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Touched By an Angel

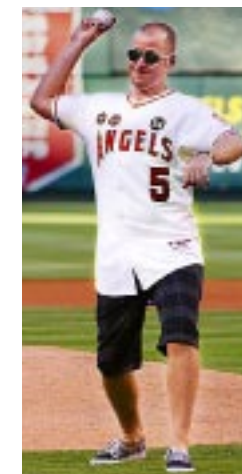
Inspired by the memory of **Nick Adenhardt**—and the remarkable recovery of his friend **Jon Wilhite**—L.A. has overcome a bleak start to seize control of the AL West | BY LEE JENKINS

When Angels pitching coach Mike Butcher walked out of the UC Irvine Medical Center at dawn on April 9, one of his players was dead, two of the player's friends were dead and a third friend was on life support, his skull no longer attached to his spinal column. Butcher wanted to believe that the third friend could pull through, but after what he had seen that night, hope was hard to muster. "His chances," Butcher says, "were slim to none."

Dr. Nitin Bhatia, the 36-year-old director of the Spine Center at UCI, had delivered the grisly diagnosis: internal decapitation. "I read the CT scan, and it was depressing," Bhatia says. "Ninety-five percent of people with internal decapitation die immediately or within a day or two. Of the other five percent, most are either quadriplegic or on a ventilator the rest of their lives."

By the afternoon of April 9 the baseball world had learned of the death of Angels starting pitcher Nick Adenhardt and his friends Courtney Stewart and Henry Pearson in a car crash, and information started to emerge about that other passenger, a 24-year-old youth baseball coach named Jon Wilhite, who had been a catcher at Cal State-Fullerton. One television network reported that he too was dead.

After a somber meeting with Jim Adenhardt, Nick's father, in



BOUND BY TRAGEDY
Weaver (left) pays tribute to Adenhardt before every start and had a hug for Wilhite (right), who threw out the first pitch in Anaheim on Aug. 29.

their clubhouse that afternoon, the Angels vowed to use baseball as their sanctuary. But on the first road trip after the crash, they lost five of six games, suggesting that there was no escape.

By the time they came home to Anaheim on April 21, their most feared hitter, Vladimir Guerrero, had gone on the disabled list, joining four of their starting pitchers. Their bullpen had an 8.31 ERA, worst in the majors. Their lineup had scored the second-fewest runs in the AL. Worst of all, their top pitching prospect was gone and never coming back.

"What's happening to us right now is mental," centerfielder Torii Hunter said then. "Guys miss Nick. They're mourning." When the team gathered on April 23 for a private memorial service at Angel Stadium, manager Mike Scioscia told the players to move on in their own time and in their own way. But he reminded them: "We will move on."

The Angels have won the American League West four times in the past five years and were widely expected to do it again this season. Despite losing free-agent first baseman Mark Teixeira to the Yankees and closer Francisco Rodriguez to the Mets last winter, they had gone 26–8 in spring training, leading the majors in batting average and runs. But on May 1 they were 9–13 and stuck in third place in their division. "We had the worst month a baseball team can possibly have," Hunter said recently. "It's like we were all telling ourselves, Hey, it's just a game, it's not that important, it's nothing compared to life and death. That went on for a month—maybe two months."

The malaise spread all the way to the Angels' Triple A team in Salt Lake City, where Adenhardt had spent the 2008 season. "I'd take the mound, look back at the outfielders, and they've got their heads down," says righthander Matt Palmer, who started the season in Salt Lake before his promotion to the bigs on April 23. "Then I'd look in at the catcher, and he's got his head down too. How do you throw a pitch if everyone's got their head down?"

The TV report on the accident was, in fact, wrong. Wilhite was alive. Bhatia had wanted to operate immediately, on the morning of April 9, but Wilhite had too many other injuries—collapsed

RALLYING SUPPORT
There can be a different hero every day for the Angels, here celebrating a 12th-inning win over Boston, but Morales (below) has provided the biggest lift.

lungs, fractured disks, torn muscles, broken ribs and swelling in his brain. Bhatia screwed a ring, called a halo vest, into Wilhite's skull and sent him to the intensive care unit. "They brought his body back to life," Bhatia says.

