

# SPORTS

*We wanted him to know that we’re thinking of him and continue to think of him. ... I knew if there was anybody who could fight it and get through it, it would be Michael Herzog.*

**TERRY HORAN**, Cobbers head football coach



Former Concordia football player Michael Herzog is recovering from being burned in a fish house explosion and appreciates the support he has received from the community.

## ‘I have a better life’

Former Cobbers QB has new perspective after surviving serious gas explosion six months ago

**By Eric Peterson**  
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**Moorhead**

On a recent hunting trip with his father and older brother, Michael Herzog was hiking in the mountains near Scofield, Utah, something that didn’t seem possible for the former Concordia Cobbers quarterback six months ago. “I was sucking air and my heart’s beating like crazy, and usually you’re like, ‘This sucks,’ but I’m alive and I could feel it so I love that,” said the

24-year-old Herzog, who is from Detroit Lakes, Minn. Herzog has symbolically climbed a mountain after he was involved in a serious accident last spring. Last March, his life changed in an instant while visiting friends in Moorhead. An early Sunday morning gas explosion in the family’s fish house, where he had slept the night before, burned nearly 80 percent of his body with about 20 percent third-degree burns. The force of the blast took off **HERZOG:** Page D3



Former Concordia Cobbers quarterback Michael Herzog had nearly 80 percent of his body burned in a gas explosion last spring.

## First time NDSU and Davis played, it was a matchup played on a muddy field

The Fargo playing surface at Toomey Field in Davis, Calif., was in rough enough shape in early December 1982 that local sports columnist Bob Dunning penned a wonderfully sarcastic piece about the home field of UC Davis’ football team titled, “Death of a Friend.” “Toomey Field, a longtime friend of Aggie athletics, died early Friday morning



**MIKE McFEELY**  
The Forum

on the Davis campus after a long illness,” Dunning wrote. “He was 33.” “Field was home at the time of his death, and is reported to have gone

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North Dakota State tight end Ben Ellefson hangs out with students from Robert Asp Elementary after receiving the Allstate “Good Works” award recognizing his volunteer time on Thursday, Sept. 19.

## Bison tight end Ellefson a national champ off the field

Local Allstate insurance agency owner Fed Hage had just finished presenting North Dakota State tight end Ben Ellefson the “Good Works” trophy when a third grade elementary student shouted a championship statement. “Raise the trophy Ben!” he said. The kid had probably seen that on TV before, like on the stage at Toyota Stadium in Frisco,



**JEFF KOLPACK**  
The Forum

Texas. That’s where the Bison have accepted seven Division I FCS national title trophies in the last eight years. This trophy was different.

**KOLPACK:** Page D6

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## HERZOG

From Page D1

the back of his hands and the skin was hanging from his wrists.

“My first thought was my dad was going to kill me, I just blew up the fish house,” said Herzog, who was then 23 years old. “I thought I might lose my hands and that would be pretty tough.”

Herzog was a three-year starter at quarterback for the Cobbers, a dual-threat player running the team’s triple-option offense. A powerful athlete for Concordia, in the weeks following the accident, Herzog had to again learn basic daily tasks like brushing his teeth, getting out of bed and going to the bathroom.

“As a dad, you think you can cure everything for your family, but this one was completely out of our hands,” said Mike Herzog, Michael’s father. “I keep it inside a little bit more. It was tough.”

Michael has had a remarkable recovery. He was expected to be in the hospital for three to six months, but returned home in less than six weeks. There is still redness and scarring on areas of his skin, but he said he doesn’t feel like he has any physical limitations six months after the explosion. His hand strength is weak, but he said it’s coming back.

Michael has to be careful about exposing his skin to sunlight as it continues to heal. He wears gloves to protect the back of his hands, which still have a red and pinkish color.

“My life is never going to be the same, and it’s not the same. I think I have a better life,” Michael said. “It opened the door to meet so many amazing people. It opened the door to understanding why people go into the healthcare field because it’s truly a calling. ... I feel like I’ve learned a lot about myself. I feel like I’ve learned the meaning of family and community.”

