

Episode 29: Westin survived a boat propeller

If you're a parent, you can probably identify a little bit with this story. Especially if you have teenagers.

My kids are grown now, but I remember back when they were teenagers. And my kids were really good! They never got in trouble or anything like that. But even with responsible, mature teenagers, you just dread that some day you might get a phone call.

It's that phone call from one of your kids that starts out, "Now Dad, I don't want you to freak out or anything, but something's happened..."

Westin was 18 years old when he had to make that phone call to his parents one summer day. He and a couple of his friends, they were all teammates on the high school football team, were out on a boat all day.

Just before it started to get dark, Westin was standing out on the bow, and he fell forward off the boat into the water. The boat, and the spinning propeller under the water's surface, continued forward directly to where Westin was treading water. He couldn't move out of the way quickly enough.

He survived of course, but what happened that day is something he still thinks about even today.

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And now, please enjoy my conversation with Westin.

Scott

How would you describe your level of tolerance for pain?

Westin

I would say that I have a pretty high pain tolerance - I'm not sure if it's always been that way. Before the accident, I had so many different traumas. I've broken arms, legs, elbows, wrists, ribs, nose, and fingers.

Scott

Wow, you've had a lot of injuries.

Westin

Yeah. I gave my parents a run for their money. I don't know if it was just a combination of those things that made me this way. During the accident - I don't remember specifically - they asked me, "On a scale from 1-10, where are you?" I think my answer was "6". I remember my uncle was in the room. He said that he's a 10, he'll be a 10 for the next hour, he'll be a 10 for the next day, and he'll be a 10 for the next week, so act accordingly. I was like, "No, it's a 6."

Scott

But you've had so many other instances of pain. Relative to those, it wasn't that bad.

Westin

Yeah, it might still be the worst. The way that accident specifically happened is it cut through nerves. I didn't really know what had happened initially. But yeah, I would say that I have a higher pain tolerance than most, based on the things that I've been through. I don't know if that's something you can build up or if you're just born that way. That might be why I have gotten into so many different accidents because I don't have my body telling me to stop doing something until it's too late, essentially.

Scott

Yeah, it's too late. Can you tell us where you were in life when this happened? You were in high school, right?

Westin

Yeah. It was the summer between my junior and senior years of high school. I'd say my main focus for the last 10 years was football. I was coming off as offense and defense. I was an all-state linebacker in my junior season. So, I was poised - going into my senior season - to, hopefully, have a pretty good chance at playing in college or, at least, maybe, walking onto a team or something along those lines.

Scott

So you were hoping to be seen by some college scouts sometime during your senior year maybe?

Westin

Yeah, that was the plan. I had gone on a visit before. I had a few coaches that I was talking to - it wasn't anything crazy - and started pursuing that. That was actually the day that it happened. That morning was the first day of football workouts. We went boating as, kind of, a reward to ourselves for finishing the first day and getting into the start of the offseason program.

Scott

I can imagine that - going into your senior year of high school and possibly playing in college - the dominant thing in the back of your head all the time would be, like, "This is maybe the direction your life is going, maybe, even as a pro career". Did you think about that at all?

Westin

I always wanted to. I'd say, physically, I probably didn't have the frame to play professional ball, but that was definitely my dream.

Scott

If you were talented enough, that could pay for your college.

Westin

Yeah, absolutely. That was one of the driving motivations.

Scott

On the day of the accident, who were you with on the boat?

Westin

I was with **Brent and Jeremy**. We were three linebackers on the football team. We basically went to Jeremy's grandmother's house, which was, like, an hour's drive north. It was her boat.

We finished football practice, got in the car, went up, and spent all afternoon on the boat. We did wakeboarding and tubing, went back to the house, and had dinner. Before we went back out on the boat, we were going to do fishing and finish out the day with a little bit of fishing.

Scott

What kind of boat was this?

Westin

It is a pontoon boat. I don't know the specifics of, like, what type, but it was a pontoon boat.

Scott

I've been on pontoon boats here in Florida. They're typically pretty slow.

Westin

Yeah, we weren't going fast at all. I guess I would say that we were trolling. We had caught our bait and were just coasting, essentially. I mean, the boat was on, the propeller was engaged, and we were just making our way to where we were going to do the fishing.

Scott

You talked earlier about wakeboarding. It seems like you'd need a faster boat to do something like that.

Westin

Yeah, ideally. But that was the boat we had, so they made do with it.

Scott

Alright, so you were planning to do some fishing. It was you, Brent, and Jeremy - just the three of you - on the boat.

Westin

Yep, just us 3.

Scott

So, you guys took off on a lake, right?

Westin

Yep. Kerr Lake, which is at the border of North Carolina and Virginia.

Scott

Take us through what happened.

Westin

I remember just standing in the front. I was wearing shorts and a T-shirt because we weren't planning on swimming. I wasn't planning on getting in the water the rest of the day. There's a little gate that you can open up with 2 seats out at the front of the pontoon boat and nothing else, except for just a ledge to the water. I was standing in the front enjoying the air. I'm pretty certain that I was sunburned just from being out on the lake the entire day prior.

