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Fenway keeper has healing spirit

By Steve Marantz
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BOSTON -- The nation's eyes were on Fenway Park on the afternoon of April 20, as Americans sought to grieve and heal. One set of those eyes belonged to head groundskeeper Dave Mellor, who knew something about grief, and had ideas about healing.

After the Boston Marathon bombings on April 15, the death of three spectators and injuries to 264 others, after nearly a week of questions about who was responsible, a manhunt that locked down Boston and adjacent towns for a long, unnerving Friday, and after one alleged bomber was killed and the other captured, Fenway opened the next afternoon for a baseball game, the [Boston Red Sox](#) versus the [Kansas City Royals](#).

The old ballpark never was more splendid. An American flag draped the Green Monster, fans held signs that proclaimed "Boston Strong," [David Ortiz](#) spit an expletive at terrorism and Neil Diamond's surprise appearance and singing of Fenway favorite "Sweet Caroline" stirred the crowd. [Daniel Nava](#)'s three-run homer in the eighth inning lifted the Olde Towne Team to a 4-3 win.

Mellor, 50, head groundskeeper since 2001, was uplifted.

"That event brought the community together -- it was spiritual in many ways," Mellor said. "I was proud to be part of the Red Sox family. I was proud to be part of 'Boston Strong.'"

To Mellor, the "Boston Strong" motto coined after the bombings meant "a sense of community, of friendship, of making new friends and making new experiences and coming together from not only our celebrations but our pain, and knowing that there's support there."

While the game took place on grass and dirt groomed to perfection by his crew, Mellor wasn't there to watch it -- he was at home on medical leave. On a day when victims were under care at Boston hospitals, and when thousands converged at the ballpark for relief and release, Mellor was recuperating from the ailments that are the basis of his unusual story, and determined message.

A week later, Mellor hobbled across the Fenway infield on crutches -- back at work after his 37th surgery.

"Coulda been 38," he said. "I consider myself lucky."

Mellor is recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the result of 37 surgeries, the incidents that caused them and the pain that resulted. PTSD cost him a lot of sleep, anguish and alcohol, and took him a long time to figure out. But once he did, in 2010, he underwent therapy and began to heal.



Fenway Park groundskeeper Dave Mellor tends to the field he's overseen since 2001.

Now he is on a mission to spread the word to the victims of the Boston Marathon bombings and their families. He suspects that many -- especially the amputees -- will suffer some degree of PTSD, the symptoms of which include nightmares, flashbacks, depression, excessive drinking and mood disorder. If any suffer, he hopes they can deal with it more quickly than he did.

"I want people to know that there's hope, that they're not alone, that there's a bright future for them," he said. "PTSD affects not only the patient but the family, and that there's support for that, too.

"Treatment has helped myself and my family become stronger. And I want people to know that there's help out there -- that they can become stronger, and things will get better.

"I encourage people to seek help -- to know help is available -- and to not be ashamed to ask for help. Know you will have a roller coaster of good times and bad, but time heals and treatment heals -- not only the physical wounds but the invisible wounds of PTSD. It does get better, and you are strong enough to get through it. If I can get through it anybody can, 'cause I'm nothing special."

On the day of the bombings, Mellor was at Massachusetts General Hospital. He had re-injured his right femur and hip five days earlier, when he slipped in the Red Sox dugout during a rain delay. The initial injury occurred in mid-March, when he tripped over a drainpipe outside his home. A hip replacement was contemplated, but he got three screws in his femur head instead. That was surgery No. 37. Before that, he had 20 surgeries on his right knee, two on his feet, one on a hand, one on his left knee and 11 on his back, which included two spinal fusions. The back surgeries resulted in the insertion of electronic stimulators for pain management. Complications from pain medication resulted in hemorrhoid surgery.



Mellor has endured his own physical challenges and sought help to cope with his pain.

His problems date back to 1981, when an out-of-control car smashed into him as he walked across the parking lot of a McDonald's in Troy, Ohio. The accident left him bedridden and then on crutches, delayed his entry into college and ended his dream of a pitching career. His love of baseball was great enough, however, that he turned to a career as a groundskeeper. His first job was with the [Milwaukee Brewers](#), and it was in Milwaukee County Stadium, in October 1995, when he was smashed by another car. This time the vehicle, driven by a woman with mental problems, came through an outfield gate and hit him as he signaled it to stop. Again, his right knee bore the brunt of the collision. By that time, Mellor was married and had two small children.