### ‘I could hear sirens’

On Sunday, March 17, 2019, Michael woke up in the morning and felt cold because the furnace wasn’t working in the fish house, where he slept because he didn’t want to sleep at a friend’s house on the couch.

“I’m kind of a germophobe,” Michael said.

The wheeled fish house, which can be used as a camper, sleeps five. Michael turned on three burners on the cooktop and the first match he tried to light broke. The second match lit, and that caused an explosion that blew the roof off the fish house. Both the furnace and cooktop are propane fed, he said.

“I don’t think I did anything wrong,” Michael said. “I’ve used it for eight years and never had any issues, kind of a freak deal.”

Michael knew it was serious after he stumbled out of the fish house and looked at his hands.

“The back of my hands were de-gloved and just like hanging



Special to The Forum

A gas explosion blew the roof off the fish house where Michael Herzog was sleeping last March.

there, melting,” he said. “I didn’t really bleed that much because it almost cauterized everything right away.”

Michael said the explosion blew off his left sock and shredded the boxer briefs he was wearing. He stuck his hands and left foot in the snow, which he wasn’t sure was a good idea. Michael said he went into shock right away as he was pacing back and forth over broken glass. He screamed for help and asking anyone who could hear him to call 9-1-1. He noticed people were going to a nearby church.

Michael said Kristina Otte, a secretary at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Moorhead, came to his aid and comforted him until emergency personnel arrived.

“I could hear the sirens in the background,” Michael said.

An ambulance took Michael to Sanford Medical Center in Fargo before he was airlifted to Regions Hospital in St. Paul. Mike and Jodie, Michael’s mom, were in California. They booked the first flight they could to Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport that Sunday morning. The flight happened to have two open seats.

“We had a ton of God moments that day,” Jodie said of getting on that morning flight.

Soon after Jodie arrived at Regions Hospital, Michael’s condition was more grim than they anticipated. A nurse gave Jodie a plastic bag that contained Michael’s hair, which had been shaved off his head.

“One of the nurses told me that we needed to pray for a miracle,” Jodie said.

Jodie asked if her son was going to die.

“She never answered me,” Jodie said as her voice cracked with emotion. “I don’t think we realized how bad it was until we got to the hospital.”

Michael had been sedated and didn’t remember much from that first day in the hospital.

“I don’t think I had my life flash before my eyes,” Michael said. “I never thought I was going to die. I’m not a parent yet. And I don’t think until I am, that I will understand what (my parents) were going through.”

Michael said he’s grateful for

the support he received from his family during his recovery, especially during the first few weeks after the accident. He said his mom was a rock through many ups and downs.

“She’s a tough lady,” Michael said. “She never cried in front of me. She got tough on me when I was down and that helped me through. I’m grateful for that tough love.”

Michael’s parents marveled at their son’s grit.

“He’s a tough kid,” Mike said. “Jodie and I both know he is a knucklehead at times, but I would be hard-pressed to find anyone who has his courage and his pain threshold.”

### ‘I want to die’

Medical personnel warned the Herzogs that there would be a roller coaster of emotions during Michael’s recovery from the burns. There were times Michael would shake uncontrollably in his hospital bed because he was in so much pain.

“He just said, ‘Take me home. I want to die,’” Jodie said.

Michael said the pain was excruciating at times. He remembers looking at the clock to see when he was scheduled to get more pain medication. He compared the pain to having a severe turf burn over his entire body with the pain never subsiding.

“It was tough,” Michael said. “It was really tough.”

About three weeks after the accident, Mike said one of the doctors told the Herzogs that Michael was healing better than expected and would not need skin grafts. When Michael received that news, it proved to be a breakthrough moment.

“A tear rolled down his cheek,” Mike said as he started to get emotional. “That was the first time he cried. I think he finally understood that he was going to be OK.”

The Herzogs have four children, Christine, Josh, Michael and Maddie, who is a sophomore on the North Dakota State women’s golf team. Josh also played football at Concordia. Mike and Jodie said their kids helped them get through some of the toughest moments during Michael’s recovery.