Scott

So you were at the front of the boat and there was no rail or anything there, correct?

Westin

Yep, it was just open air. I'm not sure if the music was playing or what. I guess Jeremy thought it would be funny if he kill the engine and then start it back up again to, kind of, shake the boat - similar to a brake check with a car. Obviously, he didn't let me know. So, I felt a jolt and, kind of, lost my balance, and I just felt myself going forward. So, essentially, I guess, I jumped or fell in. I don't own a boat and the propeller didn't cross my mind. I think, what was going through my head was, "Crap. My clothes are getting wet. I don't have a change of clothes." So, that was the last thing I remember going in. I guess, by the nature of the pontoon boat - there was nothing in between me and the propeller at that point - the hole is on the left and the right

Scott

So you fell off forward right in the center of the boat, correct?

Westin

Yep.

Scott

That happened at the front of the boat when the engine was in the back?

Westin

Yeah.

Scott

How did you meet up with the propeller?

Westin

Yeah, when you do a brake check in a boat or whatever - he did kill the engine - the boat still moves forward but not fast. I don't know if he re-engaged the engine immediately, but the propeller was definitely still spinning - the boat traveled 20 feet - before it made contact with me. I feel pretty certain that he killed the engine as soon as he saw me go off. To my knowledge, there's no braking mechanism on the propeller - it would keep spinning until it naturally slow down. It hadn't stopped by the time that it hit my hamstring or my leg. I knew that the boat hit me, but I didn't even process in my head that it could have been the propeller. I just remember immediately just feeling almost, like, a cramp - that's probably how I would describe it. It was like somebody hit me at the back of my leg with a baseball bat or something - like, I definitely got hit. I knew that it was painful, but I wouldn't say it was sharp. It was just almost like somebody hit me with something. The first thing I realized was, like, "I am stuck". I don't know if my suit was tangled in the propeller or what it was, but I couldn't get out, so I ended up having to, like, fight my way out of my shorts, to get out from under the boat, and to get up above the water where I could breathe.

Scott

So when the propeller hit you, you were completely submerged at that point, correct?

Westin

Yep, I was underwater. The only thing that was going through my head was, like, "I'm embarrassed because, now, I don't have shorts - they're off. So, I'm going to be treading water naked." I remember thinking, like, "Oh, this is gonna suck. It's gonna be really embarrassing when I get back on the boat." I was probably 15 or 20 feet behind the boat, I'd say, because I

could still see and talk to them. I was treading water and started assessing with my hands - I just, kind of, like, started patting myself down. When my right hand got to the back, I reached inside my leg and realized that, at that point, it was really bad. I think that's when I called out to them, like, "It's really bad". Maybe, there was some panic in my voice. They were, like, "Okay, come over here". So, I swam over to the side of the pontoon boat. Brent grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the water. At that time, I was probably close to 200 pounds. I don't know if it was just adrenaline, but I didn't need any assistance. He just pulled me right out and I was laying right there on the side of the pontoon boat. I could see instantly from their facial expression that they were in shock because of what they saw, and I asked them, like, "How bad is it?" I think they responded, "It's really bad". I couldn't see it because it was on the back of my leg, but I could look down to the side and see the fat, the meat, and the blood, kind of, just hanging down from the side. Yeah, I knew it was pretty bad at that point.

Scott

Of course, the hamstring is on the back of your leg, so you couldn't really get a good look at it.

Westin

Yeah, and I didn't want to really move. I don't remember feeling pain at that point in time. I think I was more focused on, like, what we need to do to fix this. One of the first thoughts in my head was, like, "This is going to like mess up my football season. My coach is going to be pissed." I didn't know the extent of it. I remember Brent was wearing a long sleeve shirt, so I said, "Take the shirt off. I need to tie that around my leg." So he tossed me the shirt and I tied, I guess, essentially, a makeshift tourniquet. I didn't have any type of leverage to really get it tight and I'm not certain that it really did anything. At that point, we didn't have cell service on the lake. So, Jeremy started the boat back up and drove back to the dock so that we could call 911 and get some help.

Scott

How far were you from the shore?

Westin

I want to say that it was probably 5-10 minutes, but I don't remember the time very specifically. It didn't take long. I remember once we got to the dock, Brent sprinted up to the house to get to a landline to call.

Scott

Is this just a random house that you saw on the dock?

Westin

No. It was his grandmother's house. We went back to his house. So, he sprinted up and called 911. There was just me and Jeremy. He, kind of, pulled me under his arm, essentially, like how you would carry a player who is hurt off a football field. So, I was just hobbling with my left leg to a golf cart that we had driven down to the dock with. I remember that it started to hurt and it was painful to get onto the golf cart. It wasn't far - it might have been a 1-2 minute drive back to the house. I remember the pain started to come in when going through the bumps on the path.

