

Handcyclist to compete in River Bank Run for first time, raising funds for charity along the way

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Brad Baumann will be competing in the River Bank Run on Saturday in downtown Grand Rapids.

ZEELAND -- Brad Baumann spent his early 20s like a lot of guys. He loved to work on cars and trucks, and enjoyed riding four-wheelers.

But when he was 22, he started to feel a little tightness in his legs. So, he went to see a doctor.

The doctors diagnosed him with Adrenomyeloneuropathy, a rare genetic disease that affects about 30,000 globally.

Gradually, over the course of a 15-year period, the use of his legs has deteriorated to the point he is paralyzed from the waist down and forced to use a

wheelchair.

Now 37, Baumann said he makes sure he still leads a full life, and that will include taking part in the handcycle division of the Fifth Third River Bank Run 25K on Saturday for the first time.

"I have a strong faith. I've been dealt this lot in life, and there's a purpose for it," he said. "What my purpose is, I don't know, but I know there is a purpose for my disease and for all of this. I didn't get to choose it, but I'm perfectly fine because God knows best."

Baumann had been interested in handcycling for several years, but the steep price tag -- a new bike can cost between \$3,000 and \$4,000 -- initially held him back.

Finally, the Zeeland resident made contact with the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association, a nonprofit organization that sponsors a wide variety of sports, which helped him find a used bike for half the price in August.

Despite spending the previous several years in a wheelchair, Baumann took to the handcycle right away.

"When you're in a wheelchair for a couple of years, you tend to build up some upper body strength," he said. "The

first day I had it, I think I ended up riding 10 miles and just kept right on going from there."

Baumann competed in a few events late last year, including the Crim in Flint and the Detroit Marathon.

An accident nearly derailed his plans to take part in this year's River Bank Run 25K. While riding the 7 1/2 miles home from his job at Fogg Filler in Holland in November, Baumann was hit by a car and broke the tibia in his left leg.

Baumann was in a cast for nine weeks, and only recently ended his rehabilitation.

But he refused to let the accident derail his plans for the River Bank Run. He got his bike fixed and had an indoor training machine moved into his house Jan. 1.

Baumann has been training hard ever since.

"After all that happened, I said you know what, we're going to do the Fifth Third," Baumann said. "We're going to be able to train and get back and do that race."

The handcycle division, which debuted at the River Bank Run in 2006, still is relatively new, but Baumann said he thinks it will continue to grow in popularity. It's one reason he is using this year's event to raise money for the GRWSA.

"I've heard of a lot of guys who have switched over from the push rim wheelchair racers to the handcycle," Baumann said. "It's turning into a big sport because their arms and hands take a huge beating when they're pushing their chairs. The handcyclers, we don't have that."

Baumann used to enjoy bike rides with his family before his legs started to give out. Thanks to the handcycle, he still can go on group rides.

He hopes this weekend's ride will help motivate others to remain active and positive, no matter their circumstances.

"It kind of motivates me, too, on my end just to know that maybe I can be an inspiration to other people," Baumann said. "God put me in a wheelchair for a reason. I don't know what the reason is, but maybe that's the reason — just to inspire somebody else."

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