

These Team Toyota Veterans Have What It Takes To Keep Going

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For U.S. Army veteran and Team Toyota athlete [Melissa Stockwell](#), mobility means everything. After the paratriathlete lost her leg to a roadside bomb while serving in Iraq, Stockwell turned to competition as a way to stay active and challenged during her recovery.

“I wanted to see how much I could do with one leg,” she says. “I heard about the Paralympics a few months into my recovery, and the dream was born pretty quickly. Sports gave me a second chance to represent my country, so I retired from the Army and headed into the world of athletics.”

Injured in 2004, Stockwell was the first female American soldier in history to lose a limb in active combat. Four years later, she became the first Iraq War veteran to qualify for the Paralympic Games, competing in swimming at the Beijing 2008 Paralympic Games. The veteran and Purple Heart recipient transitioned to paratriathlon and competed at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games as a member of Team Toyota.

The Power of Athletics

Stockwell first returned to swimming after her injury because she felt comfortable in the water. It was the easiest way for the veteran to stay active without needing her prosthetic leg.

“Swimming helped me almost forget I was missing my leg,” she says. “I didn’t have to wear my prosthetic — I could just use my crutches on the pool deck, get in and go. Swimming kind of made me feel whole again and I fell in love with the sport quickly.”

Like many veterans, Stockwell is motivated by her fellow soldiers, especially those who have overcome tragic injuries and persevered. In terms of her own recovery, she believes that participation in sports helped her get her life back. That’s why she started Dare2tri, an Illinois-based sports charity to enhance the lives of individuals with physical disabilities and visual impairments. She thinks exercise and sports can have a positive impact on everyone’s life, something she’s experienced firsthand.

“Sports changed the trajectory of my life, 110%,” she says. “Not only did it show me what I could still do, but it helped my confidence and self-worth. I think it’s so important for veterans to be active. Obviously not everyone is going to be a Paralympic athlete, but just signing up for a race or training with your family can be so powerful.”

Facing a New Challenge

Fellow Team Toyota athlete [Brad Snyder](#) shares a similar experience. The U.S. Navy veteran, who lost his eyesight while serving his second deployment in Afghanistan, found exercise and sports to be critical to both his physical and mental recovery.

“In the tumult after an injury, after getting out of the hospital, you’re really grasping onto any sense of normalcy you possibly can,” Snyder says. “And since I was home at the time, my mom and brothers, who were all swimmers, and old swimming friends were visiting me. The whole community saw me as one of them.”

Snyder was serving in Afghanistan as a United States Navy explosive ordnance disposal officer when, in September 2011, he stepped on an improvised explosive device (IED), leaving him blinded. The veteran, who swam competitively during his time at the U.S. Naval Academy, returned to the pool as a part of his recovery.

Exactly one year later, Snyder won gold in the men’s 400-meter freestyle event at the London 2012 Paralympic Games. Among fully blind swimmers, he’s the world record holder in 100-meter freestyle events. After competing in the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, Snyder decided that he had accomplished his top goals in swimming and transitioned to paratriathlon.

“I find a bit of solace in shifting the challenge,” he says. “My journey to my first Paralympics had a lot to do with personal transformation, but there’s more for me to learn. I want to try something new and see if there is more for me to accomplish.”

Snyder hopes his story will inspire others to take on challenges that may seem impossible, and to experience the emotional growth that comes with it. The veteran believes in the power of perseverance, which is a viewpoint he hopes to share with others.

“It’s important to me to carry a positive message,” he says. “To inspire people to push past their boundaries, to inspire people to say, ‘You know what? Adversity is going to happen, no matter what, so I have to get good at navigating that adversity.’”

Finding Community

Staying active can play a big role in an injured veteran’s rehabilitation, but sports can also have a positive impact that goes beyond the physical benefits. Joining an all-military sled hockey team gave veteran Rico Roman the sense of comradery he’d been missing since retiring from the U.S. Army.

“It just brought me into this community of other disabled veterans,” he says. “Right away you get that brotherhood, that teamwork, that feeling of being part of something. I felt like I belonged somewhere again.”

Roman was injured by a roadside bomb while serving in Afghanistan in 2007 and spent nearly a year recovering in Walter Reed Medical Center. He ultimately chose to amputate his leg. A few months into his active recovery, he was asked to join the sled hockey team by a local group that works with wounded war veterans.

And while Roman had never played hockey before, the gifted athlete took to the sport easily after learning the rules by watching games on television. In 2011, the Team Toyota athlete became one of the first war-wounded veterans to make the sled hockey U.S. National Team, and went on to win gold with his teammates at both the Sochi 2014 Paralympic Winter Games and the PyeongChang 2018 Paralympic Winter Games. Roman emphasizes how being on a team, especially with other veterans, helped him recover.

“Interacting with others is huge for rehab,” he says. “Finding the sport really gave me an outlet. I didn’t think about any of it — my injury — when I was out on the ice. And I still don’t. I really feel just like free in the moment, enjoying the sport and spending time with my teammates.”

Veteran athletes Stockwell, Snyder and Roman are not letting obstacles impact their mobility or prevent them from following their dreams. As they and their fellow Team Toyota athletes continue to train to compete on the world’s stage, they all continue to demonstrate that when you’re free to move, anything is possible.

To learn more about Beijing 2022, click [here](#).