

Debbie Simpson uses the new anti-gravity treadmill at Sports Medicine South in Lawrenceville on Friday. Simpson tore her ACL in June and uses the machine, which uses air to adjust the amount of body weight she runs on, as part of her physical therapy.

Staff Photos: Jonathan Phillips

Walking on air

Anti-gravity treadmill helps with rehabilitation

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LAWRENCEVILLE — Donald Heard is quick to rattle off all the important stats about his high school career — Buford, class of 1958, finishing third in his class with a 94.96 average.

“We had the largest graduating class that year in the history of the school,” the 70-year-old says with a laugh. “And it was 55 people.”

The man that Curt Bazemore, the director of physical therapy at Lawrenceville’s Sports Medicine South, jokingly calls “the most interesting man in the world” has been visiting him for a while now.



Sharon Jassen, left, a physical therapy tech at Sports Medicine South in Lawrenceville, helps Debbie Simpson zip into the new anti-gravity treadmill on Friday.

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Heard broke his right leg falling off a ladder and was just getting his confidence back when a fall at another rehab center led to a broken hip.

Bazemore's newest space-aged gadget is helping patients like Heard get back on their feet more quickly, more ably and more confidently.

The truly revolutionary Alter-G anti-gravity treadmill is just what Heard needs.

"You notice how he doesn't limp at all in there?" asks physical therapy assistant Sharon Jassen, pointing to Heard's legs among the treadmill's NASA-inspired technology. "Versus being out here, you know?"

A complex explanation for a relatively simple process:

- First, Heard, or any patient, puts on wetsuit-type shorts with a zippered "tutu" around the top.

- Heard steps up on the "deflated" treadmill, into a built-in opening.

- "Air bubble" pulled up around him, he zippers up, connecting himself to the apparatus.

- A technician powers up the treadmill, and a jet

engine quietly roars, pumping air and pressure into the now-sealed bubble. The treadmill calibrates, determining Heard's weight.

Very simple controls then allow technicians and patients to alter the standard speed and incline settings, as well as the percentage of Heard's weight he wants to run "on," allowing for freer motion and less impact on the joints.

Heard, who typically uses a cane to walk, strides with confidence at 50 percent of his body weight.

"It's a simple concept, but it's really amazing," physical therapy assistant Tammy Brent says. "They get in there, and they're able to walk normally, no limp, no problem. They're able to really really go."

Heard, meanwhile, likens the contraption to a recent Jimmy Dean sausage commercial that features actors all wrapped up in costumes resembling the solar system's planets.

"I thought it was weird," he says with a hearty laugh. "I could see the principle behind it, but I'll tell you, it was weird."

Excluding some professional sports teams, the Alter-G treadmill at Sports Medicine South's office on

Riverside Parkway is one of two available for public consumption in the metro Atlanta area.

About half of Sports Medicine South's physical therapy patients are there rehabbing lower extremity, and most of them now use the Alter-G, a staple since its arrival less than two months ago.

One former high school cross country runner who sustained a stress fracture in her pelvis uses it in lieu of regular training, going for miles and miles with pain-free impact.

After much convincing, the 99-year-old mother of a patient even hopped on the device last week.

Simply put, she loved it.

"She was like, 'Maybe next time I'll go for a jog,'" Bazemore says.

A novel idea and a fancy piece of technology is the Alter-G, no doubt. But it is, after all, more than that — it's about giving freedom, mobility and confidence back to patients.

"What it does, is it strengthens your legs, strengthens your muscles," Heard says, grabbing his bad-but-getting-better leg. "The more strength I have in this, the more confidence I have."