

March 21, 2012

## **HERTZEL COLUMN - Shirdan 'thankful, humble and a new man'**

By Bob Hertzell  
Times West Virginian

[http://www.timeswv.com/wvu\\_sports/x223905652/Shirdan-thankful-humble-and-a-new-man](http://www.timeswv.com/wvu_sports/x223905652/Shirdan-thankful-humble-and-a-new-man)

MORGANTOWN — This highway of life is often a strange one, filled with twists and turns and potholes that must be negotiated, as P.J. Shirdan discovered.

The name is not a familiar one on the sports pages, through no fault of his own.

Indeed the tale he told Tuesday afternoon in the Jerry West Lounge in the West Virginia University Coliseum as part of Dr. Carolyn Atkins' 44th renewal of "Student Athletes Speak Out" was an inspiring tale of man's ability to overcome unimaginable events that test his moral and spiritual fiber.

First let me assure you there was a time when it appeared his name would be a well-known one in WVU athletics. He had been raised in Philadelphia, a free safety who "trained to be the best football player in the country," he would say.

By the end of his junior year, scholarship offers were pouring in. He would be a major player at a major school, right up until the final day of summer camp in his senior year when he tore his ACL.

Every offer was withdrawn except three.

West Virginia made one of those offers.

"After talking with alumni, my family and God, West Virginia seemed to be my destiny," he said.

And so it was that he came to Morgantown on July 1, 2007, making a strong impression until the final day of summer camp when it happened again.

"I tore the same ACL," he said.

He went through surgery and the rehabilitation program again and even though he couldn't play, coach Rich Rodriguez had him accompany the team to the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl upset of Oklahoma.

He was pumped to get back, came out for spring ball and, yes, it happened again.

"I tore my ACL for the third time," he said. How much bad luck can a player have?

This time he was not invited to the Meinecke Car Care Bowl. He didn't mind.

“I was able to go home and get a break. I got to enjoy my life again. That was the first vacation I had had in college,” he said.

Like all vacations, though, it came to an end, and on Jan. 10, 2009, he and his high school friend Dave Garrison were driving back to Morgantown.

“That day changed my life forever,” he said. “As we approached Flintstone, Md., we hit a patch of ice on I-68, which sent us into an embankment.”

It was a scary moment but, miraculously, not a fatal one.

“Fortunately, we weren’t injured. We were in shock but OK. The only damage appeared to be the left rear tire of my SUV,” Shirdan said. “First we called our parents; then we called the police. We looked at each in amazement that we were saved.”

It was a warm moment, the kind that years later you think back upon and know how lucky you were.

“The next thing I remember is waking up face down on a hill, inches away from Dave’s face,” Shirdan said.

An incoming car had hit the same patch of ice and skidded out of control and into them and their vehicle.

“I was literally knocked out of my shoes,” he said, illustrating the force with which he was hit. “I still remember everything like it was yesterday — the wreckage, the glass, our luggage scattered on the hillside. Dave had a bleeding gash in the back of his head, which I tried to stop with a blanket. After turning him over, I tried to apply CPR.”

He looked at the other car where the driver was pinned behind the wheel. He went over and got him out of the car, then returned to his friend.

“A few minutes later the police arrived, and Dave was gasping for air. I could tell that something was seriously wrong,” he said.

Shirdan was rushed to the local hospital, Garrison flown to Johns Hopkins because of the seriousness of his wounds.

Shirdan wasn’t physically injured, but his psyche was a wreck.

“I immediately felt guilt, anxiety, depression. ... I felt everything was my fault. I felt I was the one who should have been seriously injured,” he said.

Symptoms of traumatic stress syndrome began in the hospital, and 12 days later, when Garrison’s father called to inform him that his son and Shirdan’s friend had died, it only got worse.

“That was undoubtedly the lowest point in my life,” he admitted. “After surviving the funeral, I wasn’t sure I could survive life.”

He tried to go on but couldn’t focus.

“The post-traumatic stress was unbearable — the flashbacks, the memories were too much. I relived the accident throughout the day and constantly during the night,” he said.

After months of suffering, he received counseling, and it helped relieve the stress immediately.

His grades had suffered, however, and after the semester he was informed that he had lost his football scholarship, something he appealed and won after going through three hearings.

In the summer of 2009 he discovered boxing, joined the WVU boxing team and found a new purpose in life.

“I feel I have a more natural history for boxing than I had for football, which is odd because I put my whole life into football,” he said. “I am thankful, humbled and a new man.”

He says there were a couple of lessons in his travels along the road of life.

“In my past it was all about me — my needs, my desires, my wants. Now it’s about others and what I can do for them. Every day I see as an opportunity to make progress in my life and to help others,” he said.

“Secondly, I have learned to prevail. No matter what is in front of you, no matter where you are from, no matter who says you can’t, just prevail. Life doesn’t get easier; you only get stronger, so live life with no excuses and no regrets.”

As he spoke, his mother, T.K. Shirdan, hung on every word, watching proudly, happily.

She had driven six hours from her home near Atlantic City, N.J., to get there, taking the same path he had taken that fateful day.

It brought back memories to her, too, for when he was released from the hospital they went to the scene. The car was still there.

“Carnage,” she said.

You almost couldn’t tell what was what. They looked around and most everything was ruined, except for the discovery they made in the compartment alongside the driver’s seat.

“We looked and there was his ring from the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl, fully intact, not a scratch on it,” she said.

Email Bob Hertzal at [bhertzal@hotmail.com](mailto:bhertzal@hotmail.com). Follow on Twitter @bhertzal.