



JOHN CANZANO/THE OREGONIAN

Bill Johnson at the Regency Gresham Nursing & Rehabilitation Center. Johnson uses the table in front of him to communicate by nodding when you touch the appropriate letter.

The Olympian in Room 48 is very much alive

By John Canzano | The Oregonian
Sun day, February 16, 2014

The man who lives at the end of the second-floor hallway, Room 48, of the Regency Gresham Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation Facility, is locked onto me with the only good eye he has left. He has a brain injury. There have been strokes, too. He's lost the ability to speak. His left eyelid is shut. And we are alone.

Bill Johnson has his mouth open.

He'd like me to feed him.

On the table in front of the 1984 Olympic men's alpine ski gold medalist there are laminated cards with basic commands printed on them: "CALL MY MOM," and "I NEED A DRINK." There is another with the alphabet printed on it.

A small bowl of candy is there. A glass of water with a straw sits beside it. That alphabet is waiting for me to run my finger over its letters and for the man who once blistered down the mountain on skis to muster a nod when I land on the character he wants. Johnson looks at me with that steel-blue eye and he waits for me to spell with him.

"F:"

When I arrived at the nursing home at hour earlier, I found Johnson downstairs, sitting in his motorized wheelchair, frustrated, waiting to go outside for the daily 4 p.m. smoke break. I apologized for not visiting

sooner, for being one of many who mostly think of him once every four years when the Winter Olympics are on. He broke into a smile, and nodded.

In 2010, before the Vancouver Games, I drove up the mountain to visit Johnson a half dozen times at his mobile home in Zig Zag. I visited with him as he shuffled around with a cane, telling stories through slurred words. He showed me his gold medal in the garage, but refused to put it on. He sat in front of the television, smoking pot, and telling me that he only made his comeback at 40 because he thought winning another Olympic medal would bring his ex-wife and children back.

Johnson's wife did not come back. His children, two boys, grew up in California, playing sports and going to their high school proms without him there to take their photograph. Johnson's comeback ended, as you may remember, in 2001 with the skier slamming his head against the side of a mountain in a horrific training-run accident in Montana.

Johnson does not remember any of it. When people tell him about the crash, losing control, his body hurling forward, end over end, like a loose jackhammer tumbling down the slope, it's all big blank. As if it happened to someone else.

"Maybe the brain has a way of protecting itself," he told me in 2010.

There have been television documentaries done on Johnson's life. There have been rumors that he's on life support, and near death, especially after a major stroke he suffered after the last Winter Olympics. But he's none of these things. On Friday, Johnson is on the patio of the nursing home, smoking a Marlboro cigarette through a long rubber tube stained black from tar. He's wearing an Olympic baseball cap.

Paula, a fellow resident, says, "Bill wants a cigarette as much as all of us."

Johnson smokes two, his limit. Then, a nursing-home employee takes his smoking bib off, places his left hand on the joystick of his wheelchair and Johnson races back through the door, slaloming and winding down a long hallway back toward his room, with me chasing.

Bill's mother, DB Johnson-Cooper, told me on Thursday that her son's mind is fine, but his body is gone. Only that left hand cooperates, albeit inconsistently.

"Some days he can move his scooter chair around. Other days he can't," she said. "We don't know why."

Mom visits daily, but with medical bills and a small Medicaid check every month, she has a business to run. The receptionist said Johnson doesn't get many visitors. A man from out of state called last week,



Top 25 No. 1 Syracuse steals a win with late basket **c7** | **Outdoors** **c2**
Golf **c3** | **Baseball** Beavers open season at 2-0 **c8** | **Scoreboard** **c9**

SPORTS

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2014

All-Star weekend
FRIDAY
Rising Stars Challenge
Lillard scores 12, plays 30 minutes
SATURDAY
Lillard wins Skills Challenge
TODAY
63rd All-Star Game
7 p.m. (TNT)

Follow LaMarcus Aldridge and Damian Lillard in New Orleans at oregonian.com/bazers



Damian Lillard participates in the slam dunk contest during All-Star weekend.

Lillard shows a winning set of skills on a busy day

By Mike Tokito mtokito@oregonian.com
NEW ORLEANS — He made participatory history, won an event and overall had an enjoyable evening. Trail Blazers point guard Damian Lillard won his second consecutive skills challenge title at the NBA All-Star weekend, and he also competed in the three-point and dunk events Saturday at the Smoothie King Center one night after he played in the Rising Stars event for rookies and second-year players. Lillard became the first player to compete in all three of the main Saturday night events at All-Star weekend.