Scott

You must have been bleeding all over the place.

Westin

I don't remember the blood. The only reason I'm alive is no major arteries were severed.

Scott

That's what's really amazing about this. If you clipped an artery, you probably could have bled out before you could even get anywhere.

Westin

Correct. The doctor said that if my leg is smaller, I would have, most likely, bled out in the water - it would have hit a bone, artery, or vein and I would have bled out in the water. So, I guess I attribute a lot of that to, like, the strength and conditioning program because we were all in good shape - we were pretty strong guys. So, I guess the mass of my leg is what ended up keeping me from severing an artery.

Scott

The key to remember here is never skip leg day.

Westin

Exactly. Yeah. Never skip leg day. Thankfully, it was always my favorite workout. I never skip leg day because it was my favorite.

Scott

When we are online with this, the question everybody would ask or wonder is, "Is it just the leg or were there any other important parts?"

Westin

It was just the leg - very fortunate. I guess, there were 3 major cuts into the belly of the hamstring and 8-10 superficial cuts that, kind of, went up towards my glutes. I think, one of those cuts needed stitches, and the other ones just healed by themselves.

Scott

Did you remain conscious the whole time?

Westin

I did. I still firmly believe that I was in a better state of mind than the other people - I don't know if that's because they knew the extent of it and I just thought I cut my leg. I asked for the phone. I called my parents. I specifically remember dialing and my mom picking up the phone. I said "Hey, Mom. Can I talk to Dad, please?" because I didn't want to, I guess, tell her over the phone and worry her. I'm sure she knew it instantly. I mean, we had been through this - I had hurt myself dozens of times up to this point, so she probably knew then. I told my dad, like, "I don't want you to freak out. I cut my leg. It's pretty bad. They're wanting to take me to this hospital." We are in the country. They kept saying "Maria Parham", but I didn't understand what they were saying. I was trying to relay this to my dad, like, "They're taking me to Maria Parham. I didn't know what they are saying". Apparently, it was the name of the hospital. At that point, the EMTs had gotten there and needed to ask me some questions, so I passed the phone off to somebody else. I was able to answer all the questions, like, "What's my birthday? What day is it? What year is it? What's your name?" I wasn't freaking out. I think I was pretty calm.

Scott

Did you feel like you were on adrenaline at all? Were you feeling any pain yet at that point?

Westin

The pain was starting to come. When we were waiting for the ambulance, they were packing towels into the back of my leg to try to control the bleeding - that's when I started to feel some sharp pain that you would associate with a cut. I definitely was starting to understand the gravity of the situation and the scope of the problem. What I found out later was the EMTs that showed up - I don't know if it's voluntary - in the ambulance that showed up were also the same guys laying cable on the side of the road near the boat ramp where we launched earlier. I remember my buddies saying, like, "We know it is going to be rough" when we saw the same guys who were working on the side of the road were the people that responded for the emergency services.

Scott

Well, out in the country, that's often the way it is - volunteer EMT.

Westin

Yeah, absolutely. I remember just being - I don't know - let down or just nervous when the ambulance that pulled up was, like, that old 70s or 80s van and not, like, the boxy ambulances that, I guess, I would associate with the current time. So, I was like, "Oh, goodness. I have no idea what I'm about to get into." I guess that's when things kind of took a turn. They were trying to get an IV in so that they could administer morphine and other pain medicine, but they missed at least 4 times - they were sticking me full the holes. I remember getting frustrated and telling them that I was in pain. They kept screwing this simple procedure up. I remember thinking that the ambulance was really cramped. I wanted my leg to be, kind of, in that bent position where I could, like, lay on my back with my knees up in the air - that was how I had been since I had gotten up on the boat and that was comfortable. They were trying to secure me on the gurney so that it didn't bump around too much, but that was when the pain definitely started to kick in. I did not have morphine before that point, even though I've hurt myself dozens of times. I remember when the morphine finally started to, I guess, take effect, it felt like my head was filling up with water.

Scott

Was that a good feeling?

Westin

No, I hated it. To this day, I would rather not be on morphine. I think the way it's supposed to work is it takes your mind off the pain. I guess that's how I would describe it - you're focused on that feeling that it's giving to your body instead of focusing on the pain, but it made me uncomfortable. I don't know if it was, like, panic, but I didn't like the morphine. At some point, in those few minutes, when they were trying to get me into the ambulance to stabilize me and assess me, they determined that the **Maria Parham hospital** is not able to treat me for my wounds and that I would need to be taken to a specialist facility. The closest one was the Duke University Hospital. They deemed it was necessary for the Life Flight to come to my location to get me to the hospital quickly. I don't know if it was blood loss that they were worried about. I remember them telling me, "The helicopter is going to be landing in a field close to here. It's going to be loud. It's going to be bumpy. Just keep your head down and try not to freak out." I mean, I've never been on a helicopter before. I'd flown, so I wasn't really concerned about that. I think I was just feeling the pain and trying to cope with that. I remember them opening the back of the ambulance, hearing the helicopter, and feeling the wind.

