



Sports

IN THIS CORNER

Bill Atkinson Overcomes Foe



By VINCE CURRAN

Sure the sports page is a funny place to announce the ordination and first Mass of a priest. But, somehow, for Bill Atkinson the sports page seems just right.

Not because his older brother Al is a famous middle linebacker for the New York Jets. Not because Bill is something of a sports nut.

But because of what Joe Paterno said recently at the Maxwell dinner. In affect, the Penn State coach contended that the special thing about sports is that they offer the individual a chance to rise above himself, to win or lose, and bear no animosity against the opponent.

Bill Atkinson, who at 28 years of age will be ordained on Saturday at 9:30 A.M. at St. Alice Church in Upper Darby, has done just that. His opponent? A 1965 tobogganing accident that has left him without mobility in either leg or from his elbows to his hands.

"In laymen's terms," Bill simply said, "I guess you'd say I broke my neck."

The accident to the young seminarian led to 20 months in hospitals and several occasions when the Msgr. Bonner graduate was all but given up for dead.

A lot of people wouldn't let me die," said Bill, who is being ordained with special permission from the Pope and whom the Augustinians believe will be the first quadriplegic ever ordained.

"A lot of people spent a lot of time to keep me alive — the Augustinians, my family, the people at the hospital."

Maybe the most important thing they did was to "accept me for who I was."

Al, for example, "is very competitive. And I was. He wouldn't let me quit."

And then there are the 21 professed seminarians in Bill's residence. How many of them lent a hand?

"All of them," Bill said. "The guys get me up, put me in bed, dress me, feed me."

Bill has some degree of mobility thanks to a motorized wheelchair and a van that "predates Ironsides." Through exercise he retains neck movement and with the aid of mechanical devices he is able to type.

It isn't easy but "other people have problems that I don't have," Bill said. "I look at them and say I'm lucky. Everybody has a cross to bear. I look at everybody now and say that everybody counts — just because they are."

"I feel much closer to God as a result of the accident. I experience him in people more, in people who have helped me especially. I see God's love in that. I see God's love in people who have invited me out to dinner."

On his forthcoming ordination, Bill said:

"It's analogous to a husband and wife going up the aisle. They have each other to help with the nervousness and uncertainty. And I have a lot of people helping me, especially in the community."

"All our needs are community needs and all our resources are community resources."

One of the biggest resources is Bill Atkinson.

Bob Guesetto, one of the seminarians who lives with and helps Bill Atkinson, had these observations to make on the impact Bill has made on the Augustinian community:

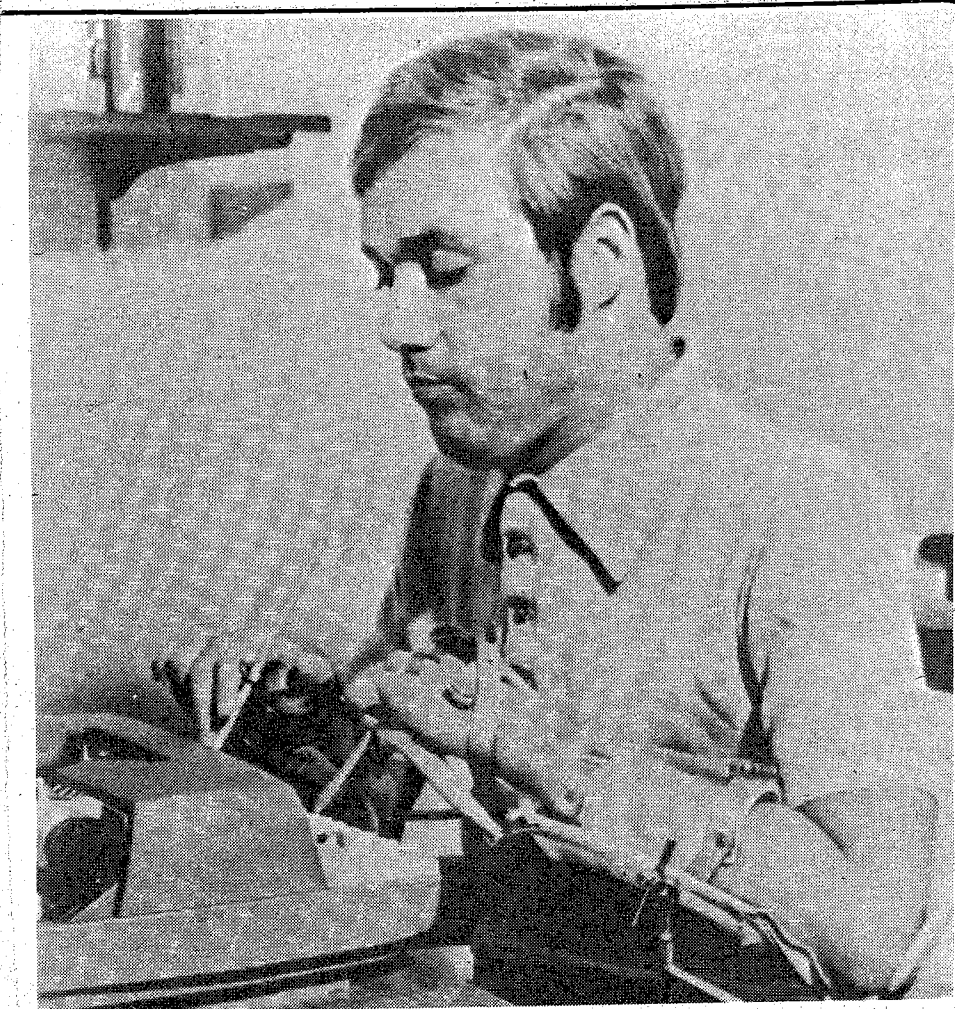
"After a while, you take the paralysis for granted but once in a while you'll realize what Bill has been through and it's really an inspiration because he's still Bill. Just Bill."

"You know he must have strong faith and be a strong person. Being himself is how he'll most touch people. He never demands. He's always aware of the needs of the other seminarians."



BILL ATKINSON

25 THE CATHOLIC STANDARD AND TIMES, THURSDAY, JANUARY 31, 1974



PRIEST PROSPECT: Typing in his room at Villanova University, William Atkinson may become the first quadriplegic to be ordained a Roman Catholic priest. When he broke his neck while tobogganing in 1965, Atkinson thought his dream of becoming a priest was over. Paralyzed from the neck down, he fought back and in February he will be ordained. Not only has he been involved in academic activities at Villanova, where he has maintained a "B" average, but he was active in sports. He became a coach of one of the intramural football teams, speeding up and down the sidelines in his electric-powered wheelchair. His brother Al Atkinson plays for the New York Jets.

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