

Glenbrook North swimmer learns to walk again after beach accident



Tural Erel works with physical therapist Brittany Franklin at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago on Jan. 12 in Northbrook. (Brian O'Mahoney / Pioneer Press)

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Glenbrook North senior Tural Erel remembers his first thoughts in the emergency room last summer following a beach accident that left him paralyzed from the neck down. First, he asked the doctor if he was going to be OK. Then, he asked if he'd be able to compete for the Spartans boys swimming team in December.

"I remember the doctor saying, 'I really don't think that you will,'" Erel said of the doctor's answer to the second question. "And then, the way that he said that, I looked at him and said, 'Do you think I'll be able to walk?' And he looked at me and (said), 'In all honesty, I'm not really sure.'"

Eight months later, Erel, of Northbrook, is walking again. His right side is a little weaker than his left, and every once in a while he'll get spasms in his hands because of nerve damage. His walking doesn't look much different

from a normal walk, except he leans a bit more on his left leg, which is "barely noticeable at this point if you're walking at a regular pace," Erel said.

Initially when he was admitted to the hospital, doctors told his parents he had less than a 5 percent chance of a full recovery. Damage done to the spinal cord is usually permanent because it's the base of the nervous system, Erel said.

Erel's father, Turhan, said because of recent successes the timeline for his son's recovery keeps changing and they aren't sure when it will be complete.

"I really don't have any limitations for myself," Tural Erel said. "The goal is to kind of get back to where I was before."

Tural Erel went to Gillson Beach in Wilmette to watch the sun rise over Lake Michigan with some friends on the last day of summer vacation in August. He drove himself to the beach and said he was a little groggy since it was 5:30 a.m. He called it, "crazy early."

He recalls that the beach sand and lake air were both a bit cool. A bunch of people were already there when he arrived. They were going to make pancakes in someone's car with a portable griddle. While they waited on the food, some members of the group ran into the water.

Tural Erel, a frequent beach-goer, already had his swim suit on when he arrived. He decided to venture into the water, too.

"It was really spur of the moment," Tural Erel said. "Where I was just like, 'You know what? I'll run into the water, too.'"

As he did, Tural Erel didn't think anything of doing a dolphin (shallow) dive, since the water was thigh high, he said. But he hit his head on a sandbank. Then he realized he couldn't get up.

He was face down in the water, holding his breath. He's not sure how much time passed, but then he felt something hit his face, which he thought was probably seaweed. It turned out to be his arm.

"That's when I knew for a fact that it was really bad," Tural Erel said.

He was in the water for approximately 60 to 90 seconds before Glenbrook South senior Paul Choi and a few other people removed him from the water. Choi recognized that Tural Erel was injured — some people thought he had been goofing around when floating face-down in the water — and Glenbrook South senior Katie MacQuarrie, a Glenview Park District lifeguard, stabilized his neck and head, according to the Torch, the Glenbrook North student newspaper. MacQuarrie conversed with Tural Erel and tried to keep him calm until paramedics arrived.

Tural Erel's parents got the call about 6 a.m. that their son was in a beach accident. They drove to the Evanston Hospital and when they saw him, he was scared.

"Mommy, I cannot feel my body," his mother Sapho recalled her son saying.

"Of course, the emotions are horrific," she added.

Tural Erel had shattered his C5 vertebra and the initial diagnosis from Dr. Ricky Wong "was just very dire," Turhan Erel said. The doctor told them instead of emergency surgery, which would typically be done in this scenario, he wanted to wait for the swelling to decrease. Delaying surgery was risky, but so was operating right away with a chance to cause permanent damage, Turhan Erel said.

It was a painful wait for Tural Erel, who had high doses of steroids to reduce the inflammation. He woke up with panic attacks.

"The best thing we could do is literally just touch him and comb his hair to calm him down," Turhan Erel said. "We had to improvise how to comfort our child."

Doctors waited four days before performing the surgery, in which the fractured bone was removed and the C4 and C6 vertebrae were fused together. Tural Erel was paralyzed from the neck down for two weeks. The spinal cord was damaged but not completely severed. After surgery, Tural Erel would feel tingling or sharp pain in his arms when he was touched. That gave them all hope, Sapho Erel said, because the nerves weren't dead.

"Honestly, it's ... kind of just luck, I guess you could say," Tural Erel said. "And I guess, a miracle, as my mom would say, that it wasn't totally damaged."

He was in the ICU at the Evanston Hospital for about a week. Each night, there were 15 to 20 students there to support Tural Erel, according to his parents. Some nights there were upwards of 35 guests. It was that support and positive attitudes that helped the recovery, Turhan Erel said.

