

TROUBLE SHOOTER:
DONATIONS WILL HELP A
BADLY BURNED BOY. **PAGE 3**

QUAKE ALERT: KNOWING
THE ODDS MAY HELP YOU
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Accent

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER, THURSDAY, SEPT. 9, 1993

DEAR ARNOLD
L.M. BOYD
THURSDAY
HINTS FROM
COMICS
CROSSWORD



FLYING HIGH: Paraplegic Andy Houghton, bottom, free-falls for the first time, tethered and taped by the ankles to dive instructor J.C. Coldren.



PUMPING ADRENALINE: Andy Houghton, left, and fellow paraplegic Joseph Babakanian, 29, of Irvine, recover after the

ROLL MODEL

LIFESTYLE: Andy Houghton was 19 when a motorcycle accident left him a paraplegic. Now, he's helping others recognize their abilities rather than their disability.

Story by **MARTIN J. SMITH**
Photos by **KEN STEINHARDT**
The Orange County Register

Andy Houghton, not your typical medical-supplies salesman, is slipping his convertible Mustang GT through Riverside (91) Freeway traffic at 70 mph.

A diamond stud sparkles in his left ear. Brown curls spill over the collar of a shirt that hints at the broad, sun-tanned shoulders beneath. With his irrepressible smile, hand-painted tie and Moschino sunglasses, the self-proclaimed "king of sexuality" could be a cover boy on the GQ magazines he keeps at home.

"There's this guy, Chris. He's about 28. I met him last winter," says Houghton, 26, of Costa Mesa, beginning his latest success story between swigs of designer water.

Chris, a paraplegic, was selling a special snow ski that he had never even tried. Houghton visited him to check out the ski, maybe pick him up as a customer.

"I went in and he's in bed watching Montel Williams on

TV. Nintendo controls next to him. Typical. And he's laughing at Montel and saying, 'Man, did you see what he did last week?' I knew right away what his life was like."

Houghton swings wide around a tractor-trailer, then, using his accelerator hand control, guns the Mustang off an exit near Queen of the Valley Hospital in West Covina.

"I told him about our Monday-night hockey team," Houghton says. "At first he said, 'Nah. I play pool on Monday night.' But then he came by and watched. Then he started playing. Now he comes every week. I missed the game last week, and he called me up. 'Dude,' he said. 'Where were you last night? We had a great time.'"

"Now he's saying things like, 'I know this other guy that needs to get out and do things.'"

Houghton wheels into one of the hospital's handicapped parking spots. Today's project is Karl Taccad, 22, recently paralyzed from the waist down by trigger-happy carjackers who wanted his Mazda RX-7. He's waiting in a wheelchair in the hospital's rehabilitation unit. Frustrated. A little scared. A week from discharge into an uncertain future and, according to his doctor, badly in need of a role model.

Houghton opens the Mustang door, then sets up his wheelchair with a motion so practiced it seems almost effortless. From

the driver's seat, he pulls its frame from the back seat and sets it on the hot asphalt beside the car.

The frame is dinged and scarred from too many rounds of tennis, too many games of hockey and "over-the-line" wheelchair baseball, too many paraplegia-won't-slow-me-down Andy Houghton moments. The wheels, which he attaches in seconds, are similarly battered, creating an overall impression that, just for kicks, Houghton might occasionally take the chair off-road.

And then he's out of the car, flirting with physical therapists en route to Taccad's room, short-circuiting the stares of passing children with an eye-to-eye "Hi!"

"This job gives me the opportunity to go to hospitals and sell our products," he says, referring to his work for Research Medical of Costa Mesa. "But going to hospitals brought back a lot of memories from my three-month stay in rehab."

Houghton had been drinking the day almost seven years ago when he crashed his motorcycle into a tree.

"It was my fault," he recalled. "When they brought me into the hospital, I didn't even know I was paralyzed. I was conscious and moving, so I didn't know I had damage. But after four hours I lost sensation in my toes. That was five days before my 20th birthday."



They sent him home with a wheelchair that didn't fit and medical supplies designed for invalids, which he assumed was what he was. He knew little about the equipment that could make his life easier, or the sports and activities that could make it fuller.

"If I had had more information, I would have started doing things a lot earlier in my injury," he says, patting the information-stuffed briefcase on his lap.

Houghton says he reached an epiphany about two years ago that converted him from cripple to crusader.

"What happened was, I was
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DISABLED: 'Unvarnished truth' helps others recoup

FROM 1
traveling, looking around for other things to make me happy," he says. "Travel here. Buy that. Do certain things. But I always saw the same person in the mirror. I realized one day that the only thing that would really make me happy is being happy with who I am."

■ ■ ■
Houghton is, according to doctors, therapists and others like him, darned good medicine for people focused on their disabilities rather than their abilities after a spinal-cord injury.

"He has been an excellent resource for all of our new patients," says Dr. John Lindberg, medical director of the physical medicine and rehabilitation department at Queen of the Valley Hospital. "He not only explains the equipment they need, but he really takes it a step further. He tells them there are many activities that people at this early stage are afraid they can't do."

Houghton does more than that. When he's able, and often on his own time, he arranges challenges for often-reluctant rehab patients.

One recent Friday, Houghton and several other paraplegics infected by Houghton's enthusiasm for water-skiing spent two days at Big Bear Lake with the California Handicap Ski School. They camped out. They got sunburned. They got dunked. And they all said they would be back.

Bob Yant, 42, a founder and adviser to the company for which Houghton works, also said Houghton has done extensive research into sexuality and disability.

