



Staff Sgt. Michael Lage readies for a 15-mile ride on Fort Sam Houston, Texas, recently in preparation for the 2013 Warrior Games. (Photo by Robert Shields)

Innovative Programs Transform Wounded Soldiers into Elite Athletes

By Elaine Sanchez

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Staff Sgt. Michael Lage may be loyal to his Army green, but he's hoping to add some gold to his uniform next week when he vies for medals in cycling and shooting at the 2013 Warrior Games.

It's a quest he never imagined taking on six years ago when he first arrived at Brooke Army Medical Center at Joint Base San Antonio–Fort Sam Houston, Texas, the sole survivor of a blast in Baghdad that killed four

others. The explosion took Lage's left hand, part of his nose and ears, and caused third-degree burns to nearly half his body.

Still, the avid athlete never lost his competitive edge or determination to excel. Last month, Lage not only breezed through a 300-mile ride with the Ride2Recovery cycling tour, he also qualified to compete in the elite Warrior Games for the first time.

Next week, the Soldier will join more than 200 other wounded service members in Colorado Springs, Colo., where they'll prove their prowess in sports such as archery, cycling, shooting, wheelchair basketball, swimming, track and field and sitting volleyball.

"I'm ready for the competition and looking forward to winning two gold medals," he said.

Lage is one of the many service members who has transformed from wounded warrior into elite athlete — a journey that, for many, begins at BAMC. From the moment they arrive until the day they depart, the focus is on fostering abilities and discovering new potential, said Lt. Col. (Dr.) Donald Gajewski, an orthopedic surgeon and director of the Center for the Intrepid, BAMC's state-of-the-art rehabilitation center.

The Army takes a four-phase approach to physical rehabilitation, Gajewski explained. Early on, providers focus on "protective healing," which involves caring for wounds as they build mobility and strength.

Patients then move on to pre-prosthetic training at the Center for the Intrepid, where they concentrate on strengthening, balance and cardiovascular training. They also begin community reintegration together, which may involve a dinner or attending a sporting event downtown, he added.

Soldiers greatly benefit from working together as a group, Gajewski noted.

"The ability to rehabilitate all of these heroes in one place is invaluable, not only from a motivational standpoint, but also from a sharing of best practices standpoint," he said.

Soldiers then receive and adjust to their new prostheses, while learning how to take on everyday tasks. They practice picking up objects from the floor, and stepping off and on stairs, curbs, ramps and uneven terrain. They also work on mastering a new gait.

The final phase involves the "fun stuff," Gajewski said, such as recreational sports and activities, drivers training, vocational evaluation and training, and if needed, military specific drills.

"There has been much research that shows adaptive sports play a huge role in the recovery of our patients," he said.

Patients who participate in sports, he added, have been shown to have less narcotic medication dependence, less depression, higher quality of life scores, smoother community reintegration, and improved cardiovascular fitness and psychological well-being.

For the Center for the Intrepid staff, the sky is the limit in this phase. They tailor their programs to Soldiers'

goals, which may include everything from skydiving and scuba diving to sled hockey and cycling.

For some Soldiers, the goal is to simply regain the ability to first walk, then run. Center for the Intrepid prosthetists go to every length to make this happen, Gajewski said, citing the Intrepid Dynamic Exoskeletal Orthosis as just one example.

Center for the Intrepid prosthetist Ryan Blanck designed this device for Soldiers who had suffered lower leg injuries and were unable to comfortably walk, let alone run. The carbon-fiber device, which comprises a cuff, carbon-fiber rod and footplate, delivered nearly instantaneous results. Now, most Soldiers who wheel or limp into his office walk out a short time later pain-free and with a normal gait.

Another prosthetist, Bob Kuenzi, created a one-of-a-kind prosthesis for a patient who, despite a devastating injury, was desperate to run again.

Spc. Eduard Lychik was clearing bombs in Afghanistan when the vehicle he riding in was hit with a recoilless rifle, taking out his entire left leg. While many above-the-knee amputees are able to return to sports and activities, Lychik's challenges were compounded by a hip disarticulation, which involves an amputation at the hip joint.

Unwilling to give up, Kuenzi created a new prosthesis — basically just a hip fitting, pylon and running blade — that was an immediate success. Within days, Lychik was moving around a track, and he was soon running an 8-minute mile. He recently took on, and succeeded at, a seemingly impossible goal: the 12-mile, 28-obstacle Austin Mudder. Since then, he's run two half marathons and the Austin Marathon, which he finished in 4:28.

"Having a patient with a hip disarticulation like Ed, doing the things that he's doing, is so rare," Gajewski said.

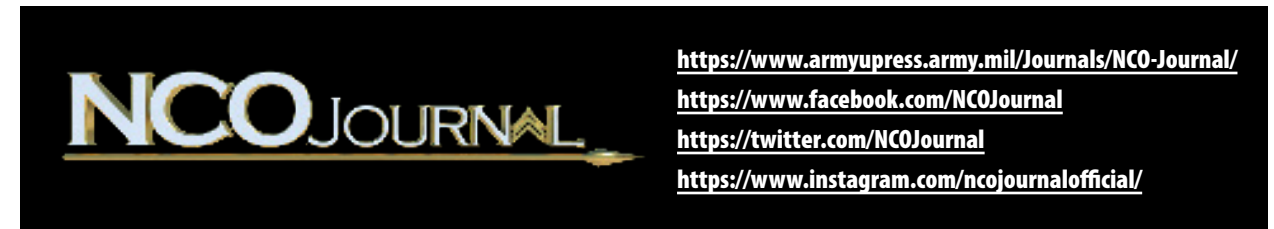
BAMC has a comprehensive physical therapy program and the most cutting-edge equipment on hand, but Gajewski attributes success stories like Lychik's to one key factor: people.

"Most important are a motivated staff, peer support from fellow service members and a motivated patient," he said. "The last is of the ultimate importance, because without a motivated patient, none of the other things matter.

"And we are blessed to have a highly motivated patient population," he added.

Gajewski will follow the Warrior Games next week and root for the six BAMC warriors participating, including Lage, as they vie for gold.

But no matter the outcome, in his mind, he said, they've already won. ■



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