

WARRIOR GAMES

FIVE GRADUATES SERVE AS COACHES
FOR THE 2011 WARRIOR GAMES



Maj. James Bales, '01, and Cami Stock, '98,
lead the Air Force cycling athletes on a training
ride before the games.

UNDAUNTED TRIUMPH

This year, the Warrior Games return to Colorado Springs. It is here that our wounded veterans come together to stand up in the face adversity and to share in the triumph of overcoming their injuries. Some are missing limbs, others the power of sight, yet all share the same determination to challenge their bodies and their minds to accomplish things they may never have thought possible. As the athletes run, swim and cycle their way through the games, five Air Force Academy graduates stand behind them in support of their journeys to be the best they can be.

Cami Stock, '98, is the common link between many of the graduates who have come together to coach at their year's games. Her background in triathlon gives her the versatility to cover the wide array of problem solving skills it takes to coordinate the multitude of sports for the Air Force training camp prior to the games. "About a year and a half ago I started working with team Semper Fi," Cami recalls of her history with the games. "They're the nonprofit which helps the Marine Corps team. I worked with the guys on the track and the guys in the pool, and I just couldn't pull myself away from it. I just fell in love with that side of sports."

Today Cami coaches for the Air Force. "My role as a coach started out as kind of a catch-all. I do a little bit of everything to work with whoever needs help. I also helped set up the facilities for the training camp and assisted with the selection process down in San Antonio, Texas. Once the athletes left the training camp in San Antonio we wrote them a training program that saw them through May up to the start of the games. I currently coach swimming and I help with cycling and track and field because my background is in triathlon. It was hard at first because wheelchair basketball, sitting volleyball, archery and shooting are things that I don't

have any experience in. It's been great to learn about them because they are very challenging sports."

Maj. James Bales, '01, is also a fellow triathlete and an orthopedic surgeon at the USAFA medical center. As a cadet, he was a four-year letterman in swimming at the Academy. In the years spent studying for his medical degree, he began training as a triathlete and has since turned professional. "The Warrior Games combine three of my passions," Bales says enthusiastically. "It combines medicine, athletics and the military. As a surgeon, I tend to see these guys immediately after they've been shipped back to the United States after incurring their injuries and we are considering limb salvage versus amputation. To see these guys go from the point where they're undergoing initial rehabilitation to the point where they're competing and racing is really inspirational to me."

Bales indicates that he's wearing two hats this year. "I'm the upright cycling coach and the Air Force team physician." The surgeon explains that there are three forms of cycling at the games.

"We have hand cycling, recumbent cycling and upright cycling. Upright cycling is broken into two groups: single and tandem." (Visually impaired athletes ride a tandem bicycle with

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Top, L to R: Cami Stock, '98, coaches her swimmers during practice. Matt Slaydon competes in shot-put. **Bottom:** Matt Pirrello swims in the 50m freestyle. Tech. Sgt. Israel Del Toro competes in recumbent cycling.

a sighted pilot.) “Athletes are placed into these various categories according to their disability.”

One of the main challenges that all athletes face in Colorado is the altitude. “We’re riding bikes at 7200-foot elevation,” Bales says, “so obviously the altitude is going to be a factor for some of these people who are coming from sea level. After we acclimate them to the thin air we work on racing strategies. Cycling is like a physical chess game. Not only do you have to know yourself, you also have to feel out your opponents. You have to know your terrain and the distance of the course. When you combine all of those factors, that’s where your strategy really comes into play.”

In addition to his experience as an athlete, Bales cannot help but bring his medical knowledge to the table as well. He explains that amputations drastically increase energy consumption above normal, and that comes at great cost to the athletes. “As an orthopedic surgeon, knowing these numbers gives me a huge amount of admiration for these athletes! They are using a tremendous amount of energy to do what they do. At the end of the day all of these athletes will be successful. It’s exciting because we’re guaranteed that

a military athlete will win—naturally I have my own bias towards the Air Force.”

Cami explains that despite what may seem like insurmountable challenges, the athletes remain steadfast throughout the entire process. “The challenges we face are the same as any other coaching staff out there,” she begins, “There’s a really fine line between exhaustion and recovery; when an athlete is at the elite level, he or she walks that razor’s edge all the time. With the wounded warriors, because they are injured, recovery plays a heavier role. We coaches face the problem of how hard to push our athletes to give them the recovery yet still experience the rewards of reaching their limits.”