"That's changing quite dramatically," Yant said. "There are a lot of different medical approaches now. But a lot of times people are just told, 'Forget it. There's nothing you can do. (Sex) is all over with.' And a lot of wives and girlfriends leave the injured male.

"But if you can get this information out that the sex life isn't over, there's the possibility of saving many relationships. Andy's serving a useful purpose."

KelLe Malkewitz, director of the California Handicap Ski



FOCUSING ON ABILITY: John Box, of Orange, skims Big Bear Lake while

READY, WILLING — AND ABLE

Andy Houghton suggests that anyone who wants to get involved in wheelchair sports and activities begin by contacting the following people and organizations:

► **National Foundation of Wheelchair Tennis**

President: Brad Parks

Address: 940 Calle Amanecer, Suite B, San Clemente, Calif. 92673

Phone: (714) 361-6811

► **Access to Sailing**

Director: Duncan Milne

Address: 19744 Beach Blvd., Suite 340, Huntington Beach, Calif. 92648

Phone: (714) 722-5371

► **Handicap Scuba Association**

Address: 1104 El Prado, San Clemente, Calif. 92672

Phone: (714) 498-6128

► **Wheelchair Hockey**

Organizer: Bob Eastman of the Boys and Girls Club of Buena Park

Phone: (714) 522-7259

► **California Handicap Ski School at Bear Mountain Ski Resort**

Director: Kelle Malkewitz

Phone: (909) 585-2519

► **Skydiving Adventures**

Owner: Robin Balch

Address: Hemet-Ryan Airport, Hemet, Calif. 92545

Phone: (800) 526-9682

► **Casa Colina Wheelchair Sports**

Contact: Dave Kiley or Anne Johnson

Address: 2850 N. Garey St., Pomona, Calif. 91767

Phone: (909) 596-7733

► **Wheelchair Basketball and Tennis**

Organizers: Ron Hastings or Brian Geyer of Saddleback College

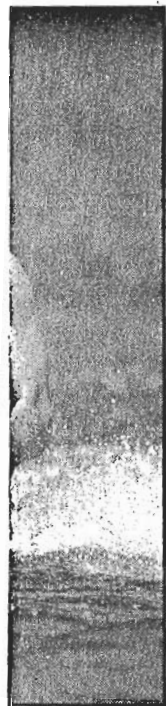
Phone: (714) 582-4679

School at Bear Mountain Ski Resort, said Andy has been prodding patients to try skiing since 1991.

"He's very open about his disability and willing to talk about it

with people," Malkewitz said. "That makes people very comfortable and is a motivator in itself."

As Houghton makes his way toward Taccad and the rehab unit,



KEN STEINHARDT/The Orange County Register

waterskiing with California Handicap Ski School, left, and later shares his impressions with Andy Houghton.

he carries, among other things, a videotape of his first successful skydive. He also carries a photo album stuffed with 8-by-10 glossies of himself since his injury. Snow skiing. Water skiing. With the marlin he caught off Cabo San Lucas.

"Andy's astounded when he hears that people aren't going to do things that will benefit their lives," said John Box of Orange, a paraplegic who designs wheelchairs for Colours 'N Motion in Anaheim. Box credits Houghton with getting him up on water skis.

"He says, 'No, dude. You've got to do this, got to try this, get involved with this. Most people know what's best (for injured patients) and don't act on it. Andy acts on it.'"

The results are obvious, Lindberg says.

"I can see it the way their attitude and motivation toward therapy picks up after talking to Andy," the doctor said. "He gives them light at the end of the tunnel, something to push toward."

Houghton also gives them the unvarnished truth about life in a chair, something most therapists understand only in theory. Getting into and out of a bathtub. Using the right urological supplies to improve self-esteem. Making love. Eating right to avoid bowel-control problems.

"There are so many new

things they have to deal with, and Andy can put it in focus," Lindberg says. "The patient can see that things are manageable in the real world and that they will come out of this in a functional way and enjoy a full life."



"Andy!"

Houghton extends a hand as he wheels into room 400B. Taccad, the carjacking victim, shakes it firmly, a greeting more genuine than one might expect between a patient and a man peddling medical supplies.

They had met a week earlier, briefly, after a therapist showed Taccad a videotape of Houghton playing wheelchair hockey.

"She told me he's the same level paraplegic as me, and that he likes to talk to people," Taccad said. The therapist asked Houghton to talk to Taccad about sexuality and other issues during his next visit.

Others have their own how-I-met-Andy stories, and most revolve around Houghton's infectious enthusiasm for sports. Box, the wheelchair designer, met him at a tennis tournament. Jesus Zavala, a gunshot victim from Los Angeles with a new fondness for water-skiing, saw the pictures of Houghton slashing through Big Bear Lake that

hangs in the rehab unit at Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center in Downey. Frank Fernandez of San Bernardino met him the day Houghton showed his skydiving video at Loma Linda University Medical Center.

Today, Houghton promised to show Taccad how he gets into and out of his car. But before they head for the parking lot, the young man peppers Houghton with questions. Is a four-door car easier than a two-door car? What sexual options should he discuss with his girlfriend?

Houghton reassures Taccad that partners sometimes find sex better after an injury than before. "You won't be in such a hurry," he says. "Go home and experiment. Have some fun."

If they discussed medical supplies, it wasn't apparent.

Later, long after Houghton departed for another hospital's rehab unit, Taccad talked about the inspiration from the visit.

"He gave me his number, so as soon as I get out and get adjusted at home, I'm gonna call him and go watch hockey," Taccad said. "Maybe I'll try it. I didn't do sports before (my injury), but he got me kind of interested. Seeing him makes me want to go do it, too. I mean, if he's doing it, maybe I can still live a life."

MEDICAL TRANSCRIPTION