

Team Army athlete uses experience to become better NCO

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Staff Sgt. Altermese Kendrick leans back to throw in the sitting shot-put event for the Warrior Care and Transition's Army Trials on April 5, 2017, at Fort Bliss, Texas. Forty wounded, ill and injured Soldiers and veterans were picked to represent Team Army at the 2017 Department of Defense Warrior Games June 30-July 8 in Chicago. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Fransico Isreal)

Staff Sgt. Altermese Kendrick's experience with adaptive sports and reconditioning has not only helped her to heal, but helped her become a better noncommissioned officer.¹

Kendrick knew she wanted to serve in the Army when she was in the fourth grade. There was never anything else, no other dream to compete. The Army was the only future she could imagine for herself, and she was not going to let anything stand in her way.²

When a recent hip surgery didn't go as expected, she maintained the same resolve. She refused to let her new limitations hold her back or change her plans to continue serving her country. She will remain on active duty.³

Today, Kendrick is one of 40 wounded, ill and injured Soldiers and veterans training to represent Team Army at the 2017 Department of Defense Warrior Games from June 30 to July 8 in Chicago. The 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

"This experience helps me to know that I can do other things, as opposed to thinking about all of the things I can't do," Kendrick said. "And I have some new goals for all of the things I can do. I'm going to ace archery. That's my big goal right now."

Kendrick had always been a vigorous athlete. She earned a black belt in Kung Fu; she was a kickboxing coach, an agility coach and an instructor for women's defense training classes. Her military occupational specialty is a 56M chaplain's assistant, and in addition to her regular duties, she strove to help Soldiers make significant improvements to their APFT scores.⁵

All of her physical training activities came to a halt, though, after what seemed to be an uneventful Army Physical Fitness Test.⁶

"I don't have a hero's story," she said. "I tested very well that day, but after the run, my leg felt funny. After a couple of days, it began to feel like someone had stuck an ice pick in my hip and back, and it became worse over time. After enduring the pain, which had spread to my

hips and groin area, for about 10 months, I was barely walking before I was scheduled for surgery.”

Doctors told Kendrick her labrum – the ring of cartilage along the outside of rim of the hip joint socket – was torn. The surgeon scraped the joint and reshaped her socket.⁷

“My groin felt a lot better,” she said. “I thought that no more pain in my hip right after the surgery meant that I was better. It did not. The pain in my back never left and went from feeling like an ice pick stuck in my back to a red hot dagger that always stayed hot. The pain in my groin returns even now after I work out, and I suffer continuous chronic pain in my hip and sciatic joints. So, needless to say, my athletic plan and abilities have changed tremendously due to the chronic pain that is left.”

Kendrick has had to learn to deal with the pain that remains.⁸

“I would try to hold back the tears whenever I would go to the gym and realize that I could no longer do most of what I had always done without causing my pain to increase to the point that I can hardly walk out of the gym,” Kendrick said. “I used to have such confidence in my fitness level and it dropped down to a level of low self-esteem that I had a hard time beating. I felt weak and defeated. Physical fitness was more about *who* I was than anything else, but now I had to become someone else.”

Kendrick attended a course at the Pain Management Clinic at the San Antonio Military Medical Center. There, she discovered she could increase her current fitness level and still go to the gym, but that to stay active, she must work out for functional fitness.⁹

“That concept of fitness was very new to me,” Kendrick said. “I had to see a pain therapist for a while in order to free myself from the version of myself that was now filled with pain, weak, and no longer Army strong. I had to create a new version of myself that could begin to feel strong and, once again, worthy to continue to serve in the Army.”

The struggles Kendrick has overcome have helped her better relate to her Soldiers, she said. The experience has shown her that limitations do not equate to fewer possibilities. There is always a new and different way to reach for a dream.¹⁰

“This experience is making me better,” Kendrick said. “I will definitely be a better leader. I have always trained people to be better in physical fitness. I really am good at that. But it is different to train people to do well in something new. When someone who used to be physically fit is no longer able to do the things they used to do, they have to learn new ways to excel. There is a shift in the mind-set, and now I understand that shift a little bit better. I can train on a wider scale of knowledge than just full steam ahead. Sometimes it has to be slow, but still ahead. And now I understand the slowness. So I know I will be better.”

Many think that once a Soldier transfers to a Warrior Transition Battalion their military career is as good as over. But that is certainly not the case. The mission of Warrior Care and Transition is to enable Soldiers to return to active duty. If that is not possible, WCT helps them make a smooth transition into civilian life.¹¹

Within WTBs across the Army, interdisciplinary teams work with each Soldier to develop an individualized plan for recovery and rehabilitation. As part of their recovery plans, many Soldiers are introduced to adaptive sports and reconditioning activities. They may choose to compete at the unit level, which starts them on the road toward the Warrior Games.¹²

The skills Kendrick has gained while training with Team Army and while assigned to the WTB at Joint Base San Antonio-Fort Sam Houston, Texas, have helped her make her own goals and stick to them.¹³

“Due to my injury, I move very slowly and intentionally,” she said. “I learned to become a different type of athlete when I participated in the soldier adaptive reconditioning program in

the WTB and now on Team Army for the Warrior Games. I feel as though I am strong in other ways, and that I can excel in other types of sports and games.

“It’s important to me to finish,” she said. “I have always had my own life goals. I love to serve. I love people. I love my country. I love being a noncommissioned officer, because I love to see people grow. It’s nice to see young Soldiers with big ideas for the future and to help guide them so they are not just out there flapping in the wind. The Army has taught me so much, and I enjoy serving. I want to keep serving until *I* say that I’m done. And that is important to me.”

Kendrick said she has received so much support and inspiration from her son and from her mentors and peers in the soldier adaptive reconditioning program. She hopes to do the same for her future Soldiers, to inspire them to continue when life deals out difficult changes.¹⁴

“Stay calm, heal, and keep it moving,” she said. “The pace may change, but forward is the only direction.”

References

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