I don't know if they weren't paying attention and didn't lock the legs. When they pulled me out of the back of the ambulance, they just dropped me out of the back and I hit the ground. That was the point where, I guess, I felt like somebody had stuck a knife into me - like, the pain was shooting. The pain medicine wasn't doing anything. I guess they picked me back up and started wheeling me towards the helicopter. I started to just really suffer from the pain. I remember, once they got me into the back of the helicopter, there was a female EMT or nurse. I told her that I need more pain medicine. She's like, "No, I understand. I know it hurts." I was like, "No, ma'am. They dropped me out of the back of the ambulance. It was really bumpy. There were just bumps in the grass." Then, they looked at her and said, "No, we dropped him." Then, you could see on her face, like, "We need to get him more pain medicine!" She was clearly upset. They gave me another dose. I don't remember how long that process took before they took off. I do remember that it got dark from the time that I got on the helicopter to the time I got off. The accident happened after dinner, so it was probably pretty close to dusk. I remember that I was panicking in the helicopter - I don't know if it was because of the pain medicine or just the situation in general. I was terrified that it was going to crash. I asked the lady to pray with me. I'm sure that she could see that I was panicked and worried. I just remember being relieved when we finally landed.

Scott

Do you think that, maybe, you were going into shock at that point?

Westin

Maybe. I think I was just out of it. Maybe it was the pain medicine. If I did go into shock, I would probably say that it happened at that point because I don't remember much vividly after that.

Scott

Did she pray with you on the helicopter?

Westin

She did. When she did that, I remember that I was calm at that point. I was able to just focus on what she was saying and she was very comforting. I'm not sure who she was, but I'm very appreciative of what she was able to help me get through. I didn't find out until I guess days or weeks later what was going on. The last thing my parents knew was I cut my leg and I was going to the hospital, which is concerning if your child calls you and says that. I'm not sure what level they thought this was. I mean, if I described it as "pretty bad", they probably knew that it was maybe worse than I was letting on.

Scott

And you had told them at the hospital too, right?

Westin

Yeah, correct. So, they drove north from our house to **Maria Parham** - it's about an hour's drive from the lake. I'm not sure who contacted them and told them that they're no longer transporting me there, that the Life Flight has actually been dispatched, and that they're taking me to Duke University Hospital. So, my dad said he did a U-turn on U.S. 1 and got onto Highway 98 which was an east-west route to Duke. I don't know if they were going at a 100 MPH, but they were probably going as fast as they could - they actually beat the helicopter - to Duke. They were waiting on the roof when the helicopter landed. I didn't know that at the time. I found out later that they ended up beating the helicopter there.

Scott

I'm sure there was some worrying conversation in that car.

Westin

I'm sure, yeah. They might have been calling friends and family to just inform them what was happening. I know that my coach was called at one point. I remember he was at the hospital with me. I mean, for the first 3 days, he was sleeping in the chair in the lobby. Once I got to the hospital, I briefly remember being taken out of the elevator and taken into the hospital. I don't remember anything else until I was in the triage room. I was expecting that it was going to be incredibly painful when they started taking the towels out and starting to assess. At some point, they were, I guess, spraying water into it. It was really relieving. I don't know if it was the coolness of the water and I was sunburned and hot, but I remember that being relieving and comforting.

Scott

How much time had passed at that point since you've gotten to the hospital? Do you know?

Westin

I have no idea. I would probably say, "Pretty quickly". I remember just asking over and over if I could have some water and they kept saying, like, "No, you will be going into surgery. You can't have anything in your stomach." I was just really thirsty - maybe, that's because of some of the pain medicine mixed with the shock or trauma to my body. I remember my mom and dad coming in at that point - or, at least, my mom being there. I was asking her for water. I guess she finally convinced the doctors that I could have-- I think they put, like, a wet cotton swab on my lips or my tongue, which is just infuriating. I mean, they're just teasing you with water when you're thirsty. It was painful. I'm not sure how long it was before the next steps were taken. I know they were trying to get a specialist in to the hospital who could, basically, operate on me or do the procedure that was necessary, but they couldn't find one who could get there fast enough.

Scott

That seemed kind of unusual. I mean, this is a major hospital.

Westin

Yeah, it is.

Scott

I thought they would have, like, an ER surgeon or something.

Westin

Yeah. I guess - I'm not certain - they thought they needed somebody better than just the regular ER surgeon, they needed a specialist who is capable of dealing with that level of trauma.

Scott

Was there ever any question of losing the leg?

Westin

I was definitely worried about that. Before I had gotten an ambulance, I was able to wiggle my toes and, kind of, move my leg, which set my mind at ease - like, I'm not losing my leg, I think.

Scott

You kind of put the possibility of paralysis out of your mind.

