

Gus Ain't Handicapped

A former high school basketball player may be missing some body parts, but Ron "Gus" Gustafson hasn't missed out on much in life

By Bob Schaller

Ron Gustafson is missing his right arm. And his left leg. He has three toes on his right foot, and his right foot is a size 9 1/2. His left leg is two inches longer and a size 14 foot, with five toes.

"I'm a pretty messed up piece, aren't I?" Gus said with a laugh.

Yet the native of Lyons, Neb., has a wife, Julie, and three kids; Isaac 9, Josiah 7 and Hannah 5.

"I don't miss out on a moment of life," said Gus, a devout Christian. That faith was put to the test on Sept. 9, 1975.

"As I ran out of the house I could hear the sound of the Oliver 88 tractor starting up in the barn," Gus writes in his biography about the accident that happened when he was 9 years old, "Fully Armed: Turning a setback into a comeback."

"...He (Gus' dad) would park the loader tractor, get on the Oliver 88 and drive the tractor and feeder wagon up in front of the house. He would creep to a stop and then signal for me to jump on just as we had done thousands of times before. The Oliver 88 was an old reliable tractor my dad had had for years. Its only purpose on the farm was to pull the feeder wagon each day to feed the cattle. We loved that old tractor. It seemed to have its own personality.

"Dad sat on the driver's seat behind the steering wheel and I jumped up onto the tractor and sat facing his right side as I sat on the moon-shaped fender that was over the right rear tire. We pulled onto the road carefully looking for traffic on our country road. Dad began the conversation and asked how my day had been. It was always important for me to tell him about the noon recess and some of the plays we ran for big yardage on the football field. What could be better than this? A beautiful day, working outside with your dad and telling him about your day, looking at the beautiful sun shining and rolling hills... We went down the first hill and began to climb the second hill and suddenly I felt my body being thrown to the ground. Everything was in slow motion as I felt the impact of the ground, gravel and dirt flying onto my face and the sound of the engine of the tractor come to a halt. It felt as though I was a rag doll and I was violently being thrown to the ground. As I relive the moment, it seemed to be a dream as the wheel flew off the tractor and I fell directly under the axle. I remember falling to the ground, bouncing up a bit and the impact of something heavy and out



Gus, a husband and father of three.

"Dad held on as long as he could but was eventually launched away from the tractor and landed in the ditch... I can recall the pain in his voice as he ran back to me yelling my name, 'Ronnie! Ronnie! Ronnie!'"

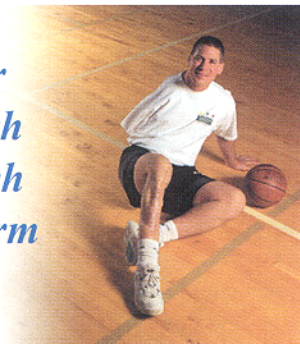
RON GUSTAFSON

of control rushing over my body.

“Dad fought to stay in control of the tractor but could not handle the out-of-control machine. He can still picture me falling off the tractor and then the tractor’s hub about to run across my throat and presumably cut off my head. By God’s grace, my body suddenly flipped and turned when the hub ran across my shoulder while my head snapped out of the way of the iron hub at the last second. Everything came to a crashing halt. All of a sudden, the feeling of being on top of the world and being in control took a 180-degree turn. My perfect body was in pieces, in a ditch, covered with silage, grass, dirt and gravel, and I was, while alive, bleeding profusely. The hub on the rim of the wheel of the ‘old reliable’ had broken and the wheel had fallen off. It happened to be the right rear wheel right below where I was riding on the fender. Dad held on as long as he could but was eventually launched away from the tractor and landed in the ditch approximately 15 yards away. I can recall the pain in his voice as he ran back to me yelling my name, ‘Ronnie! Ronnie! Ronnie!’”

And so Ron Gustafson was left with one arm, and a defective leg. He came back though, and played basketball for Lyons High School, earning honorable mention all-state honors.

“You have to be able to laugh at yourself, or you really won’t be able to enjoy a good laugh about anything,” Gus said. “We have to teach kids that. Then you learn, ‘Hey, having one arm isn’t a big deal.’”



His father still feels horrible for the accident. But Gus sees it differently. So three years ago, he went to his father to help his dad find closure.

“The man had spent 23 years walking up every night in a cold sweat from the guilt,” Gus said. “I had to help him let it go. I said, ‘Dad, that was the best thing that ever happened to me, and look at all the opportunities I have now to help people who are facing challenges. It allows me time with my family since I’m self employed.’”

His father hugged him. While Gus is certain it didn’t bring full closure he does feel he helped bring his father some piece of mind, at least.

Ron Gustafson had another setback last year. On May 30, 1999, he came into the garage of his Omaha house after going for a run, he found himself out of breath.

Then, the picture gets fuzzy. He went into the house, unsure if he was sick or nauseous. When his wife asked what was wrong, he couldn’t answer.

He was having a stroke, likely connected to the cauterizing of all of the wounds from the farm accident decades earlier. But he rebounded from that, and a few months later he was

back to speaking.

“I joked that losing the ability to get words out of one’s mouth isn’t a great thing for someone who makes his living as a speaker,” Gus said with a smile.

The incident did change his life.

“It taught me a few things,” Gus said. “First, that life is short. I have a whole lifetime to work, but I can’t push so hard that I let my wife and kids come second. Julie was always telling me, ‘Take some time to smell the roses.’ I’d come home, before the stroke, and say, ‘Hon, I smelled 115 roses today.’ But I was missing her message that I needed to slow down and really enjoy life.”

Part of that is coaching Isaac’s football, basketball and baseball teams. He takes his approach from life and applies it to coaching.

“I never look at scoreboard to see who won and lost,” Gus said. “I look and see who performed above their potential.”

So Gus moves on. His website www.fullyarmed.com gets hit thousands of times per month. His speaking has reached a lot of lives. A woman in Germany wants to use his story to help those who have lost a limb.

“They are cast aside in Europe, for the most part,” Gus

said. “I’m hoping this can make a difference.”

He still has that incredible sense of humor. A year ago when he was pondering switching cell phone providers, he was told a new company would cost him an “arm and a leg.”

“I’m about fresh out,” Gus said, “so let’s stick with the old plan.”

The salesman almost fell to the floor. However, Gus laughed hysterically. He’s always been able to laugh at himself, and his unique sense of humor about his physical challenges quickly puts those around him at ease.

“You have to be able to laugh at yourself, or you really won’t be able to enjoy a good laugh about anything,” Gus said. “We have to teach kids that. Then you learn, ‘Hey, having one arm isn’t a big deal.’ Or that being short isn’t a big deal. Besides, laughter is very important. I call a big laugh a ‘belly laugh.’ And I feel like that if you can’t have at least one big belly laugh every day, then you are losing at the game of life. And we all can win at that, if we truly choose that path.”

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