

## **Back on track**

### **After Jay Blake lost his sight, he realized his dream -- running his own race team**

**By Don Aucoin, Globe Staff | August 11, 2004**

EPPING, N.H. -- With a teeth-rattling "BRRRAAAAPPPPP," Jay Blake's race car leaps from the starting line and rockets down the track at more than 220 miles per hour.

All in all, it is a sight to behold. But even though he is standing just yards from the starting line, and even though as owner and crew chief he led the mechanical preparations for this test run on a searingly hot day at New England Dragway, Blake is the only member of his race team who can't see his car in action. He hasn't seen anything since the moment seven years ago when an industrial forklift tire blew up in his face, propelling him 45 feet through the air, nearly killing him and leaving him blind.

Still, from the look of pure pleasure suffusing his features, it's clear that Blake can visualize his car as well as anyone on the track.

"After my accident, I had a choice: to live or die," he says. And this is how he has chosen to live, here, on the drag-racing circuit, where the sounds of revving engines merge with whooshing airguns and clattering wrenches in a clangorous industrial medley, and the only things that whip around the track faster than the cars are the wisecracks.

The test run is over in 6.5 seconds. Blake jumps onto the back of a pickup truck, where his legs dangle inches off the ground as the truck speeds to the spot where the driver stands, helmet in hand. The driver has shut off the car, which can only be started from the outside, and the crew needs to move the car quickly off the track.

A member of the crew hooks a tow line to the car. "Car's hooked!" Blake hollers to the truck driver. The truck does a quick U-turn and pulls the car down a parallel road. From the rear of the pickup, Blake exhales.

This has been a busy time for Blake, a Centerville resident, and his boisterous crew of volunteers, including his older brother, Jim. By the end of the summer, they will have hauled Blake's car to New York, Pennsylvania, and Indiana as they compete for winnings to be earmarked for his nonprofit foundation, Follow a Dream. This weekend, the team will race in a National Hot Rod Association event in Englishtown, N.J.

The foundation is designed to promote Blake's message, delivered through countless motivational speeches at schools, rehabilitation centers, and gatherings of civic groups, of what he calls "the power of positive thinking and self-determination."

It is a message, he says, that is aimed particularly at disabled youngsters; the hope is that they will respond to a blind man urging them to see beyond their own disabilities to the possibilities of their lives. His message might seem clichéd if Blake weren't living proof

of his own proposition, if his every appearance at a racetrack didn't underscore the fact that for him, at least, positive thinking and self-determination have worked out pretty well.

"I live it," he says simply. He also tells audiences about the value of teamwork, and in that regard, he says with a nod toward his racing team, "We carry the message everywhere we go."

Still, worthy cause or not, the Follow a Dream team is made up of serious drag racers. "These guys, they know there's more to this than a race car," Blake says. "But the reality is we're all racers, and we all want to win."

At the center of it all is Blake, who not only owns the "alcohol funny car," as this form of race car is known, but is also believed to be the only blind race car crew chief in competitive auto racing. After the test run, he shows no hesitation in joining the crew as they scramble on, under, and around the funny car to service it after the test run.

Grabbing a T-shaped wrench, Blake uses it to take the spark plugs out, then removes the valve covers and helps out in a process known as "leaking the motor down." From observing his rapid-fire maneuvers, an onlooker would not know he is blind. The only hint of his disability is a certain solicitude displayed by some crew members. As Blake strains and grunts with the wrench, his friend Bob Chocie asks casually, "You want me to take over, Jay?" Blake replies: "No, it gets me in shape."

A stocky, ginger-haired 37-year-old, Blake wears a black T-shirt and the contented expression of a man who meets life on its own terms. He laughs often and seems to equally enjoy ribbing and being ribbed. Before the trial run, one crew member says to him: "Everything will be fine." "Right," says Blake. The crew member, needling him, adds: "Because of the power of positive thinking." Blake grins and repeats: "Right."

Mark Reardon, the crew's clutch and transmission man, says Blake constantly asks the crew: "Are you having fun? Are you having a good time?" Says Reardon: "Through all his troubles and problems, he's got such a great attitude, it's miraculous. I only hope that I could do what he does."

The crew members give up a lot of their free time (one night a week plus weekends), because they believe in the foundation, and in Blake.

Take Lyle Freiberger. Freiberger was driving a cab in Hyannis last winter when he met Blake, and he became so taken with his passenger's story that he volunteered to drive the truck that transports Blake's race car. "He won't stop working; he gives me inspiration," says Freiberger. "There are people, when they get hurt, they just want to lay down. But he just keeps going. He has a dream, and he keeps pursuing it."

He was conscious when the EMTs got to him on that day in May 1997. The explosion blew his left eye out of his head and irreparably damaged his right, shattered his nose,

realigned his jaw, and destroyed his sense of smell and taste along with his sight. "It was ugly," he says matter-of-factly. "A bad day at the office." There were more bad days ahead. He was taken to Cape Cod Hospital, then airlifted to Massachusetts General Hospital, where he would spend the next three weeks. It took surgeons 10 hours to reconstruct his features; later, a Boston doctor fit him with prosthetic eyes.

As Blake recalls the accident, he describes an unusual episode. As he lay on the warehouse floor, he says, he had the sensation of being in a "blinding white place," with "a feeling of peace and serenity that was absolutely incredible, like being in the middle of a cloud." He says he heard a voice asking: "Do you want to stay or do you want to go?" He says he replied, "I have kids. I want to go," meaning go back to life.

