

# Still farming by the grace of God

Putting his disabilities in perspective  
gave Dan De Boer reason to start again

BY JOHN POCOCK

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:9*

**A**fter losing both legs below the knees, most of his fingers, and much of his nose to a bacterial infection resulting from an earlier farming accident, Daniel De Boer, Chicago Heights Ill., never lost sight of who he was.

In Dutch, De Boer's name means "the farmer." Like most Dutch immigrants who earlier came to settle this now partly rural, partly suburban community just outside Chicago, De Boer, 35, is both a farmer and a Christian. Like his ancestors, he's trying to look beyond past hardships, stay close to the land, and start life anew with faith as his guide.

"Dan is obviously a tough kid," says Larry Paarlberg, a neighboring farmer who is not much older than De Boer and has known him since grade school. Like De Boer, Paarlberg plants onion sets in addition to corn and soybeans and belongs to Dutch Valley Co-op.

Being tough no doubt helped De Boer overcome two close bouts with death. The first match premiered in May 1986. He had just switched to ridge-till that year and was filling a 1000-gal. fertilizer tank with 28% nitrogen (N), which he intended to pull behind the cultivator and apply to corn.

The tank was leaking at the hose connections in the rear, so De Boer went underneath to tighten them with a screwdriver. But the front was hitched to a jack stand and too much weight was leaning over the single-axle wagon. As the tank was filling, the high-flotation tires began to sink, and when De Boer began tightening the screws, the jack stand lifted up – and the whole thing flipped over backwards. The tank bounced off his left side and rolled 100 ft. away.



Two artificial legs and a cellular phone help Daniel De Boer, Chicago Heights, Ill., manage about 775 acres near Kankakee and Chicago Heights.

**The Impact** crushed most of his side, broke 10 ribs, split his diaphragm, punctured a lung, and smashed his left kidney and spleen so badly they later had to be removed. "I still remember the pain," De Boer says. "But the first thing I did was wiggle my toes to see if I was paralyzed and was quite relieved to find out I wasn't."

An employee working in the warehouse heard the noise, came

to help, and called the rescue units. Still conscious, De Boer began instructing his farm workers how to perform mouth-to-mouth and cardiopulmonary resuscitation in case it became necessary.

"The employees who were helping me now joke that they were in more shock than I was," he laughs.

After a temporary colostomy (rerouting the bowel to a different



**“The doctors told me I was the sickest person they’d ever seen still live.” — Dan De Boer**



**While drifting in and out of consciousness at the hospital, De Boer remembers seeing his wife and daughter as if looking through the end of a tunnel. Pictured are Ann, Dan, Katie, and Michele. The De Boers also have a newborn, Joshua.**

exit point), De Boer recovered and went back to work in August. The doctors reversed the colostomy around Thanksgiving, and he recovered completely in January.

But four months later he was grappling with the grim reaper again. It was May 1987 and the De Boer family was getting ready to celebrate having the accident all behind them. “At 9:30 it hit me, something like the flu. I was at a church committee meeting and started feeling so bad I almost had someone follow me home,” De Boer says. He didn’t contact a doctor until the next morning. “My blood pressure was 16 over 0,” he adds. “That was the last thing I remember for 19 days.”

“There was a lot of concern that he wouldn’t make it,” says Paarlberg. “I don’t know a lot of people, given what he’s been through, who would want to try to come back. I still remember him hobbling into our Dutch Valley meetings shortly after getting out of the hospital the second time.

“Yet I’ve never seen him depressed or despondent,” continues Paarlberg. “I’ve never heard him complain (about his condition). Part of that is his nature, part is his faith, probably it’s predominantly his faith.”

**An infection** had caused the sudden illness. It was a bacterial strain the doctors had not foreseen or vaccinated against earlier when removing his spleen, a period when De Boer was most susceptible to infection. “I lost blood circulation because my body tried to shut down to save vital organs,” explains De Boer. “It practically killed me. The doctors told me I was the sickest person they’d ever

seen still live.”

