

Melissa Stockwell Is Always Ready for the Next Challenge

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When Army veteran and Team Toyota athlete Melissa Stockwell started competing in paratriathlon, the event wasn't even an official Paralympic sport.

"I wasn't thinking about the Paralympics at all because it wasn't even a possibility," Stockwell says. "Even though I'd been to multiple world championships before it was announced that it would be included for Rio, I hadn't considered it."

Stockwell, who lost her leg to a roadside bomb in 2004 while serving in Iraq, was already a Paralympian before even trying the multi-sport out. She competed on the U.S. Paralympics Swimming team at the Paralympic Games Beijing 2008. The following year, she was looking for a new challenge when another para-athlete suggested she try competing in paratriathlon.

"I used to think triathletes were crazy because it's so much," she says. "Swimming, running, biking at the same time. But I fell in love with it from the start."

While the veteran considered her Paralympic swimming career over, she still participated in races, because she loved her new sport and saw the value in competition. When officials announced that the paratriathlon would be making its debut at the Paralympic Games Rio 2016, Stockwell wasted no time starting to train. And just like that, her eyes were set on making Team USA for a third time.



Discovering Something New

Stockwell returned to swimming—her childhood sport—after her injury because she felt comfortable in the water. It was the easiest way for the veteran to be 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.”

In 2007, after a few months of swimming on a competitive team, Stockwell made her first move to the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Training Center (OPTC) in Colorado Springs. When she made the U.S. Paralympics Swimming team in 2008, she became the first Iraq veteran to make a Paralympic team. She competed in Beijing in the 100-meter butterfly, 100-meter freestyle and 400-meter freestyle and was selected to serve as the Team USA flag bearer at the Closing Ceremony.

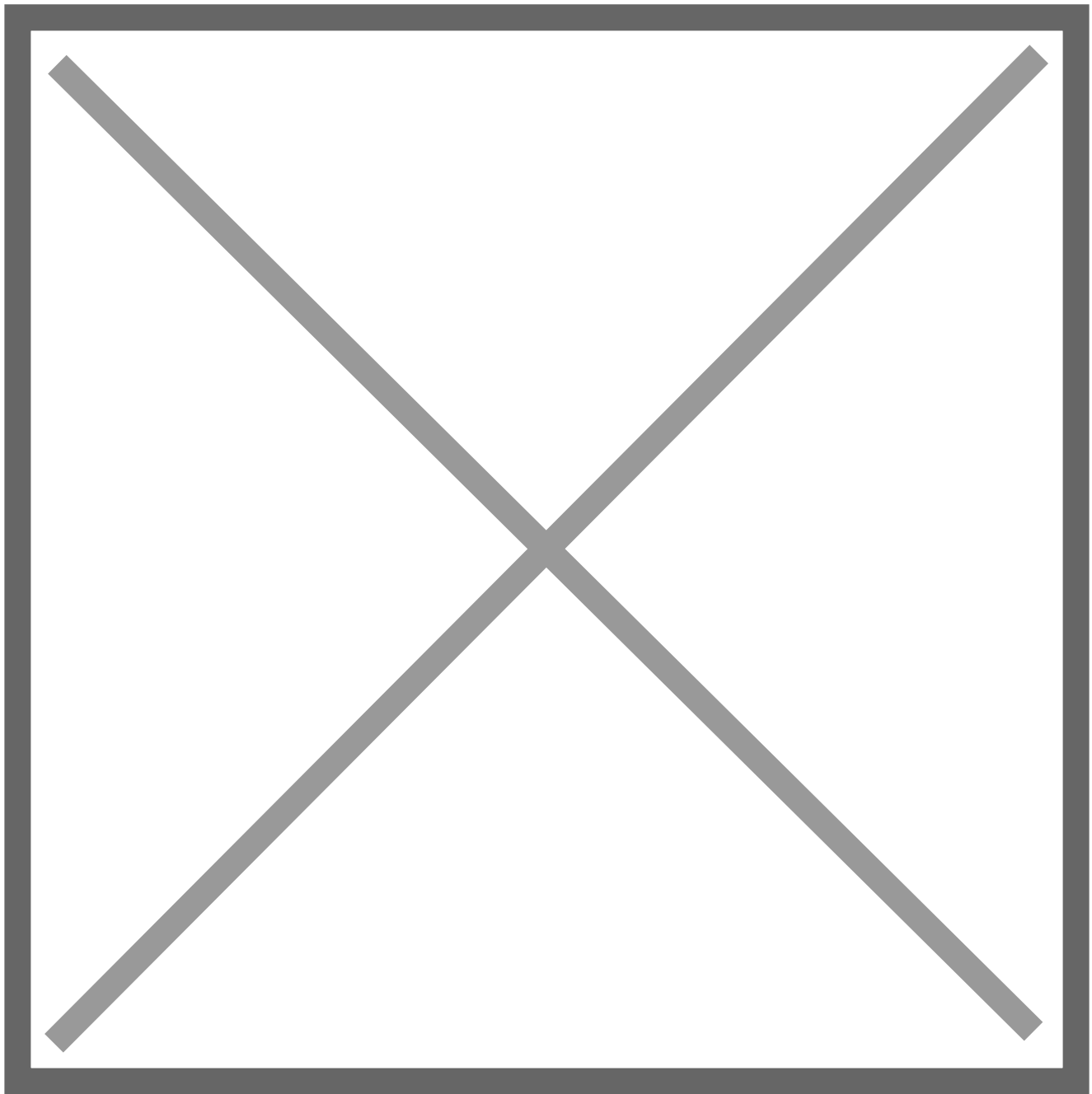
While she still loved swimming, Stockwell was ready for a new challenge and competed in her first paratriathlon race in 2009.

