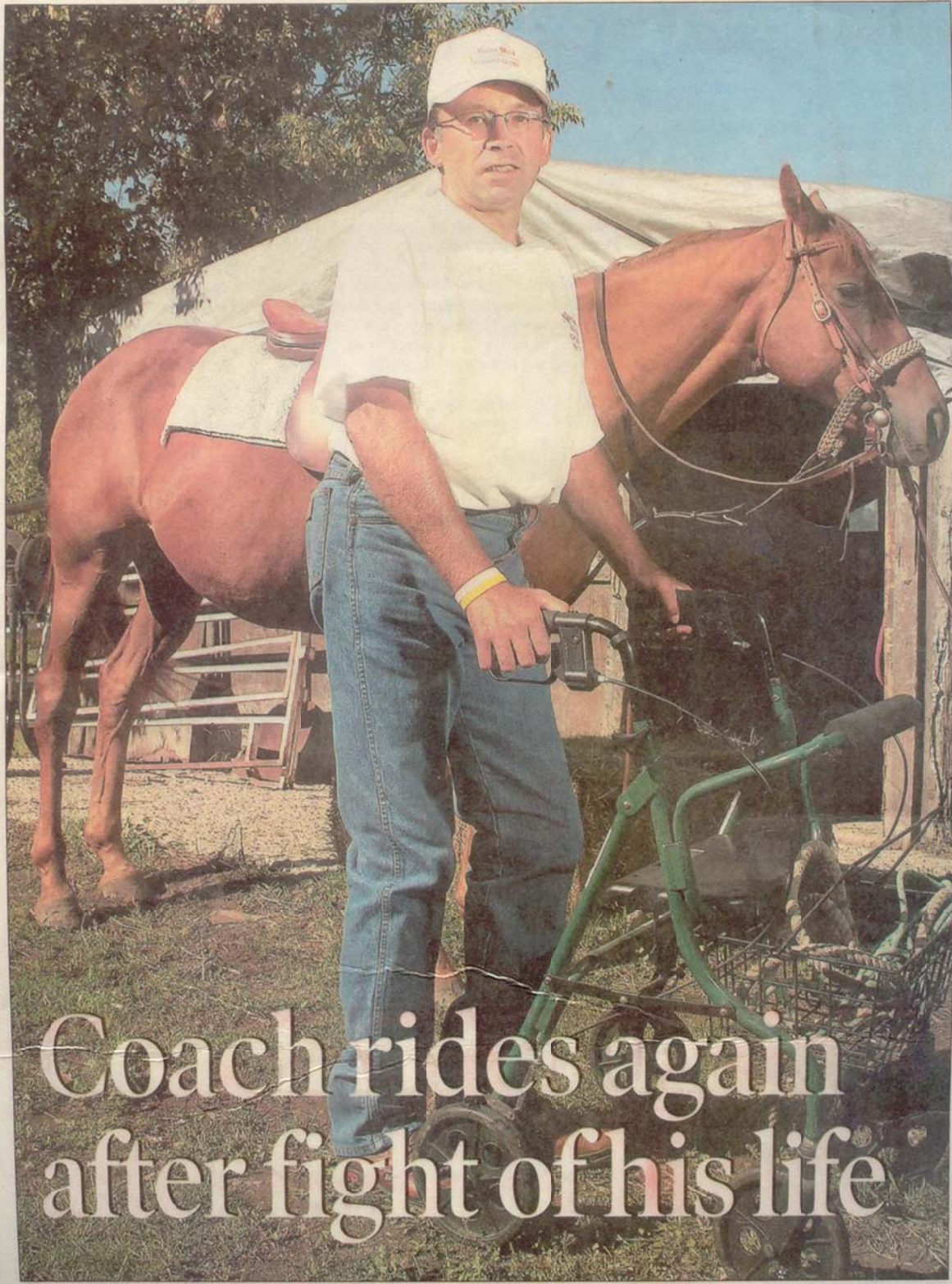


## POLO CANADA VETERAN STRICKEN



Coach rides again  
after fight of his life

Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald  
Greg Garvan is relearning to walk after being a virtual prisoner in his hospital bed just a few months ago.

KERRY WILLIAMSON  
CALGARY HERALD

It is something Greg Garvan used to do without thinking, like drawing a breath or blinking his eyes.