While recovering, De Boer says he remembers seeing his wife Ann and daughter Katie as if through a long tunnel, as if they were looking at him from the other side. He says that’s when he had a feeling he was going to survive.

His will to live was even stronger, Ann De Boer recalls, because she was three months pregnant. “Even when things looked bad I still had faith that I wouldn’t end up with a fatherless child. Now I’m quite amazed at how I coped with that.

“You really learn what a person is like when you’re going through the rough times,” Ann adds, “and you learn if your impressions on the outside are true on the inside. When life is difficult, you’ve got to pull together.”

Yet from the moment De Boer entered the hospital, he, his wife, and the doctors and nurses weren’t the only ones working to cope with his illness.

“What we’ve done is divide the congregation up so that one person will call another person and that person in turn will call somebody else whenever there’s a significant event in the life of the congregation,” explains Calvin Bremer, pastor of Bethel Christian Reformed Church, Lansing, Ill. So within four to five hours, he says, everybody in the congregation was aware of Dan’s specific need.

**Besides prayers,** De Boer says the whole congregation jumped in

to help with baby-sitting, meals, transportation to and from rehabilitation, and work around the house.

In addition, De Boer’s father, Simon, came out of retirement – losing 40 lb. in the process – while two farmers in the community also helped to keep things running smoothly on the farm with extra work from his employees.

But having lacked blood circulation in his extremities for so long, De Boer developed dry gangrene in fingers, legs, and nose and required several amputations. Still,

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**Not trusting anyone else with his onion sets, De Boer prepares the machinery for planting himself.**



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anyone looking at him now would have to look hard to detect the two artificial legs hidden under his pants legs and the skin grafts covering his nose. So far, he says his insurance has covered all expenses. "I can walk down the road with my hands in my pockets and people wouldn't even know," says De Boer enthusiastically. On the other hand, "It took four operations to get the nose right."

De Boer says faith helped him to accept his situation and keep things in perspective, explaining that his life revolves around his commitment to God.

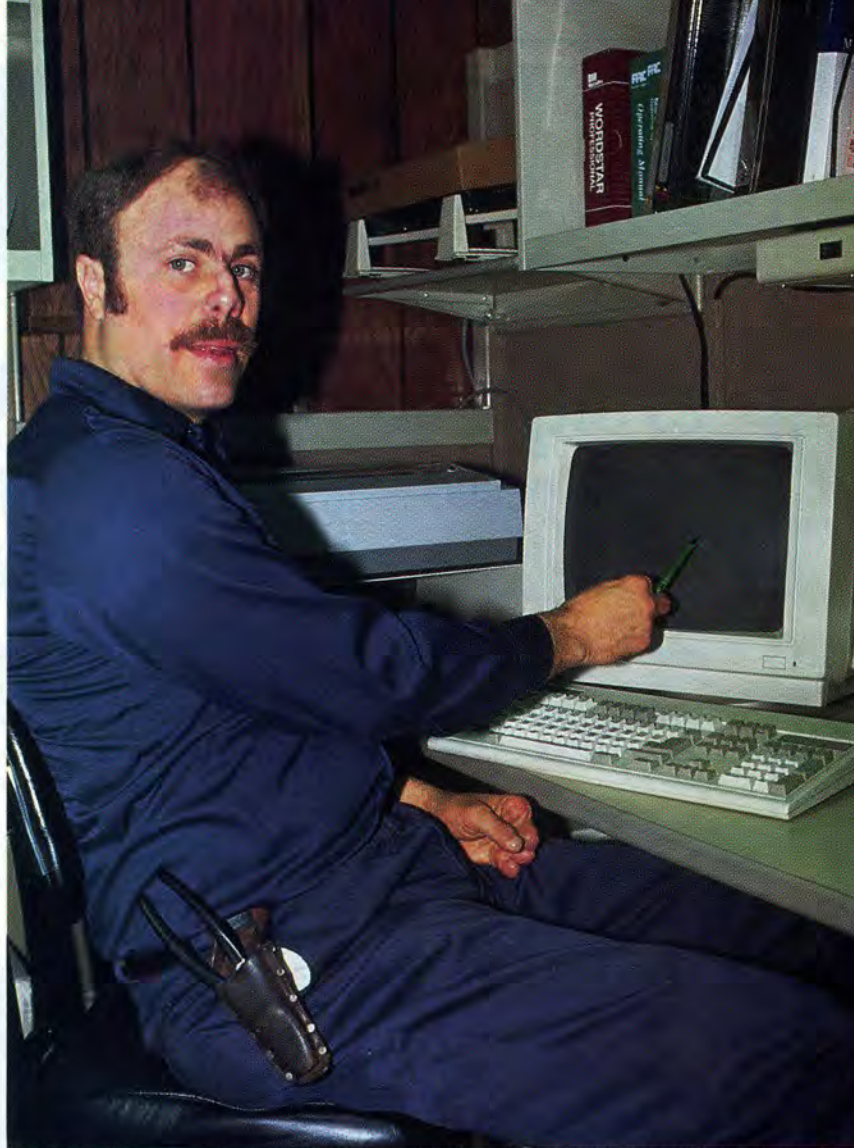
**Even during** the years he was sick or injured De Boer somehow managed to get into the fields to plant his onion sets just as he has every year since 1979. "I just don't trust anyone else," he explains. After the second time in the hospital, it took almost a year to get back to work, but he made it in time for planting and was able to drive a tractor and combine during April of 1988.