From there, Tural Erel was transferred to the [Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago](#) in downtown Chicago, where he stayed for in-patient care and therapy for nearly three months.

The temporary home at the rehab facility was a basic hospital room. Every greeting card he received was taped up to a wall, and the wall was covered. He also had a bunch of posters decorating the room.

"The walls were just totally covered with stuff," Tural Erel said.

On a typical day, he'd go through therapy from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. with a one-hour lunch break. He'd get a nap in and have dinner with his mom, who stayed with him most nights. Turhan Erel and Tural Erel's sister, Zeynep, would visit, too, spending two hours on the road just to be with Tural Erel for even 30 minutes.

They'd watch TV in a common area, then Tural Erel would listen to music on his phone, read or scoot around in his wheelchair talking to the nurses until he got bored. He'd fall asleep and "just do it all over again the next

day," Tural Erel said.

Sapho Erel works in downtown Chicago, so she'd stop by on her lunch break and see Tural Erel in therapy. They took walks along Michigan Avenue and even went to the Cheesecake Factory in the [John Hancock Center](#).

"Every once in a while we'd go outside, and she'd wheel me to a 7-Eleven or something like that, just to get some fresh air," Tural Erel said.

Slowly, he started getting feeling and motion back in the lower parts of his body. He had to re-learn how to use his body. The first stage of recovery was especially difficult because it was about just getting any movement back. He would lie in bed and could only move his arms at first. Even seemingly little things like making his leg twitch were "crazy and happy moments," Tural Erel said.

He was in a wheelchair for his stay in rehab, so needing to be pushed around everywhere he went was certainly one of the harder parts for him, Tural Erel said.

"I could tell that he felt uncomfortable in the wheelchair," Sapho Erel said. "And I would ask him to go out more, and he was a little hesitant. I can understand that."

Tural Erel's parents and Glenbrook North boys swimming coach Kirk Ziemke believe a lot of things contributed to his recovery, like all the support from family and friends and the fact that he was already in great physical shape. Tural Erel knew from swimming that he had to keep pushing himself harder in therapy to continue his improvement.

"So that was what I think pushed him even more to succeed and do well at RIC," Sapho Erel said.

Tural Erel's young age also helped his body to heal quickly, he said.

"It's really insane how the spinal cord has been able to heal," Tural Erel said. "Honestly the only thing that would really get me any better was time. You have to let the body heal."

Throughout the healing process, he's had the support of his Glenbrook North boys swimming teammates and coach. They visited him when they could and reached out with messages or texts. The visits were always exciting for Tural Erel, he said, because they would also help pass the time during his days and keep his attention on something else other than himself.

His friends would talk about what was happening at school, and Tural Erel would give them updates on his progress. Sometimes they watched TV, played a board game or went out to get something to eat.

Tural Erel has treated recovery like he treated swimming, in a way, according to Ziemke, who visited weekly.

"He's been focused. He's been optimistic. He's been determined," Ziemke said. "In August, he couldn't move... now, before the first of the year, he was up and standing around a pool deck."

Tural Erel was still "100 percent" part of the team this past season and at the forefront of the Spartans' minds, Ziemke said. On the back of their team T-shirts was a silhouette of Tural Erel celebrating a 50-yard freestyle swim during the 2015-16 season.

"We miss having him as just a teammate, and we definitely miss his contributions as a swimmer," Ziemke said during the season.

Tural Erel swam on Glenbrook North's JV squad as a freshman and sophomore before moving up to varsity as a junior. He was a sprinter, shining in the 50 and 100 free. Tural Erel made "some crazy drops" in time last season, he said, going from 23.61 seconds to 22.2 seconds in the 50 free, and then dropping from 54 to 49.6 in the 100 free.

A good goal for a swimmer is to drop 2 seconds per 100 yards each year, according to Ziemke. Tural Erel was close to a 5-second drop. Those huge time drops are a direct result of the work he put in during the season, Ziemke said.

Tural Erel put himself in a position to be a state-level swimmer as he headed into his senior season, Ziemke said.

"We over me" was a team motto that Tural Erel embodied, according to Ziemke. As a junior, he had a chance to make the state-bound 200 free relay team. He lost the swim-off for a spot on the relay, congratulated his victorious teammate who clinched the spot and showed no negative reaction.

"A kid could easily be disappointed by that and could be upset and show it," Ziemke said. "Tural never did."

Tural Erel worked out all summer, swimming with his club, Glenbrook Aquatics, to prepare for his senior season. His summer routine consisted of a morning practice from 7 to 9 a.m. six days a week, with an afternoon practice from 1 to 2:30 p.m. three days a week. On the days he didn't practice in the afternoon, he could be found in the weight room or outside running or cycling.

