April 2015 *Wingfoot* Spotlight: “It Doesn’t Matter If I Come in Last: I’ve Already Won” by Barbara Huebner

When John Pulliam is on the starting line of a race, he feels an adrenaline rush. Midway, the doubts start settling in. “Can I make it?” he wonders. “Should I just go ahead and give up?” Finally, there is the exhilaration of crossing the finish line and looking back at what it took to get there.

It’s not unlike the trajectory of recovering from severe burns that covered more than 85 percent of his body after he and his brother, while growing up in rural Texas, poured gasoline onto a barrel of trash; or from the highway crash two years ago in which he lost his right leg.

On January 26, 2013, Pulliam was riding his motorcycle in Carrollton when he collided with a truck. As the driver sped away, Pulliam lay in the road, praying that he wouldn’t die there. Had a good Samaritan not rushed to his aid, he almost surely would have: By the time he was airlifted to Atlanta Medical Center, he had lost nearly all his blood due to the severed artery in his mangled right leg.

Just nine months later, he found himself ready to begin the swim portion of a triathlon in John Tanner State Park. It was his first ever. “I doubt that I would have ever had the desire or courage to do something like this before the wreck,” said Pulliam, who lives near Carrollton. “It’s the way I saved my sanity.”

Before the crash, Pulliam was self-employed as a construction worker, staying active on the job and, as he put it, by “ goofing around,” rather than through athletics. But after receiving a prosthetic in May 2013, he learned about the Getting 2 Tri Foundation, which supports people with disabilities, and—lacking health insurance at the time—he began using triathlon training as his only physical therapy.

“They showed me that I could still get off the couch and do something if I wanted to,” said Pulliam.

While training for that first sprint triathlon, in September 2013, Pulliam remembers thinking, “If I can stay focused, not get scared off, not get discouraged, and I can make it to the starting line, I’ve already won. It doesn’t matter if I come in last.” He did, but with a twist: “As the only person in the physically challenged division, I came in last place and first place in the same footstep.”

The feeling of crossing that finish line, he said, was “just phenomenal.” After a few more triathlons and 5Ks—including “a celebration of life” with his wife, Cary; their four children, and half a dozen people from their church on the first anniversary of the accident—he heard about Atlanta Track Club, which he soon joined. A setback associated with the amputation forced a temporary return to the wheelchair, and that’s what Pulliam used to complete the Atlanta Half Marathon last Thanksgiving in 1 hour and 48 minutes.

“That was an amazing experience,” he said. “That was just a grueling course, and a huge accomplishment.”

Among the key races on Pulliam’s calendar this year is the AJC Peachtree Road Race, for which he has already qualified in a wheelchair but plans to do on his blade prosthetic even though he is just now learning to walk again after surgery in December. His wife, Cary, who took up running to support him, has joined the Club with him and also plans to do Peachtree.

Pulliam sees Peachtree as an important steppingstone toward ultimately completing a full Ironman-distance triathlon before he turns 50, as well as qualifying for and competing in the Boston Marathon. He would like to do a marathon as soon as this fall, seeking that Boston qualifier.

“Yes, his wife does think he’s crazy. “But he was crazy before the accident,” she quipped.

“You set your goals high and then have small achievable, documentable goals to make it up that ladder,” he said. “Never say never.”

Perhaps Pulliam’s biggest achievement is that of forgiving the driver who left the scene of the accident. He has not been found.

“I gave that baggage to the Lord just as fast as I could,” he said. “There’s something unique about forgiveness. It’s not necessarily for the person you’re forgiving. It’s more for you … for me. If I was still dragging all that hatred and anger that I felt right after it happened, there’s no way I would have been able to accomplish what I’ve been able to do.”