



Wounded, ill and injured service members participate in an archery event during the Army Warrior Games Trials on April 4, 2017, at Fort Bliss, Texas. (Department of Defense photo by Roger L. Wollenberg)

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Former NCO finds perfect outlet for leadership skills as Warrior Games coach

By MEGHAN PORTILLO
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After suffering a traumatic brain injury in Iraq, now-retired Sgt. 1st Class Jesse White spent three and a half years recovering at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. It was there that his love of archery was born. It is the sport that taught him how to cope, gave him renewed purpose and opened new doors in his life.¹

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Archery is particularly beneficial to individuals with brain and spinal injuries, White said. The mechanics increase the range of motion and strengthen back and core muscles. Archery also forces people to clear their minds, to live only in the moment.²

“For people who have a big issue with concentration, for example, many with post-traumatic stress disorder, it forces them to focus,” White said. “They don’t have a choice. It calms the mind and gives them that release. It did that for me. It was a huge part of my therapy when I was rehabbing in the hospital. It just gives me the sense that I can go do this and the whole rest of the world doesn’t matter.”

White competed in archery in the first four Warrior Games, which began in 2010. He then moved on to shooting professionally with USA Archery, the Archery Shooters Association, and National Field Archery Association USA. Today, he teaches introductory archery classes as part of therapy and rehabilitation for wounded, ill and injured military personnel in the Army as well as in other branches of service.³ He is also the lead archery coach for Team Army as it heads into the 2017 Department of Defense Warrior Games from June 30 to July 8 in Chicago, where athletes will compete against teams representing the Marines, Navy, Air Force and Special Operations Command in archery, track, and field, cycling, sitting volleyball, shooting, swimming and wheelchair basketball.⁴

White said he is grateful for the opportunity to give back to Soldiers. He finds his training as an NCO has prepared him perfectly to take on the role of coach and mentor.⁵

“It’s an opportunity for me to give to these guys what I got when I was in the hospital,” White said. “It was a super easy transition for me to come in and train these guys. Soldiers are athletes. Even as a platoon sergeant or squad leader, you teach your Soldiers to compete: PT tests, schools. You want your Soldiers to be the best in everything they do. So I think noncommissioned officers are really good coaches for these games because we already have the

mentality of training Soldiers. It translates well. To keep them motivated, you give them a goal, that next point – where are you going? Just like in a Soldier’s career, you keep them motivated by moving them along in their career, showing them that next point, what is next for them.”

White works with coaches all over the world, many of whom have never been in the military. Though they are fantastic coaches and exceptionally good at imparting knowledge of their sport, many of them notice the extra edge that White has as a former NCO.⁶

White recalled a Soldier ignoring his coach’s direction during the Special Operations Command Trials a few months ago. He walked up to the Soldier and whispered something in his ear. Within moments, the Soldier was doing exactly what his coach had asked him to do.⁷

“The coach looked over to me and asked, ‘How did you do that?’ I said ‘OK, one of the things in the military is that respect between a noncommissioned officer and a Soldier,’” White recalled. “I had whispered to him, ‘You are a Soldier. She told you to do something; that is what we do. This is your mission at this point, to go from here to here.’ And they understand that especially coming from me, because they know I was a noncommissioned officer and that I went through the same things they are going through. So when I come up to them and say, ‘Hey, you know what you are supposed to be doing,’ it clicks. They are used to the guidance they receive from an NCO. It is bred into them from basic training. And they know their NCO is not going to lead them wrong. It is just that relationship, that respect. It will always be there. Even though I am not technically their NCO, having an NCO figure like me around helps them. Just like an NCO, they know I am not going to ask them to do something that I am not doing myself or that I have not done myself at some point, and they understand that.”

Retired Master Sgt. Shawn “Bubba” Vosburg, one of the 40 athletes on Team Army, said White treats all of the team members as an NCO should.⁸

“His NCO leadership skills make him an awesome coach,” Vosburg said. “He leads from the front. He doesn’t put up with any excuses. He expects you to do your best, he wants you to do your best, and he is going to push you to go further than you thought you could. [His leadership style] makes the team stronger and better. He is a great guy, and I appreciate the three years he has given me.”

Vosburg picked up archery as a way to strengthen his back when he was assigned to the Warrior Transition Battalion at Fort Bliss, Texas. He started competing but had not worked with a coach until he met White at the Army Trials in 2015. With help from White and the other Army coaches, Vosburg took his training regimen to a new level and brought his scores up 40 points.⁹

“Coaching has done so much for me,” Vosburg said. “All of the coaches see your potential and push you to be better. Wanting to do better for the coaches you have come to consider as the family reminds you, yes, you have injuries, but instead of sitting on the couch and doing nothing about them, you get out. You work. You practice. You do what it takes to get better at your sport, which in turn makes you physically and mentally a better person.”

“Coaches aid in the healing process rather dramatically because we are mentors to them,” White said. “They look to us: ‘Where do I go?’ And a Soldier who is in a rehab type of environment [is often looking for purpose]. Like me – when I was rehabbing, I was lost. I had been in the Army for 18 years. All of a sudden, they were making me retire. Where do I go? What do I do? That is the big question for 90 percent of these Soldiers. The mentor role of a coach is huge because it is showing them that there is something else to do. Their world isn’t over. There are other things out there, and I can show them that they can still be involved in the Army in programs like this, like the Warrior Games. They can be involved with other veterans and other wounded personnel throughout the military. I help them realize it isn’t over. It’s just a new normal.”

References

1. Retired Sgt. 1st Class Jesse White, lead archery coach for Team Army, in discussion with the author, 2017.
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