He also balanced that schedule with summer school in June, then he worked as a pool attendant at a private pool on the days he didn't have school.

Then, his accident happened.

"So that kind of put a dent in things, but it's no big deal," Tural Erel said. "Well, it is a big deal, but it's not something I'm really worried about right now."

The team missed Tural Erel's leadership and the approach he showed while training and competing, especially the way he carried himself through a tough practice, according to Ziemke.

Junior teammate Anton Ivanchenko and Tural Erel are close friends, going back to their club swimming days before high school. Then they made the move up to varsity together for the 2015-16 season.

Ivanchenko was in "pure shock" when he heard about what happened, he said.

"It kind of felt like a dream," said Ivanchenko, who visited Tural Erel almost every Sunday at RIC. "I didn't really comprehend what happened."

Tural Erel was released from RIC and returned home Nov. 22, 2016. It was an unreal feeling to have him home, Sapho Erel said. Prior to his release, the Erel family was trained on how to take care of a young adult in a wheelchair.

"Put it this way: It was the end to a nightmare," Turhan Erel said. "We're still to this day just looking at him, and we are shocked."

Tural Erel still attends outpatient therapy three days a week for three hours at a time, which is down from five days due to his improvement and return to school. He's working on getting stronger, improving his balance, making his walking more fluid and more recently he's focused on running and jumping. His right side is still not as coordinated as his left, so he works on fine motor skills with his right arm and leg.

Therapy was tiring and challenging at the beginning, Sapho Erel said, but her son's attitude was always positive. He was really anxious to get back to school though, wanting to be with his friends and be part of his senior year, Sapho Erel said.

He first returned to school for just two classes, political science and English. He's back full-time this semester and is expected to graduate on time.

Tural Erel also made it out to watch a few swim practices and meets in January.

"It's really nice to see him, because he's such a great motivator for us," Ivanchenko said.

Tural Erel and the Glenbrook North boys swimming team hoped he could get back in the pool for a race on senior night, Feb. 3. It was a long process to make sure all the proper paperwork was signed and his doctors and the [IHSA](#) cleared him to compete, but Tural Erel received clearance to swim. He had about four days of practice in the pool before the dual against Highland Park. He remembers what it was like to get back in the water again.

"I dropped in, and I initially thought it would be colder," Tural Erel said. "So I was kind of taken aback by that."

Once he started swimming, it didn't feel quite right, he said, because his stroke wasn't quite the same and obviously he wasn't going nearly as fast as he had before. He wasn't as comfortable as before, but it got easier as he went.

The bleachers were packed that night as Tural Erel prepared to swim the 50 free in lane 8. He started the race in the water rather than on a starting block as normal. He finished the race in 1:04.46 — "undoubtedly slow," Tural Erel said — but he still beat any expectations he had for himself. He thought he'd swim a 1:15 or 1:20.

It was a fun, emotional swim, Tural Erel said.

"It was just unreal to swim that night," he said.

His mom tried to record it on her phone but couldn't because her hands were shaking.

"There was not a dry eye on those stands," Turhan Erel said.

Ziemke thought back to visiting Tural Erel in September and celebrating as he tried to do something as simple as eat a tortilla chip. Just bending his elbow, holding the chip and getting it close to his mouth was a huge accomplishment. To think he went from that to swimming a 50 free in just a few months is amazing, Ziemke said.

"I've seen a lot of great swims," Ziemke said. "I've seen American records broken. I've seen state records broke. I've seen Olympians racing. And that's the most amazing swim that I've ever seen.

"I don't see that ever being topped. I really believe it's the best performance that I ever will see."

Tural Erel is in the fitness center daily after school, making it a point to get stronger before he gets back in the pool.

Down the road, he'd like to be part of a club swim team in college. He was an extremely fit swimmer and will be again someday, Ziemke said. There's not a doubt in Tural Erel's mind that he can get there.

"It's just a matter of time," Tural Erel said. "Honestly, it's just me being patient and keeping my head in line."

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HOW TO HELP

Insurance covered a majority of Tural Erel's medical costs, but there are still bills coming in from his stay at the rehab facility, according to Tural Erel. For those that would like to support Tural Erel, there's a [GoFundMe page](#) for him called Tural's Year of Healing. Tural Erel's parents said their family couldn't have endured their son's injury without the support of the community and are very thankful to everyone who assisted.

"This isn't something a family on its own or a person on his own can achieve," Turhan Erel said.

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