



Sun Valley Adaptive Sports

Children, Teens, Adults, Veterans

We change lives and make people smile!

Wednesday, September 23, 2009

Features

Soldiers seek new beginning . . .

Sun Valley Adaptive Sports is changing veterans' lives with sports and recreation

*By Sabina Dana Plasse
Express Staff Writer*

Imagine not being able to form a sentence, routinely forgetting the day of the week or losing your balance every other step. Many soldiers who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder, conditions that can easily disrupt everyday life. They look healthy because they do not have visible injuries, but their wounds are tucked away inside their brains.

"Since the brain is so complicated, it can have thousands of manifestations from an explosion," said Tom Iselin, executive director of Sun Valley Adaptive Sports, an organization that seeks to improve the lives of people with disabilities through sports and recreation.

"The injury the size of a pin can cause you not to see, hear or affect your motor skills."

Since 2007, about 1.65 million U.S. troops have been deployed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A study conducted by RAND Health states that traumatic brain injuries are the most common injuries of the wars. It found that about 200 veterans had spinal cord injuries and 1,200 had amputations, but 325,000 had traumatic brain injuries and 300,000 had PTSD.

"The general public believes the signature wounds of war are a guy in a wheelchair or a guy with an amputated leg or arm," Iselin said. "But the real signature wounds of war are the invisible wounds—traumatic brain injuries, PTSD and major depression. These figures are shocking to the general public because few people realize how widespread these injuries are."

Last month, Sun Valley Adaptive Sports held its Higher Ground Watersports Camp for the third year at Pettit Lake, in the shadow of the Sawtooth Mountains. Six wounded warriors and their wives enjoyed kayaking, wakeboarding, water skiing, sit skiing, canoeing, paddle boarding and whitewater rafting. The camp included several activities geared toward helping couples communicate and reviving their relationships.



Raymond Pablo Andalio, from San Diego, Calif., also known as "Doc," suffers from traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder. He attended the Sun Valley Adaptive Sports camp at Pettit Lake last month.



"The real story is the wives," Iselin said. "They suffer as much or more."

The primary caregiver for a wounded soldier is typically the spouse. She is the mom to the children and in some cases has to feed her husband. She becomes the breadwinner and most often is the communication liaison for the military and the medical institution.

"Every man at this camp said they could not do it without their wives," Iselin said. "They said their wives are their rock, and if it were not for their wives, they would still be stuck in a hospital bed."

Returning for a second year as a mentor couple, Doug Franklin and his wife, Jill, helped couples rekindle their relationships and helped veterans regain their confidence.

"I had been to other camps," Franklin said. "But they left out the therapy component."

Franklin had fallen victim to a mortar blast as a team sergeant of civil affairs, part of special operations in Iraq. The mortar landed 15 feet away from him and the shock wave affected his pituitary gland. He did not get sick right away. He said he went on two more missions, but three days after the blast he found himself unable to walk. Franklin was transported to Baghdad. After six months and seeing several doctors, he was diagnosed with traumatic brain injuries.

"I had trouble with crowds, loved ones, noises, being startled and talking," Franklin said. "Jill was at a breaking point with me, and the [first] camp helped our marriage a great deal."

Franklin said the camp taught him to give more time to his wife.

"When your memory goes, you must rely on your partner for everything," he said. "She said she felt like a personal calendar."

Iselin said the divorce rate of men returning from Iraq and Afghanistan is 80 percent.

"I believe we help mend four out of six marriages that were in dire straits," Iselin said. "On a scale of 1 to 10, the camp rates as an 8 for saving marriages."

The wounded-warrior camp is not just about being in the beautiful setting of one of Idaho's picturesque lakes where activities abound. It's about the bonding of warriors who are all going through the same challenges with the same injuries. Franklin said recreation plays a big part in everyday life because it instills a sense of fulfillment and empowerment.

"People don't realize how you need adrenaline," he said.

First-time camp attendee Raymond Ansalia said he was a military medical student but flunked out due to his brain injuries and PTSD. Attending the wounded warriors' camp made him realize he was not alone.

"I can't go back to school," Ansalia said. "But there are options. The camp helps you realize what you have and what you have gone through."

Iselin said all the attendees leave camp with improved physical skills, self-confidence, independence, relationships with peers and spouses, stress management skills, communication skills and improved intimacy with their spouses.

Sun Valley Adaptive Sports has been working with Brigham Young University and San Jose State University to research the efficacy of sports on long-term recovery.

"We want to share our program and findings with the adaptive sports industry," Iselin said. "There are 100 chapters like us, and we are taking the lead in developing the best practices and conducting research to share with the top 100 adaptive sports programs in the nation."

Sun Valley Adaptive Sports is the only adaptive sports organization in the nation that has a long-term follow-up care plan for every veteran who attends, he said. The plan is three years.

"When veterans leave the camp, we connect them to sports organizations in their community and assist them in continuing what they learned here," Iselin said. "We will help pay for equipment and sports club memberships."

Sun Valley Adaptive Sports also follows up on the status of the veterans' relationships, as well as schoolwork, family and stress.

"We make sure what was learned here continues in their home environment because involvement in their community is important," Iselin said.

Iselin said the Department of Veterans Affairs is starting to recognize the benefits of sports and recreation therapy through organizations such as his.

"I have spent three years advocating the benefit of sports and recreation therapy," he said. "I have been introduced to colonels and commanders of each branch of the military in charge of their respective wounded warrior care units. All of them have decided to add sports and recreation as part of the reintegration process for each warrior who transitions back into their home community or transitions back into military service."

Iselin said his larger mission is to work with Congress to get \$1 billion appropriated for sports and recreation therapy for wounded soldiers. He said the government is budgeting \$600 billion for long-term care of wounded veterans, and part of the money is being allocated for those with traumatic brain injuries and PTSD.

Sabina Dana Plasse: splasse@mtexpress.com

Anyone interested in volunteering with SVAS or supporting the organization should call SVAS at 726-9298.

