

Marksmanship Unit NCO displays determination in path to Rio Paralympics

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NCO Journal

September 14, 2016



Staff Sgt. John Joss competes in the mixed R6 50-meter rifle prone event Wednesday at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit)

Staff Sgt. John Joss once referred to himself as an “average active adult” in the aftermath of the surgery that took his right leg.

But average people don’t make it to the grandest stage in sports.

Joss is the current American record holder in the mixed R6 50-meter rifle prone. He will compete in the event today, Sept. 14, at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. But while success in shooting has come relatively easy for the member of the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit, Joss’ path to the Paralympics has been grueling. He has gone through a harrowing improvised explosive device attack in Iraq, an exhaustive rehabilitation process and the difficult decision to amputate his leg.

Joss was deployed to Iraq in 2007, stationed just north of Baghdad. On Easter Sunday that year, he was riding in a vehicle with four other men when it was hit by an IED. Three of the vehicle’s occupants were severely injured, including Joss. His left leg was pinned beneath artillery equipment. His right leg was shattered from the shin down.

The convoy’s medic vehicle was hit at the same time as the one Joss was riding in. It meant that Joss had to apply his own tourniquet. He was eventually freed from the vehicle and sent to Germany before arriving at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. Once there, Joss began a medical odyssey lasting two months that included multiple surgeries and a painstaking rehabilitation process. He said in a 2008 interview that despite his hard work in the rehabilitation facility, his legs — particularly his right — weren’t responding to his cues.

While physical anguish filled his days in Texas, Joss was struck with another tragedy. His father was killed in a car accident two months after Joss suffered his injuries. That, coupled with his limited ability to amble around on his injured legs, spurred a gut-wrenching decision.

“Getting injured, losing my ability to move around, then losing my father in a car crash, all in less than two months — that was a lot to take at one time,” Joss said in 2008. “... I asked the doctor point-blank about my leg, amputation versus saving it. I made the decision to have it amputated. I had seen guys with similar injuries still in a wheelchair three years later. And the pain I was in was phenomenal.”

On Aug. 23, 2007, Joss’ leg was amputated.

“Within two months of the amputation, I was up on my leg,” Joss said. “I am an average active adult, and when I wear blue jeans, you can’t even tell.”

What you can tell is his prowess with a rifle. Joss took up competitive shooting at Fort Benning, Georgia, where he went for rehabilitation after the amputation. He joined the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit in 2012. He parlayed his newfound sport into two consecutive gold medals at the USA Shooting National Championships in 2013 and 2014.

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She earned the spot at the Paralympics after winning a silver medal at the International Paralympic Committee Shooting World Cup in Sydney, Australia. Now she hopes to bring home gold.

No medal for Marks in backstroke

Sgt. Elizabeth Marks couldn't continue her winning ways Tuesday, Sept. 13.

The Paralympic swimming phenom, who wowed audiences by smashing a world record Saturday, placed eighth in the women's S8 100-meter backstroke, finishing with a time of 1:22.67. Fellow American swimmer Jessica Long won bronze in the race, finishing behind gold-medal winner Stephanie Millward of Great Britain and Maddison Elliott of Australia.

While she missed out on a trip to the podium, Marks' medal performance during the weekend produced gold in scintillating fashion. The World Class Athlete Program swimmer won the SB7 100-meter breaststroke with a time of 1:28.13, a new world record.

Marks is scheduled to compete in three more events beginning with the SM8 200-meter individual medley Thursday.

Paralympic archer bows out

Staff Sgt. Michael Lukow was eliminated from medal contention Tuesday, Sept. 13.

Lukow, a Paralympic archer, lost in the round of 32 of the men's individual recurve open event to Lung-Hui Tseng of Chinese Taipei by scores of 27-25, 28-19, 27-24.