

Post Independent

Getting soldiers back in the saddle

Injured veterans benefit from recreation therapy in the valley

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CARBONDALE - Riding a blond draft horse at Aspen Equestrian Estates, Jason Poole is a different man than he was three years ago.

Prior to 2004, Poole was a Marine on his last deployment to Iraq.

He was not yet blind in his left eye.

Or deaf in his left ear.

He had not sustained life-threatening injuries from a bomb - one he describes as massive - that would cover his body in shrapnel wounds.

Volunteers and disabled military veterans take a riding tour of the area around the Aspen Equestrian Estates near Carbondale Tuesday afternoon. Veterans riding in foreground are, left to right, Brandon Burns, Jason Poole, Chris Bollinger and Lee Tom Jones.



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Military veteran Chris Bollinger takes a moment to connect with the horse before riding.

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And Poole, originally from Bristol, England, had not sustained traumatic brain injury that makes reading, writing and spelling difficult.

War changed his life in an instant.

Just 10 days from finishing his military commitment, Poole and other Marines were on patrol with two Iraqi soldiers and an interpreter. A bomb exploded, severely injuring Poole and killing the Iraqi soldiers and interpreter.

After the blast, Poole, 24, remained in a coma for two months.

"When I woke up, I didn't talk for seven months," he said. "I had to relearn everything, taking a shower, eating food."

Now living in Cupertino, Calif., Poole has endured years of physical and recreation therapy to overcome the disabilities resulting from the attack. He has returned to school, where he studies reading, writing and physical education.

"Basically I just keep going," he said. "I'm struggling in school. ... I'm slowly coming around, basically."

Tuesday, he joined 15 other disabled



Army veteran James Hancock is ready to ride with the assistance of volunteers (left to right) Jack Allard, Paul Hunt and Dakota Hill.

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veterans - all survivors of traumatic brain injuries - for equine therapy through a partnership with Challenge Aspen and Sopris Therapy Services. The men rode around the Aspen Equestrian complex with assistance from their physical and recreation therapists, caregivers, staff and more than 40 volunteers from the community.

"It will help their coordination, help them be active and involved. It's the movement, it's the action," said Karen Witt, a volunteer from U.S. Bank who donated two horses for the afternoon. "It's just important we support these things, no matter what our political beliefs about the war are. We need to remember they put their lives on the line for us."

Last year, Poole participated in a 10-day Grand Canyon river trip that helped his therapy evolve, said Sarah Volf, director of programs for Challenge Aspen. She

created the Rocky Mountain Expedition therapy program specifically for veterans with brain injuries with Poole in mind.

"Jason was my inspiration. ... There are very specific needs that are involved with TBI," she said. "Day by day, on the Grand Canyon I saw these remarkable changes in him, in his confidence."

As part of the program, the visiting veterans from California and Florida participate in activities such as whitewater rafting, horseback riding, hot-air ballooning and swimming and soaking in the Hot Springs Pool.

"It's awesome, a chance of a lifetime," said 22-year-old Jeff Hudgens, of Oklahoma.

Hudgens was injured in northern Iraq after an improvised explosive device (IED) exploded, leaving him paralyzed on his left side and suffering a traumatic brain injury. Through physical therapy, he had to learn to walk.

And on this warm September day in Colorado, ride again.

After changing horses to find a better saddle fit, the polite, red-haired veteran couldn't help but smile as he held on tight.

"I love horses," he said, before his turn. "I used to ride them all the time."

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Helping hands

- Through its Equine Assisted Therapy Program, Sopris Therapy Services offers free equine therapy for disabled veterans. Call executive director Pat Horwitz at 963-4677 for more information.

- For details about Challenge Aspen's veteran programs, contact Kevin Jardine at 923-0578 or kevin@challengeaspen.com.

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