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# A Young Logger Fights to Survive

BY EILEEN TOWNSEND

In the early fall of 2017, Cody Johnson was flying high. The 22-year-old logger had just happened on a contract on a 2,000-acre lot in the western Adirondacks. It was the job he'd been waiting for, the biggest opportunity in his professional life to date. Eager to get started, he'd already looked into pricing for a brand new skidder and a barely used loader-slasher and feller buncher. He'd arranged for a meeting to look at the land in late October.

Said Johnson, "We were going to start there and just do high production, mass production. It's really rare to get into an operation like that. It's the kind of job you only find for two reasons: either you're born into it or you bust your butt every day."

Johnson was not born into it. He'd gotten where he was from hard work. He started college at Paul Smith's as a wildlife science major but changed course after he took a timber harvesting and forest management class. Working in the woods came naturally to him. It was also in his blood, though not immediately; his great great uncle DeWitt Wiley built a legacy as one of the biggest loggers in the Adirondacks (and plays a part in the cult classic Adirondack logging movie, "Lumberjack Skypilot.") But Johnson himself had never spent much time around the industry.

When Johnson told his family what he wanted to do, they encouraged him to go into business for himself. With his family's blessing and perhaps some deep-seated genetic urge, Johnson secured his first loan at the age of 20 and bought a John Deere 648G3 grapple skidder. His dad, Dennis, a former mechanic, came to work with Cody in the woods.

For the first couple years, Johnson did a lot of mailings and focused on buying timber, mostly buying red pine jobs that he cut for saw logs and telephone poles. He eventually started working with foresters and subcontracted a mechanized crew for larger jobs. Business was good. But like many loggers, Johnson managed the stress of business ownership by pulling long days and often working weekends. He was young and trying to make ends meet with little time to rest. He didn't pay attention to how exhausted he was.

The week before his big meeting was unremarkable. Getting off work late one evening, Johnson went out to dinner with a friend. But unlike previous late evenings, Cody did not make it home that night.

Driving the narrow two-lane highway in the dark, Johnson's truck collided head-on with another vehicle. He lay pinned under the steering wheel as his vehicle went up in flames. His friend,



who'd been riding shotgun, managed to pull him out, but not before more than half of Cody's body was covered in third-degree burns. The accident broke both of Johnson's legs and damaged organs.

Johnson was rushed to the hospital, but the prognosis did not look good. On the morning he meant to have his big meeting, he lay in a coma. Doctors told his parents to prepare themselves for the fact that their son might never wake up.

I met Cody Johnson in late May at a landing located down a seemingly endless dirt road. He talked a mile a minute about the timber sale, his first since getting out of the hospital late this spring. It was not the 2,000-acre job he'd thought he'd be doing before his accident, but Johnson was excited about it nonetheless.

"My great uncle corduroyed this whole road," said Johnson. "The last time this job was logged it was actually by him. That was for softwood; that's why you only see hardwood in here. That would have been over a hundred years ago. The amount of loads they put out back then were ungodly. He got to use one of the first chainsaws—I think it was Homelite. He also had some of the first skidders. "

At the landing, Dennis Johnson operated a chainsaw. Jerry Charbonneau, a logger who the Johnsons have partnered with in recent months, ran a loader. It was around 4pm and the crew prepared to wrap up their day.

"This operation you see here is the most common operation in North America," said Cody. "Chainsaw, a couple skidders, and a loader. Sometimes you'll see guys like us that have cable skidders and grapple skidders. This stand is secondary growth, but once in a while I get into a legitimate old growth stand where we've got trees that are three, four, five feet in diameter and it's so wide open I can get away with just going in with a grapple skidder. I won't scrape up the trees trying to fit in. Most of the time, you're better off with a cable skidder. But it's nice to have both."



From left to right: Cody Johnson, Jerry Charbonneau, and Dennis Johnson.

The sale included pallet wood, saw logs, slicer veneer, and rotary veneer. We talked about how the crew had been having some problems with their loader.

"What we're going to do is that either next week or the week after is we're getting into a larger-size landing loader," said Johnson. "We're getting a Prentice 210C, which is a huge landing loader on a tractor trailer."

It was obvious from hearing Johnson talk that he was more than ready to be back in the woods. But recovery will be a slow process.

