Understanding Driving Distractions Fatality File

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (WSMV) – A Cordova High School graduate with a promising college football career had his life changed in an instant.

A head-on crash with a distracted driver cost him the ability to walk.

“I look at the road and see this lady,” said Fletcher Cleaves. “The road curves and she doesn’t, she keeps straight. She’s looking down at a device, not paying attention. So she crossed the double yellow line and I panicked. I swerved to miss her and overcorrected.”

A decorated athlete throughout high school, Cleaves was ready to begin his college football career. Then a head-on crash changed everything.

“We spun out of control and hit the guard rail,” said Cleaves. “Once we hit the guard rail, we flipped over into an embankment and the roof caved in. Once the roof caved in, it broke my neck in two places.”

The crash, caused by distracted driving, paralyzed Cleaves from the chest down. The doctors told him he would never walk or play football again. Instead of sulking, he reverted to his football mentality.

“We’ve all heard the sky is the limit. I like to push people to think outside the box and ask, ‘How can we say the sky is the limit when there’s footprints on the moon?’” said Cleaves.

Now a motivational speaker, Cleaves uses his story to raise awareness and challenge teens to stay focused behind the wheel.

“It’s a big responsibility,” he said. “When you’re behind the wheel, you’re responsible for everybody in the car. So you need to

be paying attention.”

Michelle Anderson of the National Road Safety Foundation says that phones aren’t the only culprit of distracted driving, either.

“The truth of the matter is common things such as touching the gauges on your car to adjust the heat or air conditioning can certainly cause distraction,” said Anderson. “You’re taking your eyes off of the road for even three seconds which, at highway speeds, means you are traveling the length of a football field.”

Anderson says distracted driving crashes are the highest they’ve been in 13 years.