“They took care of mom and dad. It was pretty impressive,”



David Samson / The Forum

Concordia football helmets sport a “M9” decal this season in tribute to Michael Herzog, who was burned in a fish house explosion.

Mike said. “Our kids took care of us.”

The Herzogs said they can’t thank enough the support they’ve received from family, friends and even strangers.

“We’d have strangers come to us and say how is your son doing,” Mike said. “We’re praying for him.”

Mike said the outpouring of support the family has received the past six months has made him appreciate how valuable relationships are during difficult times. The Cobbers are wearing an “M9” decal on their helmets this season to honor Michael. No. 9 was his jersey number when he played quarterback for the Cobbers. The “M9” is done in a camouflage color because of Michael’s love of the outdoors.

Cobbers head football coach Terry Horan said the team’s captains decided on the decal in August after Michael spoke to the team early in fall camp.

“We wanted him to know that we’re thinking of him and continue to think of him,” Horan said. “It hurts inside and my heart was bleeding for him, but I knew if there was anybody who could fight it and get through it, it would be Michael Herzog.”

### ‘A beam of light’

Concordia plays in the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference and one of the team’s biggest rivals is perennial power St. Thomas. Tommies head football coach Glenn Caruso visited Michael every Saturday while Michael was in the hospital in St. Paul.

“For him to take the time for someone who isn’t even one of his players was special to me,” said Michael, who was a multi-sport athlete at Detroit Lakes High School. “Coach Horan wasn’t able to come every week and I knew he would if he could have. It was like (Caruso) stepped up and filled that role. I think that’s a testament to the MIAC.”

Michael said his first visit from Caruso was brief since he was in a tough spot and didn’t want to see visitors. However, the visits got longer each time. Michael said Caruso talked about the challenges his family faced

after his wife, Rachael Caruso, was diagnosed with cancer.

Michael said Glenn Caruso told him “comparison is the thief of joy.” That message helped Michael, especially when he was going through tough times in the hospital. Soon after he got his phone back, Michael would look at his social media accounts and see what his friends were doing, while he was recovering and doing rehab.

“It was easy to get down and think this was never going to get better,” Herzog said. “That has resonated with me. I think it’s a good lesson for everybody.”

Michael thinks being a year removed from playing football is one of the reasons he was able to leave the hospital sooner than anticipated because he was in peak physical condition. He had also been through physical therapy before after various sports-related injuries and surgeries. Michael played football for Concordia from 2014-17.

“They couldn’t believe that he was able to get out that fast,” Jodie said. “I think a beam of light was coming into this room a nurse said.”

Medical personnel told the Herzogs that Michael would have likely died if he was 50 years old. His age and overall health were factors in why he was able to survive the accident.

Mike remembers watching Michael struggling to get out of bed and put his feet on the floor. There were days Michael didn’t want to get out of bed and do his rehab. In contrast, only a couple weeks later, Mike marveled at how far his son had progressed.

“He was jogging around the corridor of burn unit and giving the staff high-fives,” Mike said.

And six months later, Mike, Michael and Josh were in Utah for a hunting trip with Michael, hiking five to eight miles per day. This past Father’s Day in June was another meaningful moment for Mike.

“Father’s Day this year for me was the best Father’s Day ever,” Mike said. “I was grateful to still be the dad of four children.”

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## McFEELY

From Page D1

peacefully. Weeklong efforts to revive the ailing giant failed, and a team of physicians, technicians, magicians and morticians removed all life-support systems shortly before midnight, Thursday.”

And on it went, with Dunning lamenting the loss of the Aggies’ home field after heavy rains and a UC Davis game against Northern Michigan decimated the grass at Toomey Field. There were patches of mud over large areas of the field.

Dunning’s column ran in the Dec. 3 edition of the Davis Enterprise, one day before the Aggies were scheduled to play North Dakota State in an NCAA Division II playoff semifinal. The field was in such bad condition that Davis, one of the leading agricultural schools in the country, built a temporary see-through plastic dome over the field in hopes some of the water would evaporate.

It didn’t.

