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Dave Matheny, right, chats with his son Stefan on Saturday after he and his classmates graduated from Heppner High School in Oregon. Stefan's classmates from left are, Claire Anderson, Codi

Rosecrans, Jodie Carlson and Jonathan Bennett. Matheny has been in a Portland care facility during most of Stefan's senior year since being injured in a horse riding accident last year.

A day for grad, dad

Injury forced Heppner man to miss out on son's activities

By Karen Zacharias

Herald Oregon bureau

HEPPIER, Ore. — Stefan Matheny gave his dad's wheelchair a push as the two exited the Heppner High School gymnasium after Saturday's graduation ceremony.

"I'm sure proud of you, son," Dave Matheny said.

He had every right to be. Stefan, 18, racked up numerous academic and athletic

scholarships, including the Mike Currin Scholar-Athlete award. Currin, of national rodeo fame, was killed some years back in a plane crash while on his way to a rodeo.

"Mike was quite a cowboy. It's a real honor," Dave said after Stefan was named the award's recipient.

Fine sons and family tragedy is something the Currin and Matheny families share. Dave Matheny was thrown from a colt Sept. 9 while scouting for elk in the foothills of the Blue Mountains in southern

Morrow County.

The accident rendered him a quadriplegic. Unable to breathe on his own, Dave's ventilator-dependent condition has prevented him from returning home.

The around-the-clock nursing care he needs isn't available in rural Heppner, a town of 1,500 people. He's spent the past six months in a Portland care facility.

"I've missed out on Stefan's senior year pretty much," Dave said.

It's been tough, Stefan says. Not only because he's missed his dad, but because

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Stefan knows his dad has changed for good.

After Saturday's graduation, Stefan took a seat on the gym's bleachers and watched as, one by one, classmates came up to greet his father. Some gave Dave a pat on the back, others a pat on the hand. Still, others hung back, perhaps afraid of the ventilator's purrs or of their own shaky emotions.

"I watch my dad now and think of the way he was before. It took me a long time to think this was for real," Stefan said.

Dave's wife, Patty, hopes Dave can come home to stay by the end of June. Remodel work that will make the home handicap accessible is nearly complete.

"Once we get him home, I don't know what to expect.

Things are never going to be normal for us again. But we'll get as close to normal as we can," she said.

Like his mother and brother, Shane, 21, Stefan has learned that some of the toughest lessons in life are learned outside the schoolhouse.

The Heppner baseball team had a shot at the state playoffs last week. They beat last year's champs, Stayton's Regis High School, in a tight 5-4 win but got routed 9-0 by Roseburg's Umpqua Valley Christian High School on Friday.

"After our loss a lot of the guys were really, really upset. I was upset we lost, too. But I've learned there are a lot more important things in life," Stefan said.

Dave and Patty said Stefan has always been focused. The gold honor sash he wore over his blue gown bore testament of that.

Throughout high school, Stefan was a three-sport athlete — baseball, football and basketball. He said he's grown even more focused since his father's injury.

"I know my dad has really rough days, but he made sure I kept my mind on sports and school. He was really supportive. That was wonderful," Stefan said.

Although he missed most of Stefan's basketball games, Dave made it to the Mustangs' final three baseball games this week.

"He's been their good luck charm," Patty said.

Grasping Stefan's hand after graduation, one of his teammates declared, "You've handled all of this much better than I know I could've, man."

Man — it's exactly the right word to use when talking about the Matheny brothers. Dave might have missed out on most of Stefan's senior year, but he knows

he hasn't missed out on watching his sons grow into men.

"Shane's done a real good job with the ranch. And Stefan's got everything all figured out. He's real level-headed," Dave said.

It'll be hard to leave the family's Heppner ranch to attend Linfield College in McMinnville this fall, Stefan said. But having his father around to come home to will make it easier, he said.

Besides, the entire Matheny family knows how to handle hard things now.

"This experience has made everybody in our family stronger," Stefan said.

Oh, yeah, one more thing.

"My dad's been a real inspiration to me. And to all my classmates," Stefan said.

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