



Reflections of a River Rat:

Surviving the ultimate sports injury

By Jim Holleran

Dave Saunders was backpedaling on defense around midcourt when his steps got slower and slower, shorter and shorter. He resembled a 6-foot-3, 220-pound toy whose spring had just unwound. He seemed to freeze on the heels of his sneakers for an instant, then toppled backward near the free-throw line.

He was undergoing the ultimate sports injury – a heart attack.



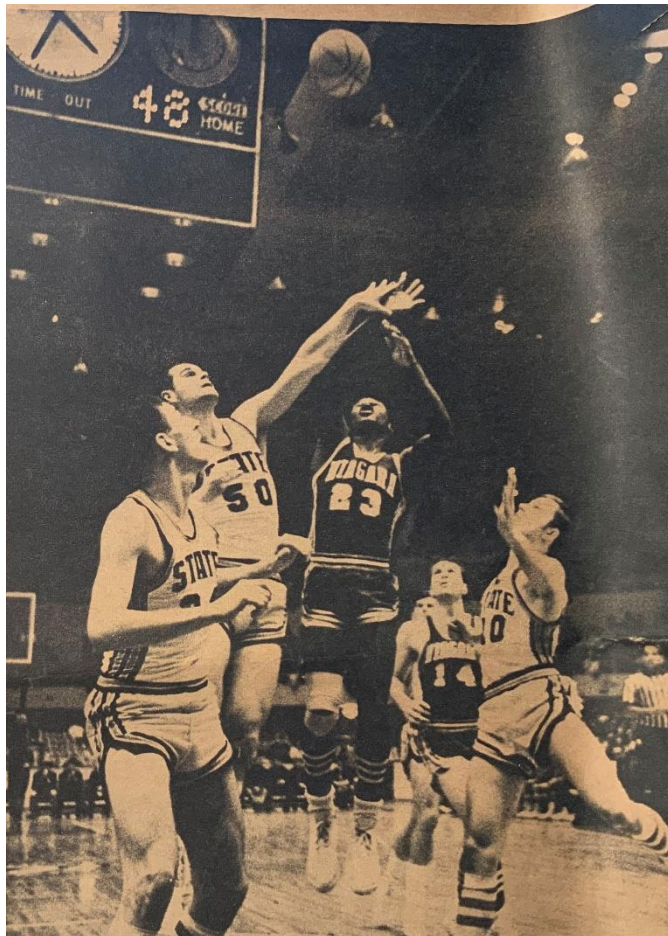
His odds were long, yet he lived. He lived for his wife, Ann, for his daughters, for his five grandchildren. And he lived for his friends to tell about it, to marvel about his luck, to appreciate each trip up and down the basketball court, each missed three-foot putt, each wisecrack over a beer in a sports bar.

The January evening in 2008 started like any other. We drifted into the gym for our 7 p.m. pickup game at St. Joseph's school gym in Penfield, but it could have been any gym in any village from Plattsburgh to Ripley. It's a story, in all likelihood, that has happened a few hundred times. But this was our game, our middle-

aged tribe, our floor. Things like this never happened to us, and haven't occurred since. Dave didn't make a deal with the devil or cash in any markers with God – he was just plain lucky.

When we drifted into the gym that night, the usual jokes were flying as we donned our basketball shoes and warmed up. How often would that one guy dribble aimlessly with his head down? Would Andy drain his customary, ridiculous shot attempt on the run? What was the over/under on Nuge traveling – five?

They didn't make those jokes about Dave. They just knew him as a dead-eye shooter with a quick release. Even though he was one of the oldest guys, you couldn't give him more than a foot of space because his feet were always set and the ball was rotating toward the rim before you could react on defense.



Dave Saunders (50) challenges a shot by Niagara's Calvin Murphy at Memorial Auditorium in Buffalo.

I knew him as a Buffalo State guy who had played for the Division III team 8 or 9 years before I set foot on campus in 1975. The difference was that he played on the team; I covered the team for the student newspaper. But we had a bond as Buff State guys and I had coached his daughter when she was a sixth-grader. That became my entry into this game.

What I didn't know, and Dave never let on, was that he was an honorable-mention All-SUNYAC pick in '66 and then a first-team choice in '68. They won the league title both seasons. He never talked about getting crushed by Dave Bing and the Syracuse Orangemen in Manley Field House or Niagara's Calvin Murphy rocketing down the lane at the Aud in Buffalo. He never

mentioned he scored 78 points in a city rec game in North Tonawanda before the advent of the 3-point line, nor that he dropped 56 in another game.

About 30 minutes into our game that night, as Dave sprawled on the gym floor, his basketball pedigree mattered little. He relied on fate. He couldn't even fight for his life because he was out cold.

We gathered around but didn't want to move him and chance a spinal cord injury. But his breathing seemed to have stopped and his cheeks were losing the ruddiness brought on by intense exercise.

As I knelt over Dave, I asked a fellow Penfield Youth Basketball coach if he had attended the CPR training the previous Saturday. He said no. He had skipped it to play basketball. I said that I had made the same choice.

More seconds passed. We knew we had to do something, but we were paralyzed by the drama and desperation. I knew the one lesson from my mother the nurse – don't panic. But paralysis by analysis had begun already. Before I could dwell on the emergency, the organizer of our game, also named Jim, took action. He knelt over Dave and started blowing air into his mouth. Mike straddled his chest and started compressions. Their urgency had offset our medical ineptitude.