"I was happy to be invited to all of them and to be able to compete," he said. "I wanted to win at least one, and I won the first one, and I thought there would be some momentum to continue to try and win all three of them."
On a night when the NBA tweaked the formats of the three main competitions — using a Western versus Eastern Conference base — Lillard started with a repeat, teaming with Utah Jazz rookie Trey Burke to win the skills challenge, which tests players' ball-handling, passing, shooting and speed. Lillard won the event as an individual last season, but the league altered the format into one with two player teams in a relay format. Lillard and Burke blazed the course in their first-round run, with Lillard getting the ball through the passing circle on the first try and making the top-of-key jump shot on his first attempt. Although Burke needed three attempts to make the jumper, Lillard and Burke completed their run in 40.6 seconds, the best time of the night, to advance to the final round. They then faced the team of Michael Carter-Williams of Philadelphia and Victor Oladipo of Orlando, who went first and completed their run in 45.3. Lillard needed two passes and three jumpers to complete his portion.

See [Lillard, c6](#)

SOCHI 2014

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In 2010, before the Vancouver Games, I drove up the mountain to visit Johnson a half dozen times at his mobile home in Zig Zag. I visited with him as he shuffled around with a cane, telling stories through slurred words. He showed me his gold medal in the garage, but refused to put it on. He sat in front of the television, smoking pot, and telling me that he only made his comeback at 40 because he thought winning another Olympic medal would bring his ex-wife and children back.

See [Canzano, c5](#)



Bill Johnson, outside the Regency Gresham Nursing & Rehabilitation Center Friday, won gold in downhill skiing at the 1984 Olympics in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia.

PORTLAND 7, VANCOUVER 4

Sweet 16 and a Hawks record

By Molly Blue mblue@oregonian.com
The Portland Winterhawks set a franchise record with their 16th consecutive win, beating the Vancouver Giants 7-4 on Saturday night.
The 1979-1980 Hawks team and the 1997-1998 Memorial Cup championship team each had win streaks of 16 games.
Portland (4-0-2-2 in the Western Hockey League) finished with a sweep of the late-season, four-game trip, outscoring opponents 28-16. Portland's last loss was against Victoria at Veterans Memorial Coliseum on Jan. 10 when the Royals won 3-2.
The streak is evenly split, with eight wins in Portland and eight on the road.
Nic Petan's point streak is at a career-high 12 games — he finished with a goal and an assist in the win at Pacific Coliseum in Vancouver, B.C. Petan scored on a power play to open the third period, giving him at least 100 points for the second consecutive season. In 50 games this season, he has 29 goals and 68 assists.
Dominic Turgeon has a six-game point streak and 10 goals this season. He finished with two assists and his third-period, short-handed goal chased Vancouver goaltender Peyton Lee, who was replaced by Jared Rathjen.
With the win, Hawks goalie Corbin Boes is 3-0 against the Giants since coming to Portland. Boes stopped 30 of 34 shots from Vancouver (22-29-3).
Next: Prince George at Portland (Veterans Memorial Coliseum), 7 p.m. Tuesday (radio on KPAM 860)



T.J. Oshie (right) of the U.S. smiles after scoring the winning shootout goal against Russian goalie Sergei Bobrovsky on Saturday at the Sochi Olympics. The winner came in the eighth round of the shootout. The teams were tied 2-2 after regulation and overtime.

Last shooter standing

T.J. Oshie scores four times in the shootout to lead the U.S. past Russia

By Greg Beacham gbeacham@oregonian.com
SOCHI, Russia — T.J. Oshie brainstormed while he skated to center ice, desperately trying to come up with one last move to end an epic shootout. He had already taken five shots at Sergei Bobrovsky, and the Russians were still even.
Yet Oshie was chosen for the U.S. men's hockey team with just such a situation in mind, and the shootout specialist concocted one last clever goal to silence an arena filled with shouting Russian fans. Oshie scored four times in the shootout and put the winner between Bobrovsky's legs in the eighth round, leading the United States past Russia 3-2 on Saturday in the thrilling revival of a classic Olympic hockey rivalry.
"I was just thinking of something else I could do, trying to

keep him guessing," said Oshie, the St. Louis Blues forward. "Had to go back to the same move couple times, but I was glad it ended when it did. I was running out of moves there."
International rules allow the same player to take multiple shots after the first three rounds of a shootout, and U.S. coach Dan Bylsma leaned on Oshie's array of slick shots and change-of-pace approaches to the net.
Oshie scored on the Americans' first shot before taking the last five in a row, going 4 for 4 against Bobrovsky and disappointing a Bolshoy Ice Dome crowd that included Russian President Vladimir Putin.
"I aged a couple of years in that shootout," Bylsma said. "We had other guys that are capable, but T.J. was the guy who was going to win."
See [Olympics, c5](#)