"It feels pretty good to be out here," said Johnson. "Definitely better than the hospital. I was going insane in there. I'm high speed, low drag, and I can't sit in the hospital. It feels good being on it, and at the same token it hurts, because I'll never be what I once was. I mean, I'm not tooting my own horn, but I was like a miniature Paul Bunyan. I could really go and go and go. And now and I'm kind of, you know..."

Johnson paused and his face fell slightly. "...that part is frustrating. They said I'd recovered faster that they thought. They figured it would take eight months. But I am glad to be out here. It feels good. I am still getting used to the stress again. I used to be so used to it. There's a lot more to an operation than what meets people's eyes. There's more to it than just cutting and skidding wood."

Johnson remained in the coma for two months after the crash. For weeks, he ran a 105-degree fever. His tissues began to break down. "I was supposed to die, that's what they said," said Johnson. "I was supposed to die the second or third week of December and somehow I just came through."

Before Johnson can cut wood again, he has to go through another operation followed by 12 weeks of physical therapy in which he hopes to rebuild his strength.

As Johnson and I talked, his dad finished cutting and came over to speak with us. I asked him how it had been keeping the business together while Cody was in the hospital.

"It's been stressful, honestly," said the elder Johnson. "When Cody was in the hospital we didn't know what was going to happen. We had payments that we had to make. Cody had some money in his bank account, just a limited amount to make a limited number of payments over a set period of time. I knew he had enough money in his account to get us through five or six months but I didn't have access to his account. And Cody wasn't conscious, so I had no way of getting power of attorney, so I could manage his finances. Throughout that process I was nervous, but at the same time I was so worried about Cody that that all just went to the wayside."

The Johnsons say that they were able to survive financially by setting up an interest-only payment plan with First Source Credit

Union (“I’m not trying to plug for them; they are just fantastic,” said Dennis. “They went the extra mile. They called and checked on him. It helped us get through that extended hour.”) When Cody came to, it wasn’t immediately clear whether or not he’d have survived the accident mentally as well as physically.

“When he started to come through, we realized that Cody was still Cody and he still had his mental faculties even after the impact and all the medication he was on,” said Dennis. “There was so much uncertainty. I was just thinking about Cody’s epitaph and stuff like that. It’s the worst feeling in the world to have to go through that mental process. You start to think about things like ‘what was his favorite color’ and ‘what was his favorite truck’ and it was just horrible. But he came through, thank God.”

Dennis Johnson is no stranger to helping to run businesses. His father, an entrepreneur, started a snow machine dealership in 1968. The family sold snowmobiles, lawn and garden equipment, and non-current clothing. When the internet emerged, they branched into e-commerce. At one point, they even raised Arabian horses. Dennis became involved in all aspects of keeping the family business afloat.

Said Dennis, “My father and Cody are so much alike in their business mannerisms. I’m behind my son 100%. Cody is just so driven. If you talk to him you can see that. He loves the woods and he loves to talk to people; he loves the skidders; he loves the forestry aspect; he loves to go to the meetings; he’s on the Board of Directors for NELA, and he got his Master Logger Certification. He’s always out there just raising dust and knocking on doors. He’s still injured and he still has a long way to go. He still has a lot of operations and procedures ahead but he’ll get through it. There’s no question.”

**C**ody Johnson has had a lot of health struggles in the past year. But he’s more interested in talking about the health of the forest. “It is hard to find landowners who actually want to do true forestry,” mused Cody. “To them, a good job is that they want it to look like a park. For the forest a good job is leaving your tops high. That helps your regeneration. On our jobs we try to do really clean work.”

As Johnson talked, he seemed to be doing some mental calculations, figuring and weighing different thoughts about

what makes for a good operation. He might not be cutting yet, but his mind and heart are clearly in the woods.

For both Cody and Dennis Johnson, the job represented a corner turned from the hardest year of their lives.

“I’m glad Cody is here,” said Dennis. “When Cody was gone I was trying to do some logging jobs. You hear stories of parents who can’t walk into their child’s room? I could walk into Cody’s room all day any day. It didn’t bother me. But when I went in the woods without him, it was hard. Because he’s always there. It’s just nice that he’s here now.” **NL**

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