Surgery on his legs happened again last week for Bob Hazelton of Eden Prairie. He lost both legs above the knees, one in 1986 and the other in 1987. This didn't happen because of an accident. Bob did this to himself. He had choices and made the wrong ones. Bob used anabolic steroids. A promising professional boxing career ended, as well as what most of us consider a normal life. Confined to a wheelchair, Bob spent the next 10 years lecturing to children on the dangers of the drug that took his life and turned it upside down.

How did it start?

In the late 1960s, Bob was a heavyweight boxer who won enough fights to get a chance to fight George Foreman. Bob was 6-foot-6 1/2 and weighed 183 pounds. The lack of size cost him the match against Foreman, Dec. 7, 1970. Foreman outweighed him by 40 pounds. In 1971, Bob was introduced to steroids in England. He was told this would help him put on the extra weight he needed to compete with the bigger boxers. "I thought it was a high-potency vitamin pill. I thought it was just to increase my appetite," he said. There was a question in Bob's mind, though. He wondered why a prescription was needed to get the drug. In spite of his reservations, he took the drug and was pleased with the results. Bob gained 27 pounds in five months and felt great. He won fights with the weight gain and moved up in the world rankings. In 1977, he defeated light-heavyweight champion Manuel Ramos. This put him just one fight away from a chance to contend for the world heavyweight title against Joe Frazier. Before that crucial fight, Bob experienced numbness in his left leg. There was a blood clot in it, but doctors told him he could still fight. He needed to defeat Lucien Rodriguez to earn the chance at the heavyweight title. The first two rounds went to Bob, but then his left leg swelled like a balloon, he said. Without any feeling in the leg, he was eventually knocked out. He heard the referee say, "It's over tonight." Bob remembered thinking that it meant that his boxing career was over. He knew why the leg was hurting. But he still took steroids before the fight to give him a rush of hate. "I thought the hate would overwhelm the pain, but it really just made things worse," he said. His boxing career was over.

Next level of abuse

Human growth hormone was the next step for Bob. The hormone was another way to add muscle and bulk. The anabolic steroids were a thing of the past. His new career was as a security guard for rock bands like Van Halen and Def Leppard. His weight shot up to 320 pounds. He was given another warning sign, but the damage had been done. "The back of my leg split open from the knee down to the ankle. It was like dead meat, because the muscles weren't getting any blood," he said. His left leg was amputated in November 1986, followed by the right leg one year later. Bob was then confined to a wheelchair, his drug abuse behind him. Next, he had a new mission. He talked to over five million high school students about the dangers of steroid use on a national lecture tour. He also appeared on national talk shows. "People see me, and they see firsthand what this drug can do," he said. "But people seem to want to keep it hushed up. They think that it can't happen to them, or that it can't happen to (their) kid or at (their) school. "That's not the way it works. If it's there, it's going to happen. I've seen this drug tear up people's lives. You can't just say it's not going to happen to you if you decide to take it," Bob explained. He tries to educate young people before they are exposed to steroids. The message is not one schools really want to hear, he said. "Let's not live in a dream world. This is a killer drug," Bob said. "Steroid (use) is like a credit card. It gives you the body now. But when it comes time to pay the bill, are you going to be man enough to pay the bill? I thought I was, but I wasn't," he said.
Side effects of steroid use

Anabolic steroids are totally different than the catabolic steroids doctors prescribe for patients, according to Marty Dvorak, M.D., of Ridgeview Medical Center Howard Lake. Anabolic steroids are chemical modifications of natural steroids and increase the steroid level in the body, he said. Many side effects include thinning of bones and blood vessels, alteration in appearance of sex organs and consequent dysfunction. All types of sexual characteristics are changed, he explained. Diabetes, brain tumors, and pancreatic problems are common, and in long-term users, skeletal features may enlarge, such as the facial features and hands, Dvorak noted. The body is a delicate balance, he said, and anything that upsets it can cause problems. Human growth hormone is an area of active interest right now. Investigation includes research on aging, cancer, and others, he said. The hormone is active in the body until the bones fuse in the late teens. Then it levels off, Dvorak said. Effects of growth hormone are still in the research stage and not completely known, yet.

A fresh start

Now, Bob and his wife, Valerie, are attempting to get some peace of mind. They are going to build a home in Dutch Lake Woods in Howard Lake and look forward to the small town atmosphere. Unfortunately, more surgery on his legs has interrupted the move for a time. Bob fell on one leg last winter as he transferred from his chair to his van. An arm on the chair gave way, and he fell directly onto the stump of the leg, chipping the bone. The chip has been removed and muscle repositioned over the end of the bone. The other leg had an infection in the muscle, and it had to be opened up and cleaned. He was scheduled for release from Abbott Northwestern Hospital Friday. Now, the challenge of building a new home will keep him busy for a while. Bob is looking forward to some normalcy and stability in his life. He hopes to find that in Howard Lake.