

# Paralyzed Rolling Meadows grad reflects on teen's death

By Steve Zalusky | Daily Herald Staff

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Rob Komosa sat tilted back in his wheelchair in the living room of his Mount Prospect home Sunday, watching the Chicago Bears play the Jacksonville Jaguars.

On one play, he watched Bears linebacker Brian Urlacher deliver a jarring hit.

Watching such plays jogs painful associations for Komosa, 26, who is paralyzed from the neck down as a result of a football practice injury in 1999. That day, the junior running back for Rolling Meadows High School was tackled into a cement post.

"Every time there is an injury, I always cringe. Especially if a player doesn't get up right away. But I still love watching it," he said. "One thing is for sure. Football is a rough sport."

This Sunday, Komosa had an extra reason to reflect - the death of 19-year-old Travis Hearn, who also was paralyzed after a collision in a 2006 game for Rock Island High School in Rock Island. Hearn died last week, after experiencing complications from a lung condition.

"It was shocking and sad because Travis was also real young," Komosa said.

Komosa had a chance to meet Hearn when the two were involved with the group Gridiron Warriors Alliance, which raises awareness of spinal cord injuries among high school football players. Hearn and Komosa were among the group members who suffered spinal cord injuries.

The group was organized by Deacon Don Grossnickle of Our Lady of the Wayside Church in Arlington Heights.

Komosa helped raise \$10,000 for a van for Hearn by selling Grossnickle's book "Great Moments in Football Halftime," a book of interviews, quotes, wisdom and inspiration from past and present professional and collegiate coaches.

Komosa said he spoke with Hearn last year at a Chicago Bears game, where the two were selling the book. Komosa said he seemed upbeat and they talked about football.

Reflecting on Hearn's fate, Komosa said, "One day this will happen to me," and added, "Live each day as happy as you can."

Grossnickle said former Bears Coach Mike Ditka has been among those helping out the organization, including arranging for nonprofit status.

Grossnickle also knew Hearn, and said he was cheerful despite adversity.

"When we got him this run down van, he told me, 'Deacon Don, you got to do better than that,' he said.

Grossnickle said he would like to form a nationwide network because the injured players can teach students a lot through their experiences.

In recent months, Komosa's been struggling a little bit with infections and is not as strong as he used to be. He's also had kidney stones, a cyst on his left kidney and some problems with his stomach, he said.

"Rob already knows that he's on borrowed time," Grossnickle said. "So this is a rehearsal for Rob Komosa, what's happening to Travis. Rob already has beaten the odds. His injury is going on eight years."

Komosa's widowed mother takes care of him, with help from his sister.

"I'm able to still get insurance," Komosa said. "But unfortunately, they don't cover nursing care. Even with my settlement I wouldn't be able to afford 24/7 nursing care, because of the hourly rate that agencies charge," referring to a legal settlement with Northwest Suburban High School District 214.

In the spring, Komosa plans to move into a new, completely handicapped accessible home on the border of Barrington Hills and Fox River Grove in McHenry County with a trained caregiver.

He has a handicap accessible van, so he's able to go where he wants in the area. He said his sister has been able to take him to sporting events, including Bears and White Sox games, including Game Two of the 2005 World Series.