"By the grace of God I'm still farming," De Boer says. "But the real problem is being able to stand for any length of time." He says walking on two artificial legs is something like walking on pogo sticks, but harder because the legs need time to develop padding where the prostheses are attached. Walking also helps keep the blood circulating to keep him cool.

"Hot weather really does a number on me," he explains matter of factly. "because toes and fingers help to cool most people, but I don't have that luxury." During 1989 De Boer soon found he was spending too many hours doing field work and was overdoing it for his health condition.

That's when he decided to look into a side business that would still keep him close to the work he loves. Two years ago De Boer began taking the train every day to attend commodity school in downtown Chicago. After graduating and passing the exam to qualify as a broker, he started his own commodity marketing business, D. B. Marketing, Inc.

De Boer says he's now devoting most of his time to the venture in addition to overseeing field work on about 775 acres at Chicago Heights and Kankakee, admitting that he now does most of the farm



De Boer now spends most of his energies on his new business in commodity marketing.

ing out of a pickup. While still making all major decisions, De Boer relies on two full-time employees to help manage the farms.

**Having used** computers since 1979 to keep accounts, payrolls, and equipment lists, De Boer says it didn't take much work to put them to use in his new business. He now receives the Data Transmission Network (DTN) via satellite, which gives him current commodity prices from the Chicago Board of Trade. His software shows buying and selling strengths and technical indicators, helping De Boer advise clients when it's best to buy and sell.

A math major and 1977 graduate of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., De Boer took every computer class the college had to offer, "which wasn't very many because they were still new back then." He says both his math and computer background helped make the tran-

sition to his broker job fairly easy.

While admitting that most farmers could probably learn to do what he's now doing to market their own grain, De Boer warns they'd have to spend time following the market every day, explaining that most farmers would rather spend the time on production. He also says a professional marketer has more information, is faster, less emotional, and can think more clearly about big marketing decisions. But what is most important, he emphasizes, is that the professional makes marketing his chief priority.

A registered futures broker and commodity trading adviser with the National Futures Association (NFA), De Boer says he's learned more from "the school of hard knocks" than he has from his regular schooling. With the hard knocks behind him, a new business, and support from his family, friends, and church, De Boer's outlook remains bright. □