



Sgt. Eric Hunter (right), who lost a leg in combat, practices punch combinations to help regain his balance with David Sheehi, a volunteer coach with the boxing adaptive sports program at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., in July. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

Boxing Gloves Help Amputees Learn Strength and Confidence

By Michael L. Lewis

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For the more than 1,000 Soldiers who've lost a limb during combat in Iraq or Afghanistan, the road to recovery is long and hard. Learning how to walk, use the restroom, cook, shop and change the baby's diaper again requires retraining the body, mind and spirit. And one of the best ways to accomplish this training, according to a team at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., is with boxing gloves.

"This is more than just going on a trip or playing sports, it's about giving [amputee] Soldiers life, and giving back a sense of normalcy after their procedure," said Harvey Naranjo, the Military Adaptive Sports Program coordinator at Walter Reed. "We are providing a treatment, not just a fun extracurricular activity. Our goal is

for them to learn everything they need to learn so they can apply it once they leave here."

The program, housed under the rehabilitation department at the nation's premier center for wounded warrior care, is designed to help service members learn to use different muscles to compensate for the loss of a limb. Through the varied mechanics of sports such as archery, rowing, skiing and lacrosse, combined with field trips into real-world settings, Soldiers develop strength and agility, especially those learning to walk with prostheses, Naranjo said. But nothing develops balance and confidence like adaptive boxing, said Sgt. Eric Hunter of the 5th Special Forces Group at Fort Campbell, Ky., a recent program participant.



Marine Corps Sgt. Ryan Donnelly (left) practices punch combinations with Michael Martin, a volunteer coach with Walter Reed's boxing adaptive sports program. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

“The hardest thing for me with my prosthetic was just being confident in myself,” he said. “I was able to stand up. But in my head, I guess, I was just scared to. Definitely, boxing has helped build confidence in my balance. When you first come in here, you can throw maybe one punch, and then you’re falling down, trying to gather your balance again. After being down here, I’m pretty much able to stand up the whole time. I may lose my balance a couple times, but it’s been a tremendous improvement.”

That confidence helps those in the program be better NCOs, said Staff Sgt. Nick Lavery, a program participant from the 3rd Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg, N.C.

“I think this program creates a better leader, and it trains future leaders as they are developing into NCOs,” he said. “It breeds mental toughness and confidence in what your body is able to do. It’s a direct translation to what we do professionally: You’re building a skill set

that you’re able to take back to your professional environment.”

The training also develops a different style of leadership, Lavery said.

“It’s a humbling sport for sure,” he said. “A lot of military guys are type-A, confident dudes, and they don’t want to necessarily take a risk or the chance of going into a situation where they may not feel so superior. But once you’re able to get past that kind of mental block, and you take that humbled approach, you’ll realize huge benefits.”

Intense — physically and mentally

Though the program trains participants in the basics of boxing, the goal is not to create the next Floyd Mayweather Jr., said David Sheehi, a boxing coach who volunteers with the program.

“It’s not about fighting. We’re not really trying to teach them how to go into the ring and do this for a living,” he said. “What we’re trying to do is just use the sport in a positive way — the fitness part of it. In boxing, those athletes are some of the fittest in the world. When you try to train a football player or baseball player to be a boxer, they just can’t do it. They’ll go three or four minutes and just get tired out.”

Boxing provides a physical and mental workout that is not easily matched, Sheehi said.

“It’s a very strenuous activity, and it keeps them in shape without running,” he said. “A lot of them can’t run yet, and they can’t do the ellipticals or bicycles yet either. So what do we do? What we do is we work the upper body. It works just as well, it burns just as many calories as just doing the lower body, and it keeps their weight down.”

The intensity surprises many, said Sgt. Christopher Hemwall, a participant formerly with the 2nd Cavalry Regiment in Vilseck, Germany.

“My first day, I spent two hours working down here,” he said. “The next day, I woke up, and I couldn’t move my left arm or my back at all — I was so sore. So that was surprising. No one warned me about that.”

Because participants don’t fight each other — they work individually with coaches on various punch positions and combinations — even those with traumatic brain injury can participate and reap the benefits, Sheehi said.

“They never spar. We have no contact at all,” he said. “Because the purpose of this is not for competition, it’s therapy, that’s why it’s very safe, even for TBI patients. Originally, they didn’t even want TBI patients to touch this — no way! So we had to show them that it helps TBI patients with the thinking process as we throw numbers of combinations out.”

The moves and training also reinforce soldiering skills many participants feel have faded as they’ve worked through the laborious rehabilitation process, Sheehi said.

“A lot of them feel vulnerable now that they have a prosthesis or are missing a limb,” he said. “So we show them how to dodge a punch and how to counter a punch. It doesn’t matter [that they’ve lost a limb], because all the power comes from your hips, not the legs. As long as they’ve got that, they can do this and be just as good at it as someone with uninjured legs and arms. When they see that, you can see the look in their face: ‘Wow, I am somebody. I can do just like I did before.’”

Hemwall, for example, was looking to regain his agility through the training.

“The biggest reason I was doing it was learning the stance, the movement,” he said. “I’m not so much worried about how to take a hit or how to throw a punch, but I’m trying to learn how to move lightly on my feet again now that I have a prosthetic. I like to think that I used to be pretty quick and agile, and I’d like to get back to that.”

The training is also helping him return to form as a role model for those he will lead.

“It’s helping me get back into physical shape, and being an NCO, you’ve got to lead by example,” Hemwall said. “If you are not in shape, then that’s what your Soldiers will be. Boxing teaches you discipline.”

Light at the end of the tunnel

Oftentimes, the most significant injuries participants have to tackle are emotional or psychological, Naranjo said.

“I had one patient who couldn’t walk on what we call shorties — a patient with significant limb loss, we put them on these little stubbies to learn how to walk and we graduate up, up, up,” he said. “For some of them, it’s

really difficult to walk around, especially if they used to be 6 feet tall. Well, one patient would never get out of his chair; he would never use his stubbies. But if you don’t learn to use your stubbies, then you won’t be able to develop the core muscles required to walk.

“So we were at this restaurant, and this guy was with his buddies. But the ramp was too narrow for him to get up with his wheelchair. But he saw his buddies — all amputees with prostheses — getting out of their chairs and going up into the restaurant. So this guy had to do it, too. He walked for the first time in public so that he could be with his peers and participate. Long story short, he’s now a Paralympian.”

Sheehi recalled an even more dramatic transformation.

“We had a female Soldier come through here who had been injured about 3 months beforehand. She really just did not want to talk to anybody; she was still in shock,” he said. “When I talked to her, she really didn’t want anything to do with it (boxing). It took a couple times for her to try, but once she did it, she opened up like a flower. Everybody in the entire room could not believe that she was talking, she was having a fun time, she was enjoying herself. This opened her up. She saw light at the end of the tunnel!”

And that’s the whole point of the program, Naranjo said — give recovering Soldiers and NCOs hope that they can do everything and anything again.

“This is as valid a treatment as any other medical discipline that is out there. It’s not all fun and games,” he said. “It lets us assess their full function outside the clinic. How did they navigate the airport? How did they use the restroom? If they were on a bus trip and it only had one of those tiny little bathrooms, how did that quadruple amputee use the restroom? Oh, the baby is crying on the bus and needs a diaper change. Can he change that diaper with one arm? On that bus? So we are assessing their whole ability to function in all those little things that we usually take for granted.”

And though the program is designed to teach independence, it is only together that Soldiers actually heal, Lavery said.

“Nobody’s here to embarrass anybody or beat anybody up,” he said. “It’s about us all getting better and growing both in the sport as well as individual Soldiers.” ■



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