BEST BIETS

It has been a rough Olympics so far for the stars of men's skiing. Americans **Bode Miller** and **Ted Ligety** and Norway's **Aksel Lund Svindal** are without medals entering today's Super G.
The ice dancing rivalry between Americans **Meryl Davis** and **Charlie White** and Canadians **Tessa Virtue** and **Scott Moir** resumes in the short program and U.S. standout **Lindsey Jacobbe** takes her third shot at gold in snowboard cross.

INSIDE

Shani Davis finishes a disappointing 11th in the men's 1,500 speedskating | **C4**
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Oregon head coach Dana Altman



Oregon State head coach Craig Robinson

Civil War basketball

Oregon's defensive pressure was the key ingredient in its recent 21-point rally against Arizona State. Today, Oregon State would seem to present the Ducks (15-8, 3-8 Pac-12) another opportunity to use that pressure in a game where each team is feeling its weight. Oregon State (13-10, 5-5) commits 4.73 more turnovers than it forces per game.
Next: Oregon State at Oregon, noon today (TV on FS2, radio on KXTV 750, KXJ 1190)
INSIDE | C7
• Moreland and Young go from teammates to rivals
• Things to watch for in today's game
Follow the game and find more news at oregonlive.com/ducks and oregonlive.com/beavers

asking if someone might hold the telephone to his ear. He was a skier, too, who also suffered a brain injury.

“He wanted to preach to Bill,” DB said. “A couple of days before that we got a huge box full of goodies that had pictures of Bill in frames. It had candy in it too. Bill loves candy so it was very appropriate.”

Back in Johnson’s room, we settle in and he wants to watch the Olympics coverage from Sochi. The women’s 15km biathlon is on, and Johnson’s eye follows a pair of Eastern European women competing for the gold. He looks lost in the competition. I ask him if he ever wanted to cross country ski, or stop halfway down a ski run and fire a rifle. He shakes his head.

“You only wanted to go fast?” I ask.

Johnson smiles and nods.

“O.”

We have two letters now. I wonder where “FO..” will take us. I wonder if Johnson wants food. Or if Johnson, who can be crass, is telling me to get lost. I watch his mouth, waiting for him to speak, as he did in 2010, when he called Bode Miller “a boy who skis,” or when he told me once of his competitors in Sarajevo, “I got under their skin, which is 100-percent of the battle.”

I wait for Johnson. He wants more letters.

There’s an email printed out and taped on the wall of his room from one of his sons, Tyler. The son watched a documentary about his father’s career recently and wrote to say that he now, “understands what life was like for dad before and after the accident.”

Tyler wonders if his grandmother might call two nights a week, and hold the telephone to his father’s ear. I read the letter, and tell Johnson that it must have made him feel really good to hear that his son wants to connect. He smiles and nods. Beside the letter is a photograph of another son, shirtless, posing beside an American flag. Johnson’s son has an Olympic tattoo near his heart matching the one Johnson got after winning his gold medal.

On Friday, we spelled words together and communicated. He smiled when I asked him if he ever thought H-A-N-G-M-A-N would become his life. I asked the first American man to win an Olympic alpine gold medal if he was happy. Bill Johnson nodded. Most days, those around him say he is. But especially around the Olympics, which he watches day and night on television.

“Also, we get out for dinner once a week,” his mother said.

If anyone asks, tell them Johnson is alive. He’s here, in Room 48, or maybe out on a smoke break. He’s waiting for your letters. He’s watching television. He’s here, if you remember him, or care to visit, especially not in an Olympic year.

“I think he’s just happy people still remember him,” his mother said.

Johnson’s health is just fine, she says. An occupational therapist works with him daily, trying to hold onto the little range of motion he has in that left hand. I feed Johnson crackers, and break a chocolate bar in pieces for him while we watch the Olympics.

That task?

Spelling that one word he wanted so badly to convey to me?

After “F” and “O” we find “U,” then “R,” on Johnson’s chart. F-O-U-R. Four what? His eye is trained on the tabletop, and I see what the most fearless American downhill skier who ever lived wants now. There is a raisin, a peanut, and two jelly beans on the table top. Four little bits.

“All four at once?” I ask.

He nods, and opens his mouth.