Six days after the crash Wilhite lay face-down on an operating table as Bhatia and a team of 30 prepared to reattach his skull to his spine. A nurse asked Bhatia, "Are you nervous?" He certainly had reason to

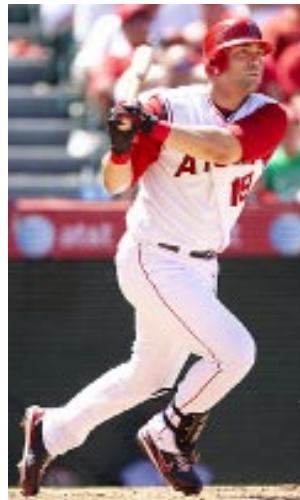
"Big events bring you together or tear you apart," says Jepsen. "Nick's death made us closer."

be. "Every step could kill him," Bhatia says. "Turning him the slightest bit on the table could give him permanent paralysis. It's a tightrope. Every step has to be perfect."

Bhatia and his team started by cutting a nine-inch incision into the back of Wilhite's neck. They inserted a titanium plate beneath the skull and connected it to a titanium rod running into the neck, in effect creating a new spinal column. The procedure lasted five hours, and when it was over Bhatia was confident Wilhite would live. Under what conditions, though, he had no idea.

Two days after the surgery Bhatia woke Wilhite from a medically induced coma and pulled the endotracheal tubes from his mouth. Wilhite started to breathe on his own. "That was the first step," Bhatia says. "He would not need a ventilator."

Wilhite was flanked around the clock by his mother, Betsy; his father, Tony; older brother Michael; and younger brother, Chad. The first motion Jon made was to squeeze his mother's hand. The first word he spoke was, "Mom." The family rejoiced.



Wilhite could not remember anything about the evening of April 9. He could not remember going to the Angels' game and watching Adenhardt pitch six scoreless innings, or hopping into Stewart's silver Mitsubishi Eclipse afterward and heading to a country bar in Fullerton, or being blindsided less than 50 yards from the bar by an allegedly drunk driver named Andrew Gallo, who ran a red light in his minivan and was later arrested after fleeing the scene.

(Gallo is awaiting trial on Nov. 9 for three counts of second-degree murder.) And he certainly could not remember being extricated through the car's blown-out back window by firefighters who were meticulous about stabilizing his neck and careful not to jostle him as they placed him gently onto a backboard.

A week after the surgery Wilhite was fidgeting in his bed and speaking in complete sentences. Mostly he made jokes at his own expense—about his "gross beard" or his "head falling off"—to ease the tension with his many visitors. But he also asked

his parents what exactly had happened to him on April 9 and what had happened to the others in the car.

His parents told him the truth, that everyone else in the car had been killed, but Wilhite's pain medication was so strong that the reality did not completely register. In fact, Wilhite was so disoriented that he kept insisting to friends and family that he was in Texas, even though Wilhite had a clear view of Angel Stadium through his window.

It was not until Wilhite watched an Angels game in late April on television in his hospital room and saw the players wearing black patches on their chests embroidered with number 34 that he realized what had occurred. "That's Nick's number," Wilhite told himself. "Nick died in the crash."

In front of Angel Stadium a memorial to Adenhardt swelled like an amoeba, with caps surrounded by photographs surrounded by teddy bears and rally monies. Box-office employees, led by assistant ticket manager Susan Weiss, disposed of wilted flowers, picked up windblown candles, brought the contents of the memorial inside when rain was in the forecast and re-created it when the threat had passed. The Angels wondered when the memorial would stop expanding. It never did.

"Even now, when I leave here at 11 p.m.,

people are still out there," says Weiss. "It's become a part of all of us."

