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NEVER SAY IT'S IMPOSSIBLE

RETIRED AIR FORCE SPECIAL OPERATOR COMPETES IN INAUGURAL WARRIOR GAMES

The noise from the cheering crowds and buzz of the starting signal reverberates off the walls of the U. S. Olympic Training Center's pool as swimmers compete in the 50-meter backstroke. For one of them, the cool water during the qualifying round of the first Warrior Games in Colorado Springs, Colo., offers some relief from the permanent pain in his legs caused by a 10-year-old injury.

That he can feel pain in his paralyzed legs should be impossible, but for retired Air Force Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan, the word impossible doesn't hold the same meaning as it does for most people. After all, swimming competitively with legs that provide nothing but ballast might be thought of as impossible.



As the starting signal sounds, Sergeant Morgan and his fellow wounded veterans rush across the pool. Intense training from the previous week has turned the swimmers into water-treading machines.

Flashes from dozens of cameras freeze the practiced movements in time. Right arm up, stroke, left arm up, stroke. The mechanics of good form make the movement look easy. To a spectator, only the wobble of his legs as they are tugged along in the water belies the fact that he is paralyzed.

Paralysis doesn't define this wounded, but not beaten, Airman. Instead, losing the use of his legs taught him to define himself by things that can't be taken away.

"In the Air Force, I was a combat meteorologist," he said. "In the special operations

Retired Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan uses a custom-designed race wheelchair for track events. The rear wheels are slanted and the chair is specifically made to be as aerodynamic as possible. Sport chairs come in many varieties, allowing athletes to race, play basketball and compete in many other sports.

(Left) Sport wheelchairs like these are used for basketball.



Nepal, an assistance dog, uses his nose to open the door at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., for retired Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan. Morgan was a combat meteorologist. He suffered a spinal cord injury during a special operations mission in South America that left him paralyzed from the waist down.



community, I feel like I based my life on who I was and what I did for the Air Force. When that was taken away I felt like I had nothing left. This wheelchair has been a character-building experience for me.”

It was on a mission to South America in 1999 that his character-building lessons began. On the way back from a mission, the vehicle he was riding in rolled down a ravine. Sergeant Morgan was thrown from the vehicle

pulled me up and carried me up the hill to his vehicle. He had a shortwave radio and was able to call the ambulance. The ambulance would be three hours. I was gasping for every breath. Both my lungs were collapsed and full of water. The missionary said, ‘This guy doesn’t have three hours.’”

Knowing Sergeant Morgan couldn’t wait for the ambulance to make the three-hour drive, the missionary decided to meet the ambulance

his life. In addition to his injuries, an infection was growing in his lungs from the stagnant water he’d inhaled.

Sergeant Morgan awoke from the coma six weeks later. His wife and five children were there to greet him. They saw the same person on the outside, but Sergeant Morgan had to redefine who he was on the inside. The reality of his drastically changed life threatened to rob him of his identity. Taking on tough challenges was something he

“THIS EVENT HAS MADE ME FEEL LIKE A PART OF THE AIR FORCE AGAIN.”

— Retired Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan

and landed facedown in stagnant water. The vehicle landed on top of him. His back was crushed, his lungs collapsed. Only a chance encounter saved his life.

“Fortunately for me an American missionary was there in Ecuador and, as he drove the road, he noticed the vehicle at the bottom of the ravine. He thought it might be a fresh accident. So, as he was running down there, he just about stumbled over me,” he said. “He

halfway. He removed the seats from his van and put Sergeant Morgan and two other injured servicemembers inside as carefully as possible. The missionary arrived at the rendezvous point just as Sergeant Morgan stopped breathing. The medics were able to insert a chest tube in Sergeant Morgan and get him to a hospital.

Within 24 hours, Sergeant Morgan was back in the United States in an induced coma as doctors fought to save

was used to from his special operations career, and it helped carry him through recovery and retirement.

“When I woke up from the coma, the doctor told me that I suffered a spinal cord injury, that I would never walk again,” Sergeant Morgan said. “I remember thinking for a split second, ‘There’s no way.’ So, I immediately replied, ‘Yes I will.’ The doctor was like, ‘I’m sorry. You won’t. The extent of the damage was severe.’ I said, ‘You



Retired Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan pushes his wheelchair to his swimming lane before competing in the 50-meter backstroke.



Top: Retired Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan dribbles the basketball during a game against the Marines in the inaugural Warrior Games held in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Sergeant Morgan takes a break during swim practice. Sergeant Morgan competes in the 50-meter backstroke.

know what? I will walk again. See, I'm moving my toes right now.' The doctor replied, 'No, you're not moving your toes.' I said, 'I am. It's just too small for you to see it.'"

Sergeant Morgan said that in the first years of recovery, he had to come to grips with the fact that he would never walk again. He learned to accept it, though it took time.

"I was thoroughly convinced that within 10 years I would be cured," he said. "I wrote in a magazine article that in 10 years I would run a marathon. It's been 10 years since I was hurt and I'm obviously not able to run, but I have found ways to compete."

The scars from 11 back surgeries are visible as Sergeant Morgan hauls himself out of the pool. A slight wince is the only indication of the pain from crushed nerves in his back and legs. He looks at the clock. He qualified. It's a good start

for the day.

With little time to change and eat, he makes his way to another building where his Air Force wheelchair basketball teammates await. For him, the team and the Warrior Games make him part of the Air Force again.

"I miss the Air Force a lot," he said as he made his way to the gym. "I was hurt right before 9/11. Being in special operations after that happened, and knowing that all my friends were deploying to Afghanistan and Iraq, I felt it was what I was trained to do and I needed to be there with my buddies, fighting along beside them. I can't tell you how bad I miss it. That's the nice thing about this. It makes me feel part of the team again, part of the family."

During the opening ceremony, Juan M. Garcia III, the assistant Secretary of the Navy for manpower and Reserve affairs, noted that the

Warrior Games were created by the U.S. Olympics Committee and the Department of Defense to demonstrate the indomitable spirit of wounded veterans. More than 200 wounded servicemembers competed in three days of Paralympic-style competition in nine sports including archery, shooting, track and swimming.

For Sergeant Morgan, rejoining the Air Force family through sports combines who he was with who he has become. It is through sports that he found a way to do what many believe is impossible.

In addition to the backstroke and wheelchair basketball events, he competed in the 400 and 1500-meter wheelchair races. Competing in the Warrior Games was another box to check off of his to-do list because he plans to join the U.S. Paralympics team.



Perhaps it's his innate competitive-ness or his refusal to admit something is impossible. Sergeant Morgan used the Warrior Games to prove otherwise.

"Out of anything I've done, this has been the greatest thing for me," he said. "One of the hardest things after I got hurt was receiving the letter saying I was permanently retired from the Air Force. I was hoping that through some miraculous chance I would start walking again one day. Obviously it didn't happen. This event has made me feel like a part of the Air Force again."

Sergeant Morgan's wife, Christina, noticed the increased optimism and excitement the Warrior Games ignited in him.

"Jason was not only excited to be part of a team again, but thrilled to be part of his Air Force team," she said. "The Warrior Games gave him more courage than fears and more gains



Above: Retired Staff Sgt. Jason Morgan, in blue, pushes hard during the 1,500-meter wheelchair race in an attempt to overtake the lead racer.

Sergeant Morgan earned a silver medal in the 1,500-meter wheelchair race.

than losses. He is looking forward to next year."

In February, Sergeant Morgan raced a half-marathon. In November, he's scheduled for a full marathon. With

each new challenge and each success Sergeant Morgan is proving that though things may seem impossible a change in perspective can prove it otherwise. 