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PHYSICAL THERAPY

“When a patient begins treatment with a PT early, their overall health care costs are lower.”

Dan Rootenberg, DPT, CSCS

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How emerging technology is helping Colby Helffrich, a partial-hand amputee, accomplish his dream of becoming a physical therapist



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PHOTO: ADVANCED ARM DYNAMICS

INSPIRATION

Question: How did a partial hand amputation effect Colby Helffrich's career path?

Answer: It reinforced his decision to become a physical therapist because he could empathize with his patients.

A future within grasp

LEADER TO LEADER

At 21, Colby Helffrich was a typical college student. Then an accident on March 26, 2009 changed his life.

"I was struck as a pedestrian by a train," he says. "It resulted in my left hand being partially amputated."

Only Helffrich's palm and his thumb remained. He also broke his ribs, his clavicle and bones in his back. He was hospitalized for a month before going to a rehabilitation hospital for another month.

"At first it was shocking and depressing," says Helffrich who wanted to be a physical therapist even before the accident. "I

didn't know what would happen—could I be a physical therapist? Or what could I still do?"

Embracing technology

Then Helffrich found out he could be a candidate for a prosthesis, an artificial device to replace his missing fingers.

"His level of amputation is really difficult," says Helffrich's prosthetist, Rob Dodson, a Certified Prosthetist Orthotist. "The challenge has always been the size of the components."

Helffrich was fitted with a high tech prosthesis, where each finger has a different processor and electrodes touch the palm of his hand.

"I flex and contract that mus-

cle and the electrode picks it up and sends an impulse," he says. "It responds very quickly."

Feeling grateful

Helffrich is one of the first patients to use this new technology. As a former high school football player, he's grateful his prosthesis helps him enjoy several activities like shooting pool and daily activities as well.

"My main thing is to carry two things at once, like carrying a plate and a glass," he says, noting he wears his prosthesis for about eight hours a day.

Since Helffrich is an adult, he won't outgrow this prosthesis, but it will need maintenance and it must be charged daily. He



Innovative prosthesis technology Individually articulating electronic fingers are a break-through in prosthetic technology.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF ADVANCED ARM DYNAMICS

also has a silicone glove to cover the amputation, which he can wear anytime he's not using his prosthesis.

"Most people had no idea about electric fingers," he says.

"Everyone's surprised and fascinated by me!"

Pursuing his passion

Nowadays, Helffrich is fulfilling his dream by studying to be a physical therapist, a program he's set to complete in 2014.

"I think the perspective will give me much more empathy," he explains. "I realize how different things are. I'll be able to be patient with people because I've been there."

Dodson is proudly watching Helffrich's progress too: "The fact he's getting into physical therapy school as an amputee is exciting!"

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