The Angels kept Adenhardt's locker intact—complete with the water bottle on the top shelf—and reserved a locker for him on the road. Relief pitcher Scot Shields hung Adenhardt's jersey in the dugout before every game, and after Shields went on the DL in May, equipment manager Ken Higdon took over the duties, followed by relief pitcher Kevin Jepsen. "Nick pops into your head when you least expect it," Jepsen says. "There are still days I come in and just stare at his locker. It's like it's never going to go away."

Jepsen was sent down to Salt Lake City on May 4, and when he returned to the Angels on June 10 he noticed a subtle change in the clubhouse dynamic. "Guys were hanging out more, talking to each other more," Jepsen says. "Big events either bring you together or tear you apart. I think this made us closer."

The day after Jepsen's call-up, the Angels lost to Tampa Bay 11–1. They were a .500 team, tied with Seattle for second place in the division, 4½ games behind Texas. "I think we realized," Hunter says, "that Nick was looking down on us saying, Fellas, come on, let's get it together. I want to win."

The Angels won 13 of their next 16 games to take the division lead. Hunter had been carrying the team offensively, but he started to get some help from first baseman Kendry

Morales, who hit five homers and knocked in nine runs during that stretch. Morales is no stranger to emotional struggle. He tried 12 times to defect from Cuba. Either his boat didn't show or wasn't seaworthy or police caught him in the act. Three times he was arrested and sentenced to 72 hours in jail.

After Morales finally escaped in 2004, he signed with the Angels, and even though he is making \$21.4 million less than Teixeira this season, his offensive numbers are just as impressive. "When I lie down at night, I think about how difficult it was to get to this point," Morales says through an interpreter. "But it was worth it."

Two weeks after the crash Wilhite climbed out of his bed at the UC Irvine Medical Center. A week after that, when he was able to stand and take a few steps, he left UCI for the Rehabilitation Center at Long Beach Memorial Medical Center, where he spent the next three weeks in physical therapy. Then he moved in with his parents in Murrieta, an hour southeast of Anaheim. His speech pattern was slow. He winced every time he turned his neck. He had to wear a blindfold in the car because seeing moving traffic nauseated him. When he grew impatient with his progress, he would reach into his wallet and pull out a photo of himself wearing the halo, which never

failed to remind him how far he had come.

Wilhite and his mother returned to Anaheim in June to thank the doctors, nurses, paramedics and firefighters who had helped save him. He got a tattoo of Bhatia's signature beneath the scar on the back of his neck. When Chad asked why he couldn't get a tattoo like his brother, their father cracked, "If your head falls off, maybe I'll let you get one too."

Wilhite went to rehab four days a week at Rancho Physical Therapy in Murrieta, jogging gingerly around cones, lifting light weights, sometimes even throwing a baseball. For a guy who had been a walk-on at Cal State-Fullerton, laced a pinch-hit single during the 2007 College World Series, caught Giants ace Tim Lincecum in the Cape Cod League and was coaching a youth team in Pasadena at the time of the crash, throwing a baseball was the ultimate sign of progress.

Then, on Father's Day, June 21, Nick Adenhardt's friend and Nick Adenhardt's team came together. Wilhite and his family drove to Angel Stadium, and before he went in he placed a Cal State-Fullerton cap on the edge of the memorial, inscribed with the names NICK, COURTNEY and HENRY, along with the words THANKS TO MY 3 ANGELS. Wilhite did not know Adenhardt well—they met through Pearson, an aspiring agent—but to the Angels they were blood brothers. "I think they saw a little of Nick in me," Wilhite said.

When Hunter noticed Wilhite by the Angels' dugout before the game, he hugged him. So did pitchers Jered Weaver and Justin Speier, as well as Butcher, the pitching coach who had been at the hospital on April 9. "You're a true blessing," Hunter told Wilhite. "I want you to know that." Wilhite preferred to be one of the guys. "They weren't ready for me in heaven," he said. "It was just like my baseball career—no one wanted me." Everybody laughed.