Westin

Yeah. I didn't think I was going to be paralyzed in that leg. I didn't know if I was going to lose it. I don't remember the timeframe, but I do remember a doctor - either on the first night or the next morning - saying, "You'll probably never run again." That was probably the worst thing that he could have told me, whether that's the right or wrong thing to say from a doctor's perspective. He told a 17 or 18 year old athlete, who has been working to play football in college or as a career for the past 10 or 11 years at that point, that I'll never run again. You might just as well leave me under the boat at that point.

Scott

That seems, like, such a premature prediction.

Westin

Yeah, that's how I felt. I mean, that's probably the worst thing he could have told me specifically at that time. I don't know if it was depression or what it was, but I just felt defeated and, probably, scared at that point. I remember my coach - Coach Winstead - was there telling me, "Don't listen to him. You're gonna play football again. You're gonna play football again this year. We're gonna get through this. We're gonna beat this." But at that time, I didn't believe him. It was really important to have people on your side telling you that it's not the end and that it's not the worst.

Scott

He probably saw that as part of his job. His duty there was to inspire you and to give you hope.

Westin

Yeah. Another aspect of that night is-- I had been dating my girlfriend, who is now my wife, for a year at that time. I was just begging to see her. She was over an hour away. She is actually a year older than me and she was at her college orientation with her friend. I was just begging for her to be there. Thinking back, I'm sure that made my mom upset because, like, her baby's here and she's there, and I was begging for somebody else to be there.

Scott

But you weren't in your regular frame of mind, though, correct?

Westin

Yeah.

Scott

What about the other two guys? Were they there with you?

Westin

Yeah, Brent and Jeremy were there with me - I'm not sure when they made it there. I remember Jeremy was there for, at least, 3 days. I remember them describing him like he was depressed himself. He wasn't eating and talking. He was just, kind of, there.

Scott

Well, it was all his fault.

Westin

Yeah. I knew that. I don't know what made me empathize with him instead of, like, hate him. I remember thinking, like, "I need to make sure that he's okay." It was several days after the main incident. I ended up lying to the police and saying that we hit a bump, I fell off the front, and it was my fault so that he wasn't somehow responsible for almost killing me. If I go back, I would probably be honest with the police strictly from a financial standpoint - I think his insurance would be liable to cover it instead of my parents' and my own insurance. I mean, I'm still paying for physical therapy and procedures 10 years down the line, so that stings a little bit. I guess my empathetic side kicked in, in crisis time, and I took care of him instead of my parents and myself at that time.

Scott

Wow. Did you and him talk about that at all?

Westin

No, we didn't, even after 10 years down the line. I don't remember if he said he was sorry - I'm sure he did at some point, in the hospital, when I was doped with all the antibiotics and pain medicine. I don't remember really ever discussing it with him even 10 years down the line.

Scott

I would think that he would, at least, get you a gift card or something.

Westin

No. I think I've come to peace with that whole situation. I wish it could have been handled differently. I wish there could have been something else, but at this point, it's not worth killing myself over what happened then and what that can happen now.

Scott

Right. Well, at some point, you must have told your parents what actually happened or how it happened.

Westin

Yeah. I was wrestling with that internally. I didn't want everybody to think that I'm uncoordinated or an idiot and I caused this to myself. I lied to the police or investigator. I even sat my mom down - I don't know the timeframe - days or weeks after to try to, like, tell her what happened. She was like, "Oh, I already knew that." She knew what had happened - I don't know if I told her in, like, my drugged-up state. I was really concerned that she was going to be upset with me if she had found out or known what had happened. Maybe Jeremy was honest with them from the get-go and I just wasn't in the right frame of mind to understand what was going on around me. I was worried for a while about the hole that I had dug for myself and, like, how I was going to get out because I didn't want to be dishonest with my parents, and I didn't want them to think that this was my fault and be upset at me.

Scott

How did this affect your friendship with Jeremy?

Westin

I wouldn't say that it specifically killed our friendship. I would say that our friendship was very largely - like, 95% - based around football. He is a year older than me and graduated - he went

to college when I was still in high school. That is what basically separated us more than me holding a grudge or maybe him being embarrassed to be around me. I've seen him 1-2 times since then and it was pleasant. We were shopping in Raleigh, so we stopped, said hello, exchanged pleasantries for a minute, and then went our separate ways.

Scott

It seems like you'd have a lot to talk about, like, "Hey, remember that day?" I don't know. Maybe it's something that neither one of you really want to talk about.

Westin

Yeah, I think that might be it - me just not wanting to go there, whether it's a grudge or let it be in the past. I'm sure if either one of us had a chance to redo it, there would be a thousand of different ways we would handle that day, but we can't now.

Scott

Is it pretty much public knowledge now that he is the cause of this?

Westin

I don't think so. I don't even know if his parents know. There have been times when - I got mentally down and upset - I wanted to, maybe, just call his parents and be like, "This is your son's fault." I always loved his dad. His dad looked up to me from a football perspective, and he would always tell me that he loved the fire that I played with and he wished he could put that in himself and other players. Maybe, part of it was, like, a financial motivation where if I told them that, they would help me out financially.