“I was hooked from the beginning,” she says. “I love the challenge of sports, and with triathlon, being on the same course as the able-bodied athletes, crossing the finish line together, the whole experience was incredible.”

Getting on the Podium

Stockwell won bronze in paratriathlon’s debut at the Paralympic Games Rio 2016. And, in what seemed like a symbolic moment, the race day happened to fall on the anniversary of September 11. Adding to the momentous day, Stockwell was joined by two of her U.S. teammates on the podium, making for an emotional Team USA medal sweep. And for the Army veteran, the experience was indescribable.

“The Rio Paralympics was probably one of the greatest moments of my life,” she says. “How everything turned out, it was pretty amazing.” Plus, Stockwell had finally won her first Paralympic medal.



During her first Paralympics in 2008, Stockwell was happy to just experience it. For 2016, her goal was to make it to the podium. Now, heading into Tokyo 2020, the paratriathlete is going for gold.

“Every Games brings something new,” she says. “I don’t think you ever get used to it. For Tokyo 2020, I want to repeat my 2016 success and prove that a 41-year-old mother of two can still get out there and be one of the best.”

Balancing Family and Training

In 2019, Stockwell relocated to the OPTC in Colorado once again, this time from Chicago and with her husband Brian and two young children, Dallas and Millie.

“When you go to the Olympic & Paralympic Training Center, you know you’re going to have the best of the best,” she says.

For Stockwell, one of the biggest benefits of the center is being surrounded by fellow elite Paralympic athletes.

