



# Sun Valley Adaptive Sports

We change lives and make people smile!

By JOHN MILLER  
Associated Press Writer

BOISE, Idaho (AP) The nearly 19,000 American soldiers wounded in Iraq since the start of the war in March 2003, including more than 500 amputees, are expected to help lead future U.S. Paralympic teams.

Soldiers returning from Iraq paralyzed or missing limbs are young, fit and fiercely competitive, making them ideal athletes.

Advocates for the disabled predict Iraq vets will account for 10 percent of the 500-member U.S. Paralympic team for the 2012 London Games, even though they'll make up far less than 1 percent of the total disabled population.

"This newest batch of veterans will be a tremendous boost to the Paralympic sport movement," said Kirk Bauer, director of Rockville, Md.-based Disabled Sports USA, who lost his left leg in 1969 to a North Vietnamese hand grenade. "It has energized it, in ways we haven't seen in years."

They also have the Department of Defense behind them: The 14-year-old Army World Class Athlete Program at Fort Carson near Colorado Springs, Colo., which trains able-bodied service members for U.S. Olympic teams, now is considering disabled candidates to ready them for the next Paralympics.

"There's going to be a pulse, because there's so much interest in Iraq veterans," said Tom Iselin, director of the Sun Valley Adaptive Sports nonprofit group at the resort in central Idaho's Rocky Mountains, which offers sports instruction to disabled people including Iraq veterans. "We have a channel to become the athlete you've always dreamed you'd be."

Staff Sgt. Josh Olson, a Spokane, Wash., native, lost his leg at the hip to a rocket-propelled grenade in Iraq in 2003, but remains an active-duty marksmanship instructor in Fort Benning, Ga.

In May, he went to Germany with the U.S. Disabled Shooting Team and this summer heads to Switzerland for the International Paralympics Committee World Championships on July 12-22, all part of his dream to be a member of the 2008 Beijing team.

"When I was younger, I'd watch the Olympics," Olson said. "Now that I'm injured, I actually may have that opportunity to live that fantasy. I'd give it all back to have my leg back. But now, I'm going to make the best of it."

If Olson gets into the program, officers say he'll be able to devote his life to making the U.S. team. "While they're attached, their primary mission is to qualify for the Olympics," said Maj. Michael Hagen, director of the program. "We try to give them everything they need."



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In 1948, British neurologist Ludwig Guttman began using sports to rehabilitate wounded World War II veterans. The first official Paralympic Games \_ short for "Parallel Olympics," not "paraplegic" were in Rome in 1960, with the first Winter Games in 1976 in Sweden.

In America, disabled sports programs began with wheelchair basketball, getting a boost after the Vietnam War when activist American veterans with life-changing wounds pushed to expand sports to include skiing, cycling, judo and swimming.

Improved body and vehicle armor, as well as battlefield medical advances, mean catastrophic injuries that once would have been fatal now can be treated. Once survivors are stabilized, it's important to offer them new athletic goals, said John Melia, director of the Roanoke, Va.-based Wounded Warrior Project.

"Athletic feats on the field of battle, when people are shooting at you, are much more feats of athleticism than those on a sterile track," said Melia, whose group put on 62 sporting events for disabled veterans last year. "We certainly think several of our Wounded Warrior Project folks may become Paralympians."

There were no Iraq or Afghanistan veterans among U.S. disabled athletes in Athens in 2004 or Turin earlier this year.

"It takes a while for them to be competitive," said Joe Walsh, managing director of U.S. Paralympics in Colorado Springs. "It may be six months from now, we'll see a greater amount of participation."

Melissa Stockwell lost her right leg in a roadside bomb explosion in April 2004 while delivering water and meals to troops near Baghdad. She hopes to make the 2008 U.S. Paralympic team in swimming, though she said it won't be easy \_ the competition is intense, and many of her competitors have been disabled all their lives.

"I need to catch up quick," said Stockwell, now a student in the prosthetics program at Century College in Minneapolis. "I want to prove losing a leg is not going to stop me."

To help, Sun Valley Adaptive Sports in Idaho hosted four Iraq veterans for a week, teaching them Alpine skiing, Nordic skiing, snowboarding and sled hockey. For athletes that show promise, Iselin said, the group will help pay their expenses to come to the resort to train.

There are similar camps elsewhere, including Challenge Aspen at that Colorado resort. That's where Heath Calhoun, a retired Army staff sergeant who lost both legs in a November 2003 Iraqi rocket attack, learned to mono-ski.

Dangling Paralympic dreams in front of wounded vets such as Calhoun gives them new goals, he said.

"You take a guy or a girl, laying in a hospital bed, and they think life is over," Calhoun said. "And then they can get up, take part in an activity, sometimes something they've never done before they were wounded. It makes people smile again."