He has done it since he was a kid, putting his left foot in a stirrup, then swinging his other leg over the back of a horse and lifting himself into a saddle.

But this morning, that simple task takes enormous effort.

"I haven't done this in two years," says Garvan, beads of sweat forming on his brow. "But I know I can do it. Just hold the horse steady."

With a grimace and the helping hand of a friend, Garvan gets his right leg over the back of Russell, one of his favourite horses. He sits tall in the saddle, and breaks into a wide grin.

"God, this feels good," says the 51-year-old expat New Zealander, a former head coach for Polo Canada.

Less than a year ago, Greg Garvan was a prisoner in a hospital bed, unable to move his arms or legs, battling a disease less than 200 people have been diagnosed with worldwide.

For four months, he called a ward at Foothills Hospital home. He couldn't write his own name, couldn't lift a mug.

He only began walking again four months ago, with a pronounced stagger and the help of a walker. His hands are still gnarled, and he struggles to form a fist. Riding a horse was a far-off dream, but one he clung to.

Struck down by a disease few doc-

“When I asked the doctors how long it would be before I could get back on a horse, their response was, ‘We’ve got to keep you alive first’”

GREG GARVAN

tors have heard of, let alone treated, Garvan was in a fight for life.

"When I asked the doctors how long it would be before I could get back on a horse, their response was, 'We've got to keep you alive first,'" he says. "That's when I realized I was in deep trouble."

Garvan first began having problems three years ago. His hip and lower back began to ache. Then his feet began to go numb. And then his balance started to go.

He initially went to doctors complaining of arthritis in his hip. But after several misdiagnoses — and the discovery of a large lesion in the marrow of his right thigh bone — doctors eventually came up with POEMS syndrome, a rare blood disorder that involves an overgrowth of bone marrow cells.

That, in turn, produces chemicals that damage other parts of the body. It affects both motor and sensory nerves, and has no known cause. It can be fatal, taking away a person's ability to breathe or pump blood.

In a matter of months, it had shut Greg Garvan's body down.

"My body was attacking itself. I

couldn't move, and when I could move, I was very stiff.

"I didn't know where my body was. I always had to look down to see where my legs were, and where my feet were. The sensation just wasn't there."

Garvan underwent 5,000 units of radiation. He became so familiar with the process that he named the radiation machine 'Igor.' He fell from 225 pounds to just 150.

Doctors were stumped. They considered arthritis, diabetes and leukemia. Nothing fit, until the discovery of POEMS.

Dr. Norman Schachar, a professor of surgery at the University of Calgary who is treating Garvan, had never seen a case of the disease, had barely heard of it.

"It was at the bottom of a list of hundreds and hundreds of things that could cause a hole in the bone," he says. "I'd never seen anything like it."

Schachar said Garvan's battle with the disease is far from over, but he's amazed at how far he's come in the past year.

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# FROM BI COACH

He shakes his head when he hears Garvan rode a horse, well aware his patient would try regardless of medical advice.

"He's a stubborn, pig-headed Kiwi who made up his mind that he was going to get better, and that always helps, no matter how bad you are. I tell patients never to give up hope and he never did," says Schachar who intends to submit Garvan's case to medical journals.

Schachar hesitates when talking of Garvan's recovery. Like the disease, Schachar has seen nothing like it.

"As far as I am concerned ... this is miraculous."

Garvan's darkest days came lying in a hospital bed when the Sheep River spilled its banks last year and flowed into his home near Okotoks, and was helpless when sewer backup filled his basement.

When the river rose a second time, he had to be carried from his own home and driven away in

a truck.

"I couldn't do anything. For the first time in my life I couldn't help anybody," he says, adding the time was perhaps the toughest of his life. "I had two weeks of really black days. I'd just cry over everything.

"And then I thought, 'that's enough of that, I've got to get up and get on with my life, and that's when I turned things around.'"

Garvan now celebrates the small things, like riding a horse, or using his ride-on mower to cut his lawn. Tomorrow, he'll MC a cowboy polo game at the Bar U Ranch's annual Old Time Rodeo.

He even remembers the day he could cut his own steak again.

"Before that point I had absolutely nothing," he says. "It feels really good to be independent again."

He shouldn't have been able to walk again. Now he's back in the saddle.

"I always knew, in the back of my mind, that I would get on a horse again," he says. "It never got that dark that there was a 'never.' I always knew I would do it."