Scott

Of course, yeah. They would feel obligated, I'm sure.

Westin

I ended up deciding that was not the right course of action. As much as I might think that it would help me, I don't think it would. It wouldn't fix any of this situation. I would almost feel bad if they offered money at that point. I would feel, like, that's not on them.

Scott

Well, it was Jeremy's action - it wasn't his parents'. They would be the ones who would be hurt by it.

Westin

Exactly. I don't want to upset Jeremy's parents. I haven't talked to them much since then, but I don't have any reason to bring pain into their life or upset them.

Scott

Did you experience any bouts of depression at all? Or is that ongoing?

Westin

I would say that a lot of the time in the hospital, I may have been depressed to some extent - certainly not now. I think I've pretty much moved on from it. There's definitely frustration, but I wouldn't classify it as depression. To a large extent, the accident may have led me to the situation I'm in now. I ended up marrying my girlfriend then - I don't know if it was because of how well she took care of me during, but it certainly helped. Based on how well she cared for

me in the hospital, I knew she was the one. That's not to say that I didn't know before, but it definitely reinforced in my mind that this is somebody who is going to be there for me even when it's the worst. Who's to say that, if I don't get injured and I focus solely on football and playing in college, I might lose sight of my relationship? I know a lot of college athletes lost their relationships because football is so demanding at that level. So, to some extent, I may owe the relationship that I have with my wife and the two kids that we have now to the accident. So, if I could snap my fingers and change it, I don't think I would at this point because of where I ended up as a result of it.

Scott

That's a pretty incredible way to look at it.

Westin

There are certainly days when it hurts and I wish that it was different. But yeah, I don't know if I would change it at this point.

Scott

How has your recovery gone since then? You obviously went through physical therapy and probably multiple surgeries.

Westin

Yeah, let me go back to, I guess, the hospital because a lot happened there that went wrong and went right. They couldn't find a surgeon that night and I ended up having to just, basically, try to sleep. I'm not sure what room they put me in. But they were certain that they could find a specialist that could come the next morning. I remember waking up and it being sunny. The doctor had grabbed the toe of my hurt leg and shook my leg to wake me up, which made the pain immediately come back. He said something along the lines of, "Hey, Westin. I looked at your charts. We're gonna have you stitched up and home by tomorrow because I've got a plane to catch." My mom looked at him and said, "Get out of this room and don't ever come back in here!" I'm not sure what type of legal battle went on, but she filed a complaint with the hospital, and he was removed from our care, and they ended up finding another specialist.

Scott

I'm just amazed-- I mean, doctors are smart enough to not do this kind of stuff.

Westin

Yeah. I guess he was just so intent on not missing that flight for his vacation or whatever it was that he threw everything else out the window. I'm not sure if he was the specialist, if he actually saw the pictures of my leg, or if he thought he was in a different room, but I spent 18 days in the hospital and it wasn't "I'll stitch you up and you'll be home tomorrow". The first surgery came shortly after that morning during that first day in the hospital, where they stitched the hamstring back together. They brought the 2 severed pieces together, put stitches through the body of the muscle to hold it together, and then packed it with a Wound VAC. They put, like, a Saran wrap or some type of tape over the top of it. That creates an airtight seal so that a small vacuum that's running 24/7 can basically pump out the fluid that's coming in there to keep the infection at a minimum. I'd say that's, probably, largely, why I was able to heal so well - because I didn't get any infections from the lake waters. I mean, it's nasty. So, I was really fortunate to avoid any type of infection.

Scott

Well, they had you on a lot of antibiotics too.

Westin

Correct. every I mean, there were just bags and bags of antibiotics on me, which just tears up your system. The first couple of days were definitely difficult. At that point, I was trying to just cope with "I was paralyzed". They gave me a spinal tap. So, when I woke up from surgery, I couldn't move either of my legs and I was completely numb from, like, the low back down, which is terrifying, even though it's medically induced. Although they explained it, not being able to move your legs is a terrible feeling. The support that basically came around me was overwhelming. My coaches, my teachers, the people from my school, people from our church, family, and friends were filling our room all day, every day. I was fortunate to have a huge room - it was a corner room. The days were great. I mean, I enjoyed spending time with people, to begin with. Having them there, basically, to cheer me up was great.

I remember the quiet hours every night were really difficult times - if there was depression, that's when it was the strongest. There wasn't anything taking my mind off of the pain. My mom or dad was there sleeping on a little pullout couch. When they had to leave to go get something, I just felt really alone. I was focusing on the fact that the doctors were telling me that this is going to affect me for the rest of my life, and it was terrible. I do remember that Nikki, my girlfriend at that time, was there every day. I don't remember if she had to have her wisdom teeth taken out, like, that first week - like, she had the procedure scheduled. She came on the same afternoon that she had her wisdom teeth out. We were both just sitting in there drugged up and suffering together.

Scott

In sickness and in health...