Over the next 15 months he had four surgeries on his right knee. The knee eventually was replaced in 1997 as Mellor endured excruciating pain because of scar tissue. The pain was so bad, he recalled, that one night he thought, "I hope I don't wake up -- not that I want to die, but I hope I don't wake up."

In 2001 the Red Sox hired him as head groundskeeper to replace a crusty fixture, Joe Mooney. The Fenway job was a "dream" job for Mellor because he had grown up a Red Sox fan, and because his father, who died when Dave was 3, was a lifelong Sox fan. One month after Mellor started at Fenway he injured his back as he pulled on a hose. He waited until after the All-Star break to have surgery on a herniated disc.

In 2006, he injured his back again while repairing a bullpen mound and had surgery for another herniated disc. After the second disc surgery his back deteriorated, and he experimented with electrical spinal cord stimulators, with mixed success. During the 2007 season he had two spinal fusions, through his stomach.

By that time he was established as one of the top groundskeepers in baseball, noted for the artistry with which he cut designs and patterns into the grass. He had published two books on mowing techniques and lawn care and had been called on to advise on the field upkeep for several All-Star Games.

Despite his professional success Mellor was unhappy, and not only because of his physical pain. Something inside was off-kilter, tense and anxious. Recurring nightmares and sleep deprivation wore him down. He was impatient and moody and tried to mask his unhappiness with a happy-go-lucky façade that, he came to realize, fooled nobody. He drank to escape.

In 2010, while at the office of his acupuncturist, Mellor picked up a magazine and read an article about PTSD. At the time his oldest daughter was an intern at the Home Base Program, which provides support and clinical care to military veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, and specializes in treatment of PTSD. He had another reason to be interested -- Home Base is a combined project of the Red Sox Foundation and Massachusetts General Hospital. The article marked a turning point for Mellor.

"I thought only soldiers from the horrors of war could have post-traumatic stress disorder, and the first paragraph listed about 12 symptoms and I had 10 of them," he recalled. "And I just started trembling and tears just started pouring down my face. It was scary but in its own way it was a relief that maybe finally I have a name for what I've been going through."

Mellor ripped the article out of the magazine, skipped his acupuncture session and raced home to tell his wife, Denise, about his revelation. In a tearful scene, he poured out the hidden fears and suffering that now came with a diagnosis he could understand. Soon enough he was in therapy.

"I went on Mondays for an hour and Fridays for an hour and a half and we had to one by one go through each incident and break down and desensitize all these buried emotions," Mellor recalled. "For years people would see the scar on my leg and ask what happened, and I'd tell them I got hit at McDonald's and a lady ran me over on the field and I'd tell just the facts kind of like a police report. I'd always leave the emotional part out because I was worried I would break down in front of somebody, they'd see the crack in my armor. And when we went through this -- working to desensitize these emotions it was powerful. I mean, they had me write out word for word everything I was thinking and there were many days when I would have to start over because the paper was soaked from my tears and then they had me read it out loud and I would break down reading it out loud."

After several months of therapy, Mellor noticed an improvement in his mood. Then, one night, he slept seven hours without a nightmare. He said it had been 29 years since that had happened. The next night he did it again, and the next. After the third full night of sleep he was confident enough to tell his wife and doctor. He was healing -- maybe not fully, and not for good, but some, enough to make a difference.

That was in February 2011. Since then Mellor has slept well and dropped 130 pounds. Even the injuries of this spring -- to his femur and hip -- have not re-awakened his PTSD. Though he lives in chronic pain -- he rates it an 8 on a scale of 10 -- he endures it with courage. "I think I have the best life -- I'm the luckiest guy in the world," Mellor said.

Since the marathon bombings, he has come up with his own interpretation of "Boston Strong." It involves treatment for any victim who may experience PTSD. And it involves a Fenway field as verdant and perfect as any he has cultivated.

"People come to Fenway to escape," Mellor said. "To put a pause on trauma and pain, to see the fun on the field and the joy of children in the stands. Being an employee of the Sox is an honor. I feel a bond with the fans in the stand and they feel a bond with each other. It gives us an opportunity to celebrate and

be happy and forget about our troubles for a while."

Among PTSD resources, Mellor recommends several outlets, including the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress](#).

Steve Marantz is an E:60 researcher and the author of "Next Up at Fenway: A Story of High School, Hope and Lindos Suenos."