Another minute or two passed. Someone had called the rescue squad. Guys fretted and spoke in hushed tones. They wondered what was taking so long. I called my wife Mary because Dave's daughter, Katie, and my daughter, Claire, were attending an evening freshman basketball practice. Someone had to tell Dave's wife and get Katie home from practice. Mary was going to do both, but the ambulance crew had called ahead to inform Ann that it was transporting Dave.

Mary would drive her to the hospital, ducking any specific questions.

Back in the gym, we waited but still no ambulance arrived. We were irritated by the delay, worried by the situation.

Our organizer, Jim, decided it was time to fetch the parish priest, who was attending an adult religious ed class down the hallway. That was when I got my instant diploma in mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Forget the scratchy mustache

and goatee. Forget the situation. Just fill this guy's lungs with air. I took over for about 10 minutes.

Mike kept up his beat on the chest compressions, which truly saved Dave's life. We didn't know it at the time, but Dave's body had plenty of oxygenated blood. The mouth-to-mouth was beneficial, but the chest compressions kept him going, circulating the blood to his brain and extremities. That minimized most damage.

Time collapsed. The moment became a giant, hectic blur. A lady from the church took over my spot on mouth-to-mouth.

Soon, we heard a siren wailing. The last 20 minutes had seemed like 20 hours. The crew took over and immediately applied the paddles and shocked Dave's heart back into motion.

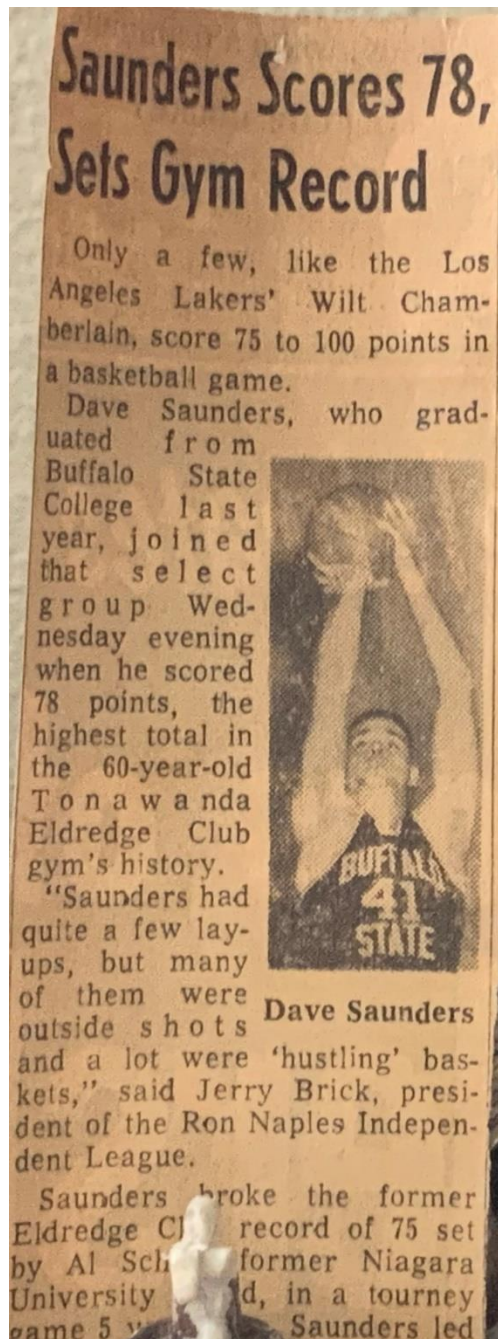
One of our guys, Tom, would text his sister, a pediatrician. She gave Dave a 1-in-10 chance of surviving. Father Jim arrived. We weren't sure if he gave Dave last rites because we were focused on the defibrillator, the gurney and Dave.

Now Dave was in the hands of EMTs; Dave's wife was in the hands of Mary, who did not want to freak her out with the words "heart attack." She figured it would be best if the doctors did the talking when they emerged from the emergency ward.

Around 11 p.m., Dave was stabilized. He remembered being at halfcourt, then nothing until he woke up in the hospital. Mary headed home in her car while I stopped at our post-game watering hole. I knew our guys would be conducting a vigil over a few drafts.

I was rushed with questions. I did my best to answer soberly and honestly. Of course, Dave had the best line from his hospital bed about two days later. Another player named Dave, the hulk we called Big Dave, offered to move Saunders' truck from the church parking lot. Cracked Saunders, "Dave, I've seen you drive the lane. There's no way you're driving my truck."

Nuge started a fund drive to purchase a defibrillator for the gym. Within a few weeks, it was installed but has never been used.



Dave returned in a few weeks with a bag of basketballs to thank his army of supporters. But his playing days were over. He was focused on rehabilitation and dietary changes.

The longer he stayed off the court, the sooner his basketball gifts faded. He had a relapse a few years later and survived again. He had undergone a hip replacement and knee replacement. He plays a little golf, but most of his days he rides a stationary bike and retreats to the pool. He exercises in the water where the buoyancy takes the pressure of his knees and back. "It's the most resistance with the least harm," Dave said.

He once focused on his deadly jump shot. Now he focuses on his five grandboys.

"When kids show up for a birthday, I am so glad that I am still around to see this. I was blessed to come out of this and do what I am able to do now."

"When I get to certain situations, when we are out on the golf course and scenery is breathtaking, I say to myself sometimes, 'I'm not supposed to be here,' but I am, and I'm so glad."

He lives by the words of his doctor. He thought they were a little trite at the time. No longer.

"My doc said, 'Dave when you walk down the street, I want you to be able to smell all the flowers.' I thought it was a little silly, but now I know I am blessed."

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