Westin

Yep, exactly. My brother, at that time, was at Airborne school in Fort Benning, Georgia - he's in the army. I remember wanting to see him, but I told him, like, "Don't quit your training. When you're done, I want to see you". I remember he got there - I don't know if it was, like, a week after. My spirits were definitely lifted by being able to spend time with him. I didn't get to spend much time from the time he joined the army. He snuck a TV and a Playstation in on, like, one of those food carriers with wheels. He had a full video game setup that he could just wheel in front of me. Then, he would sit in the bed beside me and we would just play video games. Thinking back now, I probably ignored a lot of company because I was sitting there playing video games, but I remember that being one of my favorite experiences in the hospital.

Scott

Well, the people that visit you just want to see you comfortable and happy. At least, I wouldn't be offended by something like that.

Westin

Yeah. I enjoyed the time in the hospital. Obviously, I wasn't there for a good reason, but I got to see a lot of people and see how much they cared for me. I enjoyed a lot of my nurses. The procedures were really painful. I would probably say that the skin grafts that they had to do were more painful than the accident itself at that time. I hurt my right hamstring and was sitting in bed for 24 hours a day. You get really uncomfortable just laying on your back that long. I remember just being able to, like, scoot to my left and, kind of, lean on my left hip to get comfortable. Well, they took the skin grafts from my left leg on the outside, so I felt stuck. I couldn't lean to the left

because that's where they had just shaved skin off the side of my leg to patch the right side. I couldn't lean to the right side because of the Wound VAC and the wound itself. So, I just felt trapped after they did the skin grafts. I don't know if it was a week after I initially got there when they did that. I remember it was incredibly painful. Last year, I had gotten to the point where my leg was aching and hurting, so I restarted physical therapy. My physical therapist encouraged me to finish the procedure and get the rest of the skin graft removed and the scar tissue below it cleaned up - that was successful. The skin grafts that were there are no longer there, and there's just a, probably, 15-inch scar down the back of my leg instead of the skin graft scar that was initially there. Hopefully, I won't have to have any more procedures on that in the future. I'm not certain if I'm out of the woods yet.

Scott

What sports or activities are you able to participate in now? What limitations do you have?

Westin

I would say that I'm not limited in what I can do, but I'm limited by the amount of pain afterward. I played rec league football and rec league softball. I went to college, played every normal sport they offered, and never really felt like I couldn't do something. I played collegiate rugby for a year afterward. The biggest issue I have now is my weakened hamstring. Because I lost a considerable portion of the muscle mass from it - the hamstring combines with your calf muscle behind your knee to create support for your knee - I have a considerably less-supported right knee when I run for exercise. When I get tired and lose my form, I would quickly sprain my knee, hurt my knee, get terrible shin splints, or something along those lines. That is part of the accident that we never really even knew happened. Some part of the boat hit me in the calf muscle, but it just looked like a cut in the hospital, so they didn't treat it and evaluate it. We determined later that the fascia or, like, the lining of the muscle was actually torn. There's about a silver-dollar-sized hole in the muscle fascia on my calf, which is where a lot of that shin splints and aching pain comes from or originates. That and the hamstring injury itself have been equally difficult to deal with. It was just something that took place during the accident that they weren't even aware of.

Scott

Do you think you'll ever stop physical therapy?

Westin

I don't think so. If I could go once a week, I would absolutely do it. It's just too expensive and insurance only covers a set portion, but I'm pursuing to go back this year. I just have to get a prescription from a regular doctor to see him so that the insurance covers whatever portion they will. I don't foresee myself ever being done with physical therapy. The damage to my leg is too great to really just fix at this point. It's maintaining and trying to keep that leg strong. This past year, I learned to walk incorrectly and I used a lot of muscles differently on my right side than my left side because I've been compensating for the lack of muscle mass on my hamstring. So, a lot of my physical therapy is to, like, retrain my body to walk with a natural gait.

When I was released from the hospital, they had me in, like, an immobilizer so that my leg would be straight. They told me that I needed to keep my leg perfectly straight for either 3 or 6 months - it was a long, long time. I remember that I was at my grandparents' house on the 4th of July. I was in so much pain from the medicine and I was just sitting there in the bathroom - it was a really small bathroom. I was trying to get comfortably seated, but I couldn't because my leg was straight. So, I made the decision to take this brace off. So, I unstrapped all the straps

and took it off. I kind of grabbed below my knee and lifted it up to, kind of, let my leg fall naturally, and it was just instant relief. It made sense afterward that when your leg is straight, your hamstring is at its tightest point. Bending my knee took the strain or the tightness off of my hamstring. So, I pretty much decided that I'm not putting that thing back on. I've never really liked following doctor's orders because I feel, like, they're being really overcautious because of the legal standpoint.

Scott

Yeah. Liability...

