

First steps

TBI 'signature injury' of the Iraq war



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Amputee Rashad Johnson, right, rides up the Village Express lift with an instructor during Challenge Aspen's first Winter Extremity Camp for newly injured soldiers the last week in January. Staff Sergeant Johnson was severely injured by an IED explosion only last September. Now, less than four months later he's snowboarding, a sport he never tried until the camp.

Peter Mullett / Special to the Sun

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This is who I am right now. Most of us, at any age, struggle with being ourselves on a daily basis under the best of circumstances.

Now, imagine you are a young man or woman in your early 20s when in the span of a few seconds you go from a vital, active, running, jumping high school sports star to a severely wounded soldier whose right leg has just disappeared in the explosive concussion of a roadside bomb.

Incidents like this happen virtually every day in the war in Iraq.

Unlike World War II or Vietnam where a polytrauma injury like the one just described often killed those soldiers, modern medical advances, new technology and new approaches to training now save most of those soldiers' lives.

And then they come home to what's next.

Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) are quickly becoming the "signature injury" of the Iraq War, and often these young men and women soldiers suffer polytrauma (TBI with additional injuries). When the roadside bombs or IEDs (improvised explosive device) go off, in addition to amputated arms and legs, many of these soldiers suffer from the affects of TBI and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Challenge Aspen held its first winter camp for newly injured soldiers with TBI and polytrauma from January 23-28 here in Snowmass.

"It remains the goal of Challenge Aspen to introduce new and unique winter activities to enhance the therapeutic value of recreation in the hopes that outdoor sports become a lifelong passion and not just a specialized therapy," explained Sarah Wolf, Challenge Aspen's director of programs.

During the camp, five newly injured male soldiers, one wife, two rehab therapists from the Tampa Bay VA hospital and a host of Challenge Aspen volunteers and support staff skied, snowboarded, snowmobiled and attended the X Games to see the finals of the mono-ski competition. But perhaps, most importantly, they set goals for themselves during the week and they struggled and endured the pain and hard to accomplish those goals.

For observers of these young men, it's easy to sympathize and sentimentalize their injuries. They deserve more.

Jeanene Griffin is a recreation therapist in the polytrauma transitional rehab department at the James A. Haley VA Hospital in Tampa, Florida.

"First and foremost is education. We try and give them skills to get back out in the community and to be advocates for themselves and others," explained Griffin. "We

work with them to accept and be happy with who they are right now."

Roberto Cruz

Roberto Cruz, 26, had been in the service three years and was an United States Army corporal on August 14, 2005, when a sniper in Iraq fired a shot that nearly severed his spinal cord. He grew up in San Sebastian, Puerto Rico, where his family still lives.

On the day he was shot Cruz was airlifted to the medical facilities in Balad, Iraq, for 10-12 days, before being transferred to Germany and then on to the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. where spent over a year in rehab.

Doctors told him that he probably wouldn't ever walk again, but after a year of pain and hard work he took those "first steps."

In Snowmass in late January, he skied. But he still battles a host of polytrauma injuries.

"It's been pretty good so far," he beamed as he was eating his lunch during a break in the camp. "These people (from Challenge Aspen) are amazing."

His goal for the week was to build up his endurance. An injury to his arm had just been operated on.

He retired from the Army in 2006 and now lives in Tampa where he continues his rehabilitation.

"Being injured like these young men were is a lot to take in," said Tampa rehab therapist Griffin. "Polytrauma injuries not only include physical injuries but also mental and emotional. And a majority of the soldiers we see who return from Iraq are also suffering from PTSD. We try and get them out of their box and help them with social interaction skills."

For newly injured soldiers the stigma of going out in public, being stared at and dealing with that or the off-the-wall questions is part of that education process Griffin, Challenge Aspen and others work so hard to instill. The community rec outings begin small: going to the museum or a fair. And families are as much of the education process as the soldiers, so part of a therapist's job is to teach them how to support and accept and move forward.

That was one reason why Challenge Aspen and the rec rehab therapists from Tampa were so happy that one of the soldiers' wives came to Snowmass and attended the camp with her husband.

Rashad Johnson

For any person facing a life-threatening injury or illness, one of the first questions they ask themselves is: "How am I going to deal with this?" While depression and emotional trauma is natural under the circumstances and it's not unusual for many to want to hide and give up, there are others who take an active, even aggressive approach. Squad leader Staff Sergeant Rashad Johnson, 28, is one of those patients.

Three-and-a-half months after the Humvee he was riding in ran over an IED in the desert of Iraq, causing the amputation of his leg, Johnson stands on the snowy slopes of Snowmass preparing to go snowboarding. He had never snowboarded before.

"How someone deals with a traumatic injury varies with the person," said rehab therapist Griffin. "Rashad is somebody that that was willing to push forward through the pain, look past his injury and learn about the new technology that can help him and new opportunities."

He has been assisted in his therapy by his wife Marcia who came to Snowmass with him.

"Marcia's been huge in Rashad's treatment," said Griffin. "She's reassured and comforted him, and she's encouraged and pushed him."

Johnson's goal during the TBI camp is to be able to do "normal activities." He has two young children, 5-year-old Jenelle and 2-year-old DeMarco, and he wants to be able to

play with them and not get so tired.

Johnson hopes to stay in the military (hopefully becoming a trainer or teacher in some way). He's starting college in August. He does a lot of rock climbing, and he lifts weights, and he wants to come back to Snowmass in the summer.

"It's good to be here," said Johnson over lunch. "I'm glad to have they have programs like (the Challenge Aspen TBI camp)." While he praises the people he's met here in Snowmass with the Challenge Aspen program and his coaches, his biggest praise goes to the other soldiers and their camaraderie.

For Cruz, Johnson, Michael Bradley, Eric McDaniel and Hunter McGaughey, the Challenge Aspen TBI Winter Extremity Camp is one of many "first steps" forward following their traumatic injuries.

Hearing their stories, watching them joke and horseplay over lunch, but noticing those small moments where they struggle with a word or movement, you know these young men will are in different stages of their recovery and that they all handle their injuries in different ways.

But all of them make you only feel one thing: proud.

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