“The administration panicked,” said Dunning, who still writes for the Davis newspaper. “The game was going to be televised and they thought, ‘This is going to be really bad for recruiting and the image of the



Mike McFeely / The Forum

The sports page from the Dec. 5, 1982, Forum, telling the story of North Dakota State’s 19-14 loss to UC Davis in the NCAA Division II playoff semifinals in Davis, Calif.

university.’ So they went out and painted the mud green. True story.”

It is just part of a wild couple of days involving the first time the Bison and Aggies played, a game won by Davis 19-14 even after it lost NFL-bound quarterback Ken O’Brien during the game to a leg injury.

NDSU was angry the game wasn’t in Fargo. Bison head coach Don Morton called the field conditions “a tragedy” and Davis won a thriller by thwarting NDSU on fourth down at the Aggies’ 7-yard-line as time

expired.

If Saturday’s matchup between the Bison, currently the No. 1-ranked team in the Football Championship Subdivision, and fourth-ranked Davis is half as spicy and entertaining, the nearly 19,000 fans expected to be in attendance are in for a treat.

The 1982 season was at the beginning of NDSU’s dominant Division II run of that decade. The Bison were national runners-up the year before and were ranked second going into the ‘82 playoffs. After beating Virginia Union

in the quarterfinals, with the help of a controversial inadvertent whistle, NDSU expected to host Davis for the semifinals at Dacotah Field.

But, as Dunning recalled this week, the NCAA always awarded Davis home playoff games because, well, it’s located in California.

The snub was bad enough since NDSU wanted to bring the California team to frigid Fargo in December, but it was made worse by the condition of Toomey Field.

“I think it’s a tragedy that the NCAA would play a semifinal playoff game on a field like this,” Morton told The Forum, keeping things in perspective like all football coaches. “It’s not fair to the players on either team. I’m sure Cal-Davis is embarrassed. The NCAA blew it.”

Morton wasn’t done. Davis’ quarterfinal game the week prior was played in soupy fog on a mucky field, so the Bison coach thought the NCAA should’ve adjusted its thinking before giving another game to the California school.

“Why didn’t they make a change after they saw the condition of the field after last Saturday’s game?” Morton asked. “What are the priorities? Sure, climate is a factor.

But shouldn’t playing conditions be considered? It could be 40 degrees tomorrow in Fargo and we have artificial turf.

“We want to showcase Division II football and they come up with something like this. We’re on national television but it won’t look very professional.”

Las Vegas gamblers pegged Davis as 7.5-point favorites, and they weren’t far off. O’Brien, taken in the first round of the NFL Draft the following spring by the New York Jets (1983 was the Year of the Quarterback, with six taken in the first round of the draft including John Elway, Dan Marino and Jim Kelly), had two short touchdown runs in the first half as the Aggies took a 13-7 halftime lead.

O’Brien had another short TD in the third quarter and Davis led 19-7 before the Bison answered with a 13-yard scoring run by Jeff Willis early in the fourth quarter.

From there, the game went to the final seconds. Trailing 19-14, the Bison took possession with 5:29 left in the fourth quarter and drove to the Davis 7. With six seconds remaining, NDSU quarterback Mark Nelleremoe passed incomplete to Mark Luedtke in the end zone.

Even that was

controversial for the Bison.

“I felt there was contact with my legs,” Luedtke told The Forum after the game. “Whether it was interference, that’s not for me to call.”

“I thought it was interference from our standpoint,” Morton said. “But games aren’t won or lost on one play.”

The key stat of the game might’ve been the 150 yards rushing for the Bison. That was 100 yards below their season average.

“Our lack of passing finally caught up with us in the Cal-Davis game,” Morton told The Forum later. “We just did not have momentum coming into the game.”

Davis went on to lose in the championship game to Southwest Texas State, the same team that beat NDSU in the 1981 title game. Southwest Texas State was coached by Jim Wacker, who was the Bison coach from 1976-78.

Saturday’s game at the Fargodome could go a long way toward determining whether NDSU or Davis advances deep into the playoffs in 2019.

And Dunning, who will travel to Fargo to cover the game for the Enterprise, will have to save his sarcasm for something other than field conditions.

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