When he woke up, his brother, Jim, was at his hospital bedside. "Am I alive?" Jay asked. "Yes," Jim replied. "Am I blind?" Jay asked. "I think so," Jim replied.

From that point on, Jay Blake had to, in his words, "learn how to live life with my eyes closed." But he hadn't lost the resiliency and humor that had led his mother to nickname him "Happy Harry" as a child. As he was being discharged from the hospital, Blake's doctor told him he should quit smoking. "Hey doc," Blake replied, "I've quit enough this month." Nor had he lost his direct, pragmatic attitude, the one that prompted him, when he was 20, to donate one of his kidneys to his ailing father, telling him: "I got two. Take one."

#### Tools of survival

A key breakthrough occurred shortly after he returned home from the hospital after the accident in 1997. As he wandered around the house, trying to acclimate himself, he drifted into the garage. He opened up his trusty old toolbox, reached in, picked up a combination wrench, and realized, with a rush of delight, that he could identify the tool just by feeling it. He picked up a distributor module, and he knew what that was, too.

"That was a real pivotal point for me," he says. "I wanted to learn to do everything I could do, again."

He was the head mechanic at a transportation company in Barnstable when the accident happened. Blake grew up in Wayland and attended boarding school, but if he had had his druthers, he would have gone to technical school. "My toolbox has been bigger than me my whole life," he says. "I have always loved working with my hands. Especially now that I can't see, it's nice to be able to create with my hands."

While he was mastering the logistics of life without sight, his daughter asked him to speak to her class at school. Blake began polishing his ideas about the power of positive thinking (the speech Blake now gives to students is called "The 5 Essential Tools for Life's Toolbox").

Meanwhile, he spent six months at the Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, where he learned Braille and underwent rehabilitation. One day, he and other students were

assigned to write a paper on their "fantasy job." Blake wrote: "Having my own race team." He had written the same thing to a similar question in fourth grade. In September 1998, while attending a drag race in Reading, Pa., he suddenly resolved: "I'm going for it. I'm going to form my own race team."

As he started to raise money to buy a race car, he began to think of ways to combine racing with motivational speaking. The Follow a Dream foundation was the result. To create the foundation, he admits, "I've invested everything I have. I've gone into debt. I've done a lot of things people say you shouldn't do." He is hoping a corporate sponsor will step forward to help fund the speaking program. The point of Follow a Dream is to convince others, especially those with disabilities, that they could do what Blake did, could rebound as he has. Recently, five visually impaired teenagers from the Carroll Center visited Blake in the Centerville garage where he keeps his race car. Blake revved the car's engine for them, allowed them to sit in the driver's seat, explained the different parts of the car, and demonstrated how he works on it with a Braille tape measure and a special ruler that clicks to denote measurement.

"It inspires the kids. It gives them someone to look up to," says Denise Doktor, a job developer at the Carroll Center who brought the youths to the garage. "He had an accident, and now look: He owns a race car; he's out and about." According to Doktor, the youths were energized by Blake's infectious high spirits, but they did not hesitate to ask him hard questions about the emotional impact of losing his sight, and Blake did not hesitate to answer: "It was horrible." But he then emphasized how he rallied his spirits and resumed his life while adapting to his new limitations.

On a central issue facing the visually impaired -- the use of a cane -- Blake, who uses one, had a pronounced impact on his young audience that day. "To a lot of these kids -- these are teenagers -- it's not cool to use your cane," Doktor says. "They listen to him, because he's been there and done that." For a similar reason, Doktor brought several adult clients to visit Blake last spring, including a man who was struggling with the fact that his visual impairment was inhibiting his participation in auto racing. After the visit, Doktor said, "He was like, OK, there is hope. He just needed to hear from somebody other than an instructor that there is hope out there."

Not that there aren't times when even Blake has trouble tapping into the power of positive thinking. Divorced a year after his accident, he attended his 17-year-old son's high school graduation ceremony a couple of months ago, but it pained him not to be able to see his son walk across the stage and receive the diploma. He is close to his 13-year-old daughter, but he misses being able to see her in the literal sense.

With a somewhat embarrassed smile, he admits that although he is in a happy relationship with a woman, he also misses the practice of what might be called (to use the old-fashioned term) girl watching.

"I am a healthy, red-blooded American male," he says. And of course, he misses driving cars -- a loss that is only slightly easier to bear because he is around cars all the time.

"Every day is a challenge," he says. "I'm not going to sit here and tell you it's easy, because it's not. But I am so lucky to be alive."

#### Rat Fink, with a twist

Before the test run in an area of the parking lot adjacent to the racetrack, Blake takes charge of the crew's hectic preparations. He asks questions -- "You put a new filter in? Did anyone plug the racepack charger back in?" -- and answers them, in short bursts of insider lingo. "What are we gapping the plugs at?" Jim Blake asks. "Eighteen, 19," Jay Blake replies.

On the back of the race car is painted the cartoon character Rat Fink. But there is a twist to his depiction: Rat Fink wears dark glasses and uses a cane. When an artist offered to paint the character on the car, Blake told him sure, as long as Rat Fink could be portrayed as blind.

Finally it's time to fire up Blake's car. The crew straightens up and stands in attentive expectation. "Power!" Blake calls. The driver pulls a lever. Blake holds the starter in his right hand. He flips a switch and the car roars to life, all 3,000 horsepower of it. It is like the rumble of Armageddon, but it seems to be music to Jay Blake's ears. He listens intently, hands on hips. Then he smiles.

"I love it," he says. "It never gets old."

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