

How is Lars doing?—How do we feel?

by Per Gaarder

For me, preparations for this ski season have been different, very different. The usual things that at times go wrong in my life do not appear to be all that important anymore. For various reasons, training has been somewhat sporadic. However, it has not upset me the way it used to do.

I know many of you have similar feelings. Lars' accident has made us re-think, reassess. Somewhere in the process, we had forgotten that we were healthy, that we could go out and use our legs anytime.

My first visit with Lars in the Intensive Care Unit was hard. He does not remember anymore, but I will never forget. As I approached the bed he whispered, "Oh hi, Per, how are you doing?" When I got over the initial shock and posed the same question, he said, "I am afraid I screwed up." He talked slowly and with difficulty (his jaw was wired shut). I did not stay long; he was in pain. As I was leaving he said, "I received much support from a lot of people when I skied - now I wonder if I can ever do anything in return." A somewhat remarkable comment, I thought, from a 22 year-old paraplegic in an Intensive Care Unit.

In the days and weeks that followed, I learned a lot about the initial physiological and mental stresses of a paraplegic. Seeing Lars on an almost daily basis also exposed me to some of the other patients on the ward. However, there was a difference. Lars had been a "high performance" athlete, a tremendous talent, an olympic hopeful. In a way, I felt he had lost more than the others. Also, he was a loner, not uncommon for long distance athletes. The differences soon became quite obvious. Lars' physical recovery developed into a fast track process. He was assigned a terrific physiotherapist who went beyond the call of duty. He soon started to lift weights more than twice what was normal at his stage of rehabilitation. When the average patient could sit in a wheelchair for 30 minutes at a time, Lars would sit for 2 1/2 hours. He went on longer and longer wheelchair trips. Each trip was a competition where he mobilized everything he had. At times he was totally exhausted when he went back to bed at night, but was ready for another attack the next morning. Lars, the athlete was back.

While Lars' physical strength has been on a steady and speedy recovery, his mood swings have been on a roller coaster. The emotional stress has at times put him under. It has simply been too much - in popular medical terms referred to as "crashing". However, he has emerged from each 'crash' a little stronger. His ability to deal with

mental stress as an athlete is now starting to work for him. He knows so well that this portion of his rehabilitation is a long road. In his own words, "I can accept the paraplegic part; it is the forever part that I cannot get a handle on." Although tough at times, it is his clear thinking and very analytical mind that eventually will pull him through.

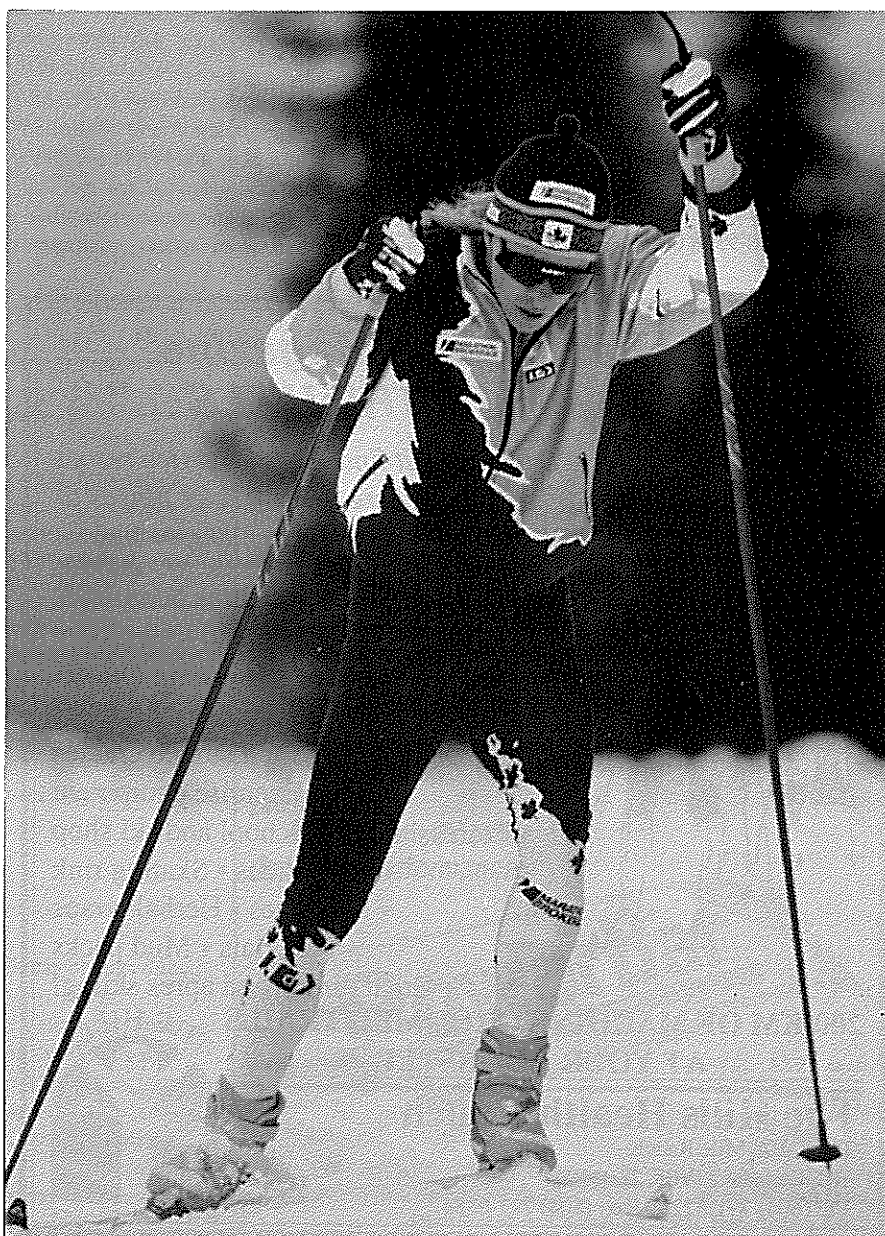
Lars has now been transferred from Shaughnessy Hospital to G.F. Strong, a rehabilitation institute. His days are busy with all kinds of rehabilitation programs which include learning to drive with hand operations. When a few weightlifting records from the gym were brought to his attention, it was easy, very easy, to read his mind.

There is a marked improvement in Lars'

ear problems. Vision has not as yet returned to his left eye. Full recovery in these areas is presently high on his wish list.

The following extract from Lars' "Thank you letter" to donors to the Trust Fund sums up his own feelings: "...Although I may never walk again, advances in technology and public attitude mean I stand to lead a life which is both meaningful and productive. However, the road back is long. Your donation means, that for me and those who may be in the same position as me, the journey has been made easier. Thank you."

Lars is very thankful for the tremendous support he has received. However, he may not know that in the process he has taught all of us a lot.



John Gibson