

Rico Roman is Building Community Through Sports

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For Army veteran and Team Toyota Paralympian Rico Roman, team sports gave him a sense of camaraderie that he didn't realize he was missing. Roman, who was injured by a roadside bomb while serving in Iraq in 2007, spent months in rehab before joining an all-military sled hockey team.

“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.”

The San Antonio sled hockey club, which included veterans from all branches of service, helped the Purple Heart recipient feel normal and took focus away from his injury. All it took was one prank in the locker room for Roman to feel like he was part of the team.

“I left my prosthetic leg in the locker room, and when I came back, someone had put trash in it,” he says. “That’s when I was like, ‘I need to be here. This is where I need to be.’”

Now, the Paralympian is working to give other wounded veterans and para athletes the same experience of community through sport.



A Slow Start

Though being active played a big role in his physical rehabilitation, Roman didn't jump into sled hockey right away.

After his injury, he recovered for a year at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Maryland, where the medical team managed to save his leg. But he couldn't bend it and relied heavily on pain medication, so when he was transferred to the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, he ultimately chose to have it amputated.

"I was in a lot of pain," he says. "I just wasn't myself. I opted to amputate my leg. It took a year of rehab to learn how to walk again."

As part of his rehab, Roman got involved in handcycling. A few months into his active recovery, a local group that works with wounded war veterans, Operation Comfort, asked him to join an all-military sled hockey team. Based in San Antonio, Operation Comfort helps active duty members, veterans and their families from all service branches recover and get involved in their communities through athletics, activities and special events.

"I told them no," he says. "I turned them down a good 10 to 12 times before I finally gave in and tried it out. I think what got me to say yes was I was already enjoying handcycling and the group of people I was working with so much."

Roman had never played hockey before and had to watch it on TV to learn the rules. But as a natural athlete, he took to the ice easily. He spent eight months on the team before learning it was a Paralympic sport. That's when his coach at the time, Lonnie Hannah, encouraged him to try out. Roman didn't make the cut.

"The tryouts were an eye-opening experience," he says. "I realized that if I was serious about making the team, I was going to have to put in the work. So, I decided to lean in."

Roman continued to train hard with his team in San Antonio and ended up making the Paralympic team the next season, in 2011. One of the first war-wounded veterans to make the U.S. National Sled Hockey Team, Roman has gone on to compete in two Paralympic Games and is currently an assistant captain.



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Finding Community

While Roman acknowledges how important physical exercise is for rehabilitation, he also emphasizes how much being a part of a team sport helped him recover.

“Interacting with others is huge for rehab,” he says. “Some guys on my team were out of the service, some had stayed in and others, like myself, were still rehabbing. We could talk about prosthetics and stuff like that. I could ask, ‘What works for you?’ It was an experience they understood.”

Roman, who plays center forward and takes the face-off (when the puck is dropped between two players of opposing teams to restart the game), likes the physical aspect of sled hockey. Though he’s landed in the penalty box a few times for body-checking his opponent, the physical nature of the game helps to settle his mind.

“Finding the sport really gave me an outlet,” he says. “I didn’t think about 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.”

Giving Back

As a two-time gold medalist, Roman’s next goal is to give back as much as possible, especially to the organization that helped him discover sled hockey.

“Without Operation Comfort, I would have never found the sport,” he says. “They do so much for us veterans. They don’t have a big billboard or do commercials or anything like that, but they’re there when guys are hurt, are in bed or rehabbing and making sure that they have what they need.”

When he’s not training, Roman works with local sled hockey groups and teams affiliated with Operation Comfort in San Antonio, encouraging war-wounded veterans to try out new experiences.

“Being able to give back is the biggest thing for me,” he says. “I’ve been so lucky to be able to help out. I go show off my medals and hopefully inspire the next generation of athletes to go and compete.”

“Operation Comfort and the Paralympics have given me this platform,” he says. “I hope we can inspire the future Paralympians out there to chase after their dreams of winning gold and just change how society looks at people with disabilities. That’s what I’m looking forward to.”