

The benefit of sports proves invaluable to those with limb injuries

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BALTIMORE, Md. — To former Army Sergeant Ryan Major, there’s no better feeling than banging into another player so hard during a game that he knocks them over. It’s an exhilaration sports have given him ever since he was a little boy. The more competitive the sport is, the more he likes it. But in 2006, an improvised explosive device blew off Major’s right leg and some fingers. He was on foot patrol in the Iraqi city of Ramadi at the time. His left leg was later amputated, and Major wondered if he would ever play sports again.

Now using a wheelchair, Major not only still plays rough sports, but they’ve become central to his life and key to his mental and physical rehabilitation. The 31-year-old former Towson High School football player now plays rugby, toppling others in wheelchairs with his hard hits. He also skis, kayaks and participates in numerous other activities.

Major is one of many people with major limb injuries who found that sports made them feel like their old selves again. People in the field of physical rehabilitation are also learning that sports can be good for recovery. He credits sports with helping him overcome the severe depression he experienced after returning home from Iraq. “I had lost my freedom,” Major said. “And sports helped bring it back. I don’t know where I’d be without it.”

Bringing Home The Gold

He competed in May in the Invictus Games competition for injured soldiers in Orlando, Florida, where he won gold medals for rugby and seated shot put and silver medals for indoor rowing and seated discus. Next up, he is going to the Department of Defense Warrior Games starting Wednesday in West Point, New York, where he will compete in shot put, discus, cycling, wheelchair racing and swimming.

The Invictus Games were established in London two years ago to showcase the recovery aspects of sports. The Olympics-like competition for injured and ill military personnel and veterans gives them the opportunity to compete in sports such as rugby, track and field and swimming. The first Warrior Games, a similar competition, were held in 2010. Various leagues have been founded to provide recreational sports opportunities for the injured and disabled.

Sports Are A Key Part Of Therapy

The University of Maryland Rehabilitation & Orthopaedic Institute has long used sports in its programming, and the institute’s therapists say it helps patients cope with often-life-changing injuries and illnesses. The program started with golf 21 years ago and now includes basketball and scuba in its therapy program. The activities build muscles, endurance and balance but also give people a social outlet and improve self-esteem, confidence and quality of life, program counselors say.

“It makes people feel like they have a purpose in life again and it helps them stay healthy because you still need to be healthy in your new state,” said Sheila Schaffer, a therapy manager at the Rehabilitation & Orthopaedic Institute.

Cynthia Frisina is the executive director of BlazeSports America, which provides athletic opportunities for

people with disabilities. She said that veterans who do adaptive sports have reported an increase in quality of life, overall health and the ability to get jobs.

“Having the opportunity to participate in adaptive sports changes the lives of veterans, children and adults with physical disabilities, as well as their families,” Frisina said. “We see it firsthand every day. There is an increased focus on the power of sport to transform lives and the power of the human spirit to overcome adversity and challenges in all forms.”

Although Slow To Catch On, Its Benefits Are Huge

Adaptive sports began gaining popularity among veterans after the Vietnam War but have been slow to catch on, said Michael Cottingham. Cottingham is the director of adaptive athletics at the University of Houston. He has done research on the issue. According to Cottingham, it can be expensive for many veterans living on disability benefits, and not all areas of the country have programs. It may also be hard to convince some people that they can play sports after life-altering injuries.

In his research, Cottingham found that injured people who participate in sports are more likely to hold a job. Also, for each year of participation in sports, the chances of a person finding work increased by 4 percent. Playing sports also develops skills such as team-building and makes injured people physically stronger. “If you have a spinal cord injury and your body is just rattled, you’re going to get physically stronger and in better shape when you play sports,” Cottingham said. “You will be able to sit up for eight hours a day at work. You will be able to put your wheelchair in the car five days a week.”

Ryan Major’s Long Road To Recovery

Major lay in a coma for weeks after getting injured in Iraq. He received care in Germany first. Next he went to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, where his left leg was amputated. Then he was moved to the University of Maryland Shock Trauma Center in Baltimore to help treat infections in his wounds. Dr. Sharon Henry is a trauma surgery professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and Shock Trauma’s director of wound healing. When Henry first met Major, she remembered he was withdrawn and “a man of few words.”

His treatment was intense. Doctors took him to the operating room almost daily to check and clean his infections. Major said he was depressed when he arrived at Shock Trauma. He wondered if he would get better and how life would be after the amputations.

Major needed to be convinced to play rugby at first. He had become an active kayaker and didn’t want to give that up. A small part of him also wasn’t sure he would be able to play. A therapist at Maryland’s Rehabilitation & Orthopaedic Institute convinced him to give it a try. There was no turning back after his first practice. Rugby reminded him of his football days. The team atmosphere, where people worked together to win, reminded him of his days in the Army. These days, the loud and gregarious Major constantly prepares for the next competition. He plays with heart and passion that his rugby teammates say rubs off on them.

“It is,” he said, “what I live for.”