Wilhite grew up in Manhattan Beach, rooting for the Dodgers and wearing number 14 because Scioscia was his favorite player. They were both lefthanded-hitting catchers, and when Scioscia met Wilhite on Father's Day, he asked him, "You're not one of those Dodgers fans are you?" Wilhite

ducked the question, but the honest answer is yes. "I am a Dodgers fan," Wilhite said, "but because of what's happened, I'm connected to the Angels for life."

Just as the Angels found their groove, Hunter and Guerrero went on the disabled list on July 10, and fans braced for a relapse. Instead the team won 12 of its next 13 and shot to the top of the majors in runs, hits and batting average. In recent years the Angels had banked on pitching, defense and speed, which betrayed them when the playoffs rolled around. This year's team is reminiscent of the 2002 version, which won the World Series thanks to its top-to-bottom strength.

Because the Angels are so deep, it's hard to pick out a headliner and equally difficult

through Sunday, and their starting rotation was finally taking shape. Lefthander Scott Kazmir, acquired in a trade on Aug. 28 from Tampa Bay, has been tinkering with his delivery for most of the summer and saw his ERA jump to 5.92. But he has reunited with Butcher, his former pitching coach, and provides an intriguing postseason option. For his career, he has a 2.53 ERA against the Yankees and a 3.59 ERA against the Red Sox, the team that has eliminated the Angels from the playoffs for the past two years.

Wilhite bench-presses 50 pounds, a source of embarrassment for him and amazement for his doctors. His speech is still labored, but when he watches tape of interviews he did shortly after the surgery, he sees how much he has improved. Bhatia believes Wilhite's ability to speak will be normal by Christmas and he will be fully rehabilitated within a year, though his neck will always feel somewhat stiff.

Wilhite watches the Angels on TV almost every night, in addition to the Dodgers. He bought the MLB Extra Innings package so he can check in on former college teammates Kurt Suzuki, a catcher for the A's, and Ricky Romero, a pitcher for the Blue Jays. Wilhite's big league friends, specifically Suzuki, have raised more than \$61,000 to help cover his medical bills and rehabilitation costs.

Wilhite flew to Oakland to throw out the first pitch when the Angels played the A's in July and returned to Angel Stadium for another game later that month. He threw out the first pitch when the Angels hosted the A's on Aug. 29 as part of a ceremony honoring the Wilhite, Stewart and Pearson families.

For now, Wilhite is not looking too far into the future. He wants to see the Angels and the Dodgers meet in the World Series. He wants to speak out against drunken driving. And when he is able, he wants to coach baseball again. Coaching sometimes seems unlikely, but that's when he pulls the picture out of his wallet and looks at his halo.

"We've searched to find something positive that came out of that night," said Palmer, the Angels' pitcher. "One positive is that we have grown stronger as a team. The other is Jon Wilhite." □



Kazmir has a 2.53 ERA against the Yankees and a 3.59 ERA against the Red Sox.

FALL GUY

The Angels hope the acquisition of Kazmir can help stop the revolving door in a rotation that has used 14 starters.

to identify a weak link. At one point three weeks ago, every batter in the Los Angeles lineup was hitting .300 or better, a feat last accomplished by the Cardinals and the New York Giants in 1930.

Rightfielder Bobby Abreu, who was unwanted as a free agent last winter, is now poised to knock in more than 100 runs for the seventh year in a row. As a bonus, Abreu has taught the free-swinging Angels how to work a count and wait for their pitch.

"You hear guys on the bench ask, 'How come he just took two strikes right down the middle?'" says Mickey Hatcher, Anaheim's hitting coach. "Then he goes to 3 and 2 and still gets a base hit. That makes an impression. We're not biting on the pitches we used to bite on, and you can see pitchers getting frustrated."

The Angels were 5½ games up on Texas in the AL West

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