



# BOLT FROM THE BLUE

On this cricket pitch 9 schoolboys were struck by lightning. They survived. Another wasn't so lucky

By GLORIA EDWARDS Pictures: DINO CODEVILLA & PAPI MORAKE



FACEBOOK

ABOVE: Jayden Broodryk and Mphetho Bidli were the worst hit of the nine schoolboys struck by lightning on the cricket field. BELOW: Jayden's shoes "exploded".



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**H**E WAS enjoying a cup of coffee when the phone rang: his son had been struck by lightning and he should come now! Johan Broodryk, who moments earlier had dropped off 17-year-old Jayden's cricket equipment at the school, says he couldn't believe his ears. "The chances of being struck by lightning are so slim. It was the last thing I'd expected to hear."

During the week of Valentine's Day (14 February) 13 Johannesburg schoolchildren were injured in two lightning strikes.

Four girls from Protea Glen Secondary School in Soweto were struck on the Monday while walking to school. One of them, Bertha Ncube (16), died the next day at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital.

The next day nine boys from the first cricket team of King Edward VII School (KES) in Houghton were struck by lightning as they were covering the pitch after

practice. Jayden and his teammate Mphetho Bidli were admitted to intensive care at Netcare Milpark Hospital in Auckland Park where they were kept in an induced coma.

Johan, a broker, was at the Houghton Golf Club when he heard that his son, a matric pupil, and eight first-team teammates had been injured. "When I'd dropped Jayden's equipment shortly before, we'd still joked. The next moment I had the call from a hysterical parent.

"I arrived there after the ambulance and immediately ran over to him. He was unconscious. His clothes, even his underwear, were burnt to a cinder. His cricket shoes had been knocked off his feet."

Both Jayden and Mphetho suffered heart failure and a paramedic saved their lives by applying mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

**I**T'S a day after the freak accident and an emotional Johan is standing in the passage at the Milpark ICU. His wife, Kim, is in the ward, sitting at Jayden's bedside and holding his hand.

Mphetho (17) is lying in the bed beside him. His condition is still critical. The hos-

pital hired a taxi to bring his mom, Rachel, here because she couldn't afford the fare. Netcare is paying the medical expenses for this top student who's at KES on a cricket bursary.

Both boys are still in an induced coma and Dr John Opolot explains this is done so patients who have suffered massive trauma can rest completely, thus speeding up their recovery.

Jayden has swelling on the brain and the lightning bolt has left a burn wound from his chin, across his chest to his right foot. On his right hand his younger brother, Callum (12), has written: "I love you, boetie. Get better soon."

Kim joins her husband and says Jayden has just squeezed a schoolmate's hand – apparently a good sign for someone with brain injury, the doctors say.

"It was all so unnecessary," Kim says, unable to stop the tears. "It was horrible, horrible."

The school's warning system causes a siren to go off in the event of lightning activity. The boys who were standing upright when they were struck suffered worse injuries than



LEFT: Jayden's parents, Kim and Johan, and brother, Callum, at his bedside. RIGHT: Mphetho's brothers Mongezi (left) and Thabo, his mom, Rachel (far right), and aunt Kholiswa Billa wait for signs of improvement in his condition.



those who were crouching over the covers.

Besides Jayden and Mphetho, KES deputy head boy Godfrey Ramaboea was also hospitalised and is in a general ward at Milpark. The other six boys have already been discharged but some have returned for counselling today.

Akshay Maharaj (17) is still clearly traumatised. "It had just started raining when someone said we should put on the covers." They had just started pulling on the covers when it happened.

"It felt like a burning blow to the head. I was out for about a minute. When I regained consciousness I saw one of my friends lying next to me and carried him to the nearest building. I ran back to help Jayden. I thought he was dying. His face was blue and he had convulsions. He was groaning with pain. Mphetho didn't have a pulse. I couldn't handle it."

The school's first-aid team and a paramedic, Mike Russel, were on the scene "within seconds" and gave Jayden and Mphetho mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Mike says he'd picked up his 14-year-old son after the cancellation of his cricket match because of the storm. They were about to leave the school when he saw the boys lying on the ground and he and his wife, Bernadette, ran over to help. "Luckily we were in the right place at the right time."

Cricket captain Kyle Melville, Bryan Leach and Izac Digale say they felt as if they were on fire. They were unconscious for a few seconds, as were Grant Roelofse and Sheldon de Robillard. "When we came to we crawled off the field," Kyle says.

Mphetho is one of six brothers and the first to study at one of the country's top schools. "I'm so proud of him," Rachel says. "I'm just praying he'll be all right."

Then, as if he can hear his mom, he moves one of his feet after lying motionless in

a coma for 24 hours.

Moments later Jayden wakes up for the first time. Because he's been on oxygen he struggles to talk. He tries in vain to write his parents a note before the doctors sedate him again.

An excited Johan rushes to the waiting room to tell the school principal, David Lovatt, about the improvement in Jayden's condition. David hasn't slept since the lightning strike and has been between the hospital and school.

Johan has only praise for Netcare, the hospital and the school community. "The cricket team is like a close-knit family. We call them the musketeers."

**B**Y SUNDAY afternoon, four days after the accident, Jayden is well enough to be moved to a general ward. "We're overwhelmed with joy! It's a miracle," Johan says.

Jayden can't remember anything about the strike but realises he had a narrow escape and just wants to get on with his life.

And Mphetho? His condition has also improved. His brother Mongezi says he's been taken off the ventilator. "He's been able to open his eyes and look at us but the medicine is making him sleepy."

The Bidlis and Broodryks hope schools, parents and pupils learn something from the nightmare. "Everyone must be better informed about the dangers of lightning and how to prevent injuries," Johan says.

He never dreamt a lightning bolt would nearly claim his son's life. Until that call. ■



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LEFT and FAR LEFT: The burn marks left by the lightning are clearly visible on Jayden's chest and foot. Four days after the strike his condition had improved enough for him to be moved to a general ward.

## COMMON LIGHTNING MYTHS

**Myth A:** If you stand with one foot in the air you won't be struck.

**Fact:** Stand with your feet a little apart so the current can pass through one leg to the other.

**Myth B:** You'll receive a shock if you touch a lightning victim.

**Fact:** The body doesn't store electricity. It's safe to touch a victim.

**Myth C:** Metal objects on your body such as jewellery and watches attract lightning.

**Fact:** Tall, pointy objects and isolated areas are usually struck. Metal doesn't attract lightning but conducts it so avoid fences and railings.

**Myth D:** If outdoors, lie flat on the ground.

**Fact:** If you lie flat there's a greater chance you'll be struck by current in the ground.

Professor Ian Jandrell of the high voltage laboratory at Wits and Professor Walter Kloeck, chairperson of the Resuscitation Council of Southern Africa, believe the boys survived because they weren't struck directly.

SOURCES: WWW.LIGHTNINGSAFETY.NOAA.GOV

## PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

Mande Toubkin of Netcare advises:

- Shelter under a roof or bridge and avoid trees.
- Stay in your car.
- Don't take a shower.
- Don't speak on the phone or touch electrical implements.
- If outside, stay low on the ground. Crouch with your hands on the ground. This will protect your vital organs if you're struck.
- Test a victim's breathing and pulse. Call the paramedics and apply mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. – Katlego Mkhwanazi