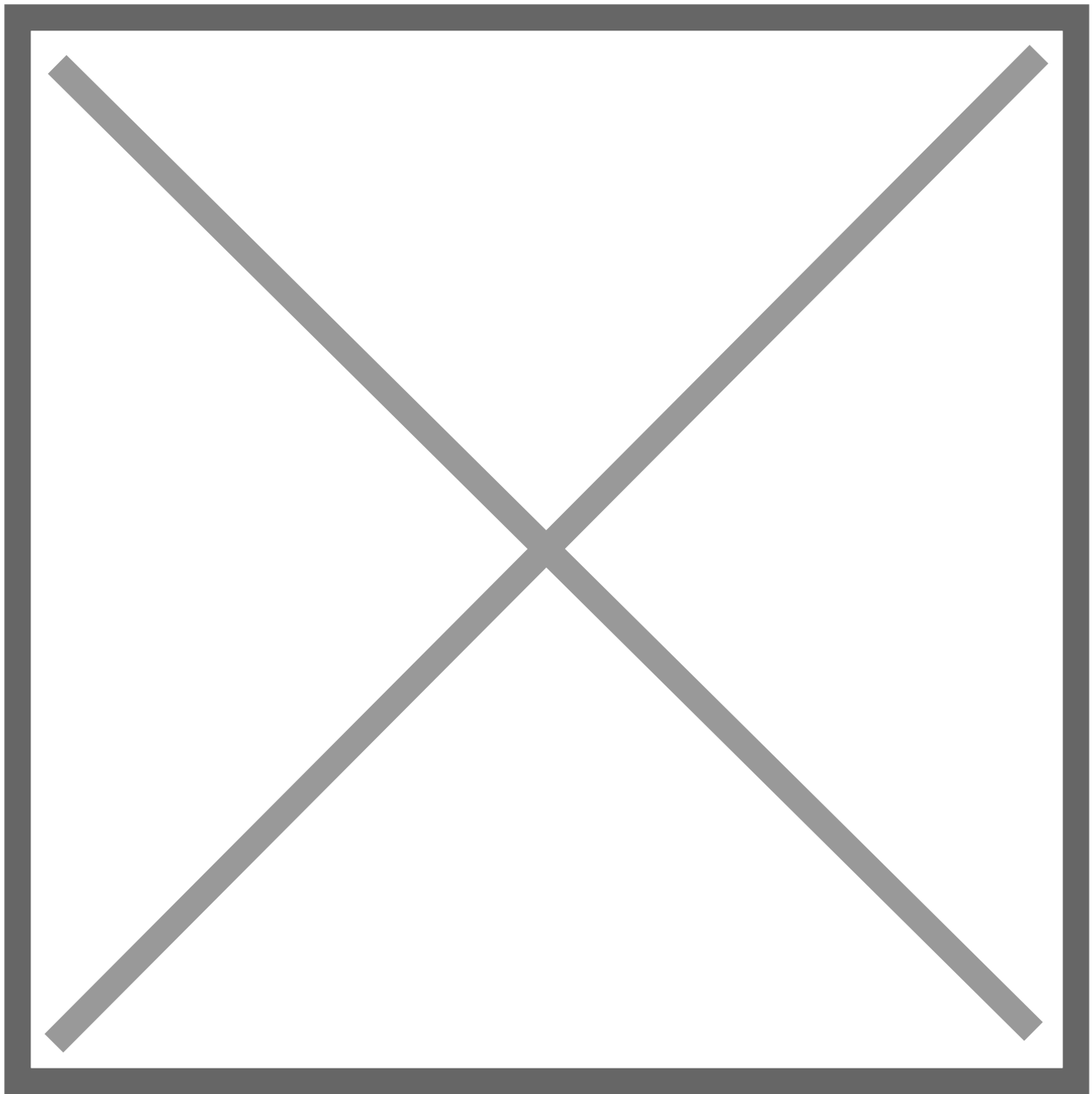
“I train with two of my biggest competitors every day, but we push each other and make each other better athletes,” she says. “We have fun doing it. It’s such a supportive community and I’m very fortunate to be a part of it.”

With the long hours that go into training, community becomes very important. While preparing for Tokyo 2020, Stockwell trains for about three to four hours a day, plus extra gym sessions and physical therapy. In addition to the school and sport activities for the children, Stockwell and her husband also own a prosthetic company in Colorado Springs,

“I’d be lying if I said it was easy—it’s always go, go, go,” she says. “I’ll train for four and a half hours and I want to go home and rest, but I can’t, because it’s dinnertime, bath time, playtime with the kids. I go into each day knowing it is going to be a busy one, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

To stay motivated through her busiest days, Stockwell looks to her family for support and hopes she’s setting an example for her kids about what it means to follow your dreams.

“I’m motivated by a lot,” she says. “I want my kids to grow up and realize that you can dream big and go after your dreams, even if there are sacrifices. Obviously, I’m away from them more than I would like to be, but that’s what it takes to make your dreams a reality.”



The Power of Sports

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 lives, 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 obvious that not everyone is going to be a Paralympic athlete,” she says. “And you don’t have to be a Paralympic athlete. But I think just to be active, whether it’s with your family or on your own, or signing up for a race, maybe one you don’t think you can do, but training for it and realizing that you can do it — it’s powerful.”