Westin

But I didn't have time for liability. I wanted to advance this, so I took the brace off. Within a week of being out of the hospital, I was walking with a walker when I was supposed to be in a wheelchair for 3-6 months. I only use the walker for 2-3 days before I switched to crutches. Then, about a week after the crutches, I got rid of those, and I was just, kind of, hobbling around. It felt good to be back on my feet. It was definitely faster than anybody would have recommended. At that point, because I knew that I was beating all of these timelines, I was like, "My goal is to play football this year".

Scott

Just like the coach said.

Westin

Exactly, just like the coach said. It was a battle. I went to so many different doctors and all of them were telling me that I was crazy and that they wouldn't sign off a plan to, like, get back to play football, but I finally found one. He was inspired or was willing to let me listen to my body, and he gave me a few goals. When he said, "If you can stretch to the point where you can put both of your hands on the ground with your legs straight, and if you can do this amount of weight support..." that became my goal at that point. So, I spent all my time with my physical therapist to try and get to these goals. At that time, I felt like he was trying to go against me. I know that he was just working to try to keep me healthy, but I was 18 years old, young and dumb, and wanted to do what I wanted to do. I remember just battling him every day that I went and saying, like, "I'm going to play football this year." "No, you really shouldn't. You're not going to." We worked for three months, and then I was able to meet all of the goals or milestones that the doctor gave me. Then, I played football 3 months after the accident - I don't remember specifically how many days. I was able to suit up and play on the football field in my senior year.

Scott

That is pretty incredible... Three months!

Westin

It felt good. After being told "You'll never run again. You need to have your leg straight for 3-6 months. You shouldn't be doing this and that", I was able to battle back and get back on the football field. It wasn't to a level that I was happy with from a performance standpoint, which is understandable, but it still it kills me knowing that I would be the guy who was going to be on the field and make the stop, like, for my entire career. I remember the worst thing that ever happened - it felt like it ever happened - was I got pulled out of the game for a backup to take my place for, like, a crucial Third Down. So, there was still frustration. I would say some of the battles that I had to go through was, like, I'm not the same as I was - I made it back and I proved

to myself that I could still play football, but I was frustrated that it was at a significantly lower level than I had been at before.

Scott

Yeah. I mean, at some point, you have to mentally accept that.

Westin

Yep. So that was another just mental battle that I had to go through.

Scott

Have you gone boating again?

Westin

I have - a couple of times. I've essentially got back on the horse, proverbially. I was never really big into boating beforehand. It was, kind of, "If the opportunity arises and I'll gladly go on it." I'm at a point in life where I don't own a boat myself and I don't know anybody else who really owns a boat. I've been fishing a couple of times. My father-in-law has a boat and we've gone out on it a handful of times.

Scott

At least, you haven't given into the fear of, "I can't get on a boat again."

Westin

Correct, yeah. I'm definitely much more wary when I'm on a boat or just in general. I think one of the big things that changed internally from the accident is being aware of situations. A lot of times, it manifested in, like, height situations. I don't mind myself being in heights - like, I can be there - but I'm really conscientious of other people and heights and things outside of my control. I want to be holding my kids when we're up high because I know I can hold them - I don't know about somebody else. I think that changed. I'm much more conscientious of external and, like, high-risk situations.

Scott

I can imagine that - especially with your kids. That's instinct.

Westin

It's been a long time. Most days, I would still think about the accident, but not necessarily about being hit by the boat. Like, I would think about my leg and the pain that it causes in my lower back. I pretty much have to stretch daily if I want to keep it from hurting.

Scott

It could have been a lot worse, right?

Westin

Absolutely. I could have died in the water very easily. I could have lost my leg very easily. So, I'm very blessed and thankful to be able to run around with my kids, even if it hurts. It's a blessing to be able to have my legs still.

Scott

I hope that's the worst accident you'll ever have in your life.

Westin

I appreciate it. Yeah. When I recovered, I made, like, a bucket list of the worst. I was like, "Well, now that I've been hit by a boat, I need to get hit by a car, I need to get shot at some point, then I'll feel like I've completed all of those negative things." I haven't checked any more things off that bucket list. I've broken a couple of bones since the accident. I broke my wrist, I broke my ribs, and I've broken some fingers since the accident.

Scott

You are unbelievable! Well, if you check any more items off your bucket list, get back to me and I'll have you back on the podcast.

Westin

Great. I appreciate it.

Scott

Thanks for listening to this episode. As you may have already realized, my goal for each show is to introduce you to people and situations that you just won't find on other podcasts.

If you're on Facebook, we'd love to have you join in on the discussion over at our private Facebook group. You can chat with other listeners about this episode or a previous episode, and even some of the guest I've had on the podcast are in there to talk about what they went through and answer questions. You can get in at [WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook).

And thanks again to those of you who support the show! Any money that comes in is going to be put toward a new microphone. If you have ever watched or listened to Joe Rogan's podcast, the mic he uses is the Shure SM7B and it sounds awesome. And it's about \$400 on Amazon. So someday you'll hear me talking on a new mic, and hopefully it's not too far into the future!

Thanks again for listening, and I'll see you here for the next episode, where we'll once again ask the question, "What was that like?"