

RIISING TO CHALLENGE

Injured GIs build new lives with athletic efforts

By JILL CARROLL
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OCEANSIDE, CALIF. - Surviving the bomb blast under his Humvee was a hard-won fight for Andy Robinson. But two years later, filling the life he fought so hard to have was turning out to be another challenge.

"When I got hurt, three guys got killed," says Mr. Robinson, who was partially paralyzed in the June 2006 attack in western Iraq. He told himself, "You better shut up and better not complain.... No matter how bad the injury is, [you] got a second chance so enjoy it, live it."

Living, for Robinson, meant a long series of surgeries, physical therapy, and learning to use a wheelchair. It also meant deciding how to view his future. Was it over? Or just a beginning? A counterintelligence specialist used to high-intensity training and deployments, he desperately needed a mission.

"I've reached the end of the Internet," he'd periodically shout to his wife, Sara, through their Oceanside home as he *See RUNNING TO WIN page 12* tapped on a computer trying to pass the time. They were finally in a house, not a hospital room, and together for long stretches for the first time in their marriage of barely two years.

But as the months drifted by, the quarters began to feel a little too close. Just getting ready and out of the house took hours. His natural intensity and energy had nothing to pour itself into but frustration and tension.

"We had more arguments and tiffs because he had nothing to do," says Sara. "He needs a focus and a purpose and something to work on. He wants to help people."

Then Robinson came out to cheer for

his marine buddy Greg Jones, called "Stitch," in a bike race in October 2007, and he was intrigued by the handcyclists zipping by. Stitch was already interested in helping injured athletes and he'd connected with Team Semper Fi, a group of injured marines who are endurance athletes, founded and funded by the non-profit Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund.

He passed along the name to Robinson, who soon was volunteering at the group's office on the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps base. The organization also bought Robinson a handcycle, and in the first days of this new year, Robinson found a new beginning.

"It was like the hardest thing I've done since being injured. It was fun to be able to move fast," says Robinson, lighting up as he recounts the thrill of that first, hour-long ride with Stitch on the back roads of Camp Pendleton. "Before, to feel a breeze, I would just have to sit there and wait for a breeze."

Now, he makes his own slipstream.

Then the team needed a new manager, and Robinson didn't hesitate to take the job.

"It's made our lives so much better," says Sara. "He's doing his thing and I'm doing my thing. It's a lot more normal."

Now, he spends long days working on recruiting, finding events for the athletes to participate in, and arranging the logistics to get them there. He also works out on the gym equipment in his garage, where a racing handcycle hangs from the ceiling and a leisure handcycle is parked next to his car.

Team Semper Fi's use of sports as mental and emotional rehabilitation is part of a wider community of such groups, including the US Paralympic movement. A division of the US Olympic Committee, the Paralympic movement originated from a rehabilitation program for wounded World War II veterans, according to the group's website, and it now has a dedicated veterans' program, partnering with Team Semper



Fi.

Navy Corpsman Derek McGinnis, a founding member of Team Semper Fi, lost part of a leg and sustained other injuries when a car bomb slammed into his vehicle in the Iraqi city of Fallujah during a major battle in November 2004.

His wife, Andrea, dropped everything at their home in Hawaii to be at his bedside in Bethesda, Md. The Fund helped out with some of the many expenses associated with devoting the family's attention to Mr. McGinnis's survival and recovery.

As he slowly recovered, McGinnis learned of the group's support, carving a deep well of gratitude within him. As summer 2005 arrived, a few people with the fund said they planned to run in the Marine Corps Marathon that November. They asked him to join them.

His response was an unequivocal "Hell, yeah! I can't wait!" He saw it as his chance to draw from that well of support and to give back to the group. Then an unexpected round of surgeries sidelined him from the race. The disappointment was staggering, but it also hardened

McGinnis's resolve to run the following year.

As soon as he was able, he began strength training. Then came the prosthetic designed for running.

"It took me forever to figure it out, but they never gave up," says McGinnis of the therapists who coached him. Eventually he was out there running with active-duty GIs.

He also started vigorous swimming workouts. A pool is the only place he doesn't need an adaptive device. He and several buddies made it to the Marine Corps Marathon's 10-kilometer race, and soon after Team Semper Fi was born. Now, almost two years later, he's run so many races and triathlons he's lost count.

"You don't want to bring any of that anxiety or issues [associated with injuries] home," he says. So "you work it out" in training.

He keeps an intense six-day-a-week schedule of workouts, around work with the American Pain Foundation and helping his wife raise their two young boys, whom he calls "my little motivators."

Now the elite athlete wants to improve his ability to bike up hills. Everyone else can stand up on their pedals for leverage. McGinnis starts to explain that he can't stand up on the bike, then pauses.

"I don't mean to say 'I can't,'" he says, then rephrases. "I'm having a hard time standing up on the bike."

Robinson says he expects the team, just two years old, to send athletes to the Paralympics or Iron Man competitions one day.

"When I was riding my handcycle, they weren't looking at me like, 'He's messed up.' They look at you with a lot of respect," says Robinson.

That's something Kathryn Rizzo understands well. Her injuries aren't immediately apparent, but she spent months trying to hide their effects, fearing others might look at her differently.

After suffering head injuries during her deployment in Iraq, she had to work twice as hard when she returned so no one would notice she struggled with memory problems and feelings of distrust and anxiety.

But when the problems became too much for her to hide, she was given a medical discharge, ending her plan for a lifelong career in the Marines. When she was faced with losing the only community and career she had known for years and entering a foreign civilian world, her future looked to her like a black hole.

When she learned about Team Semper Fi, Ms. Rizzo joined up. And now, even though her injury has altered her equilibrium, causing her to frequently lose balance and fall off her bike, she keeps training. She participated in a triathlon in New Jersey in May, and she sees a life ahead of her with purpose, surrounded by marines like her.

"Even though we're not protecting the country, we're still serving," says Robinson. "We were injured in the war and we can still lead normal lives, and exceptional lives for a lot of us."



DEBBIE NODA/MODESTO BEE/MCT/NEWS.COM

'MY LITTLE MOTIVATORS:' That's what Derek McGinnis calls sons Ryan and Sean, here with his wife, Andrea, at home in Waterford, Calif. His new challenge is biking up hills with his hand-powered cycle.



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ALL OUT: Marine Iraq vet Derek McGinnis raced in Modesto, Calif., in May.