The athletes in the Warrior Games face a wide array of injuries, many of which are compounded to include amputation, traumatic brain injury and PTSD. Matt Slaydon is one such athlete who faces multiple injuries. A member of the Explosive Ordinance Disposal squad in Kirkuk, Iraq, Slaydon survived a close encounter with an improvised explosive device which took not only his eyesight, but also his left arm. Today, more than three years after his injury, Slaydon

By the Numbers:

Increased Metabolic Costs of Amputation

Ankle Amputation: Increased 15%

Transtibial (Unilateral Below Knee Amputation): Increased 25%

Bilateral transtibial (Bilateral Below Knee Amputations): Increased 40%

Transfemoral (Unilateral Above Knee Amputation): Increased 70%

Bilateral transfemoral (Bilateral Above Knee Amputations): Increased 200%

competes in shot-put at the games. His coach, Capt. Dana Lyon, '06, explains, "With Matt Slaydon, our blind amputee, balance is a huge issue. Matt was left-handed, which is the arm they amputated. We've had to teach him to use his non-dominant hand to throw the shot-put. We get curveballs thrown at us left and right because the Warrior Games are still new and we're all still trying to figure things out."

Lyon is part of the Air Force's World Class Athlete program at the Olympic Training Center. Last year, through a series of coincidental practice overlaps with wounded warriors from the Army, she wound up giving pointers to their athletes for the 2010 games. Not long after, Air Force athletes began approaching her for tips as well. "This year, Cami asked me to come on board with the Air Force team. I stumbled into it last year, but now it's just a blessing to be able to work with these athletes. One of the biggest challenges they face is confidence. They all have different disabilities which put them into different classifications. It's easy to look at the other athletes and say to yourself, 'I can never be as good as these guys.' It all comes down to helping them find a way to do their best."

The games cover a wide array of sports, from swimming and cycling to track and archery. Maj. Charlie Toth, '01, is the men's assistant swim coach at the Academy, and this year he's helping to coach swimming for the Warrior program. "A lot of these athletes may have been recreational swimmers but none of them have ever really competed before. It's great to get back to some of the fundamentals of teaching people

how to swim. You can really see vast improvements from Monday when they show up for training camp until the Friday before the games."

Screams of encouragement fill the aquatic center at the Olympic Training Center as different heats of athletes dive into the water to swim for the finish. Cami Stock, Charlie Toth and James Bales all lend their support as their Air Force members charge through the pool. Toth says, "Both the attitudes and the competitiveness of these guys is just great. They all want to do great things, but it's kind of a sliding scale. We have athletes with spinal injuries who have no use of their legs; they just want to complete the 50 meter swim. Then we have others who want to compete and win medals. From the day they arrive in Colorado, they're all here to improve. It's great to win medals, but the idea behind the Warrior Games is to give these guys an avenue to compete; that drive doesn't go away just because there's an injury."

At yet another noisy venue on the other side of the Olympic Training Center the sitting volleyball

Left: Niki Marino, '02, talks strategy with the sitting volleyball team during a match. Capt. Dana Lyon, '06, gives a pep talk during shot-put.





From top: Jennifer Stone serves at a sitting volleyball match. Air Force's Jason Morgan rolls towards the finish in the 800m wheelchair race.

competitions take place. Men and women compete on the same team as the Air Force faces off against the Army, Marines and Special Operations Command. Niki Marino, '02, serves as the volleyball coach. "I discovered my love for coaching when I started coaching here at the Prep School as a lieutenant," she says. "Cami approached me last year about the Warrior Games, and at the time I didn't really know anything about sitting volleyball. I've known Cami for years and she's a great person. Pretty much anything she ever asks of me I'm willing to do. I was a little worried at first because I wasn't familiar with sitting volleyball. It turned out to be fairly easy to adapt my knowledge to the sport. From there it all comes down to finding how people's strengths can help the team."

Niki echoes the sentiments of all the other graduate coaches when she talks about her athletes. "What stands out most to me with these athletes is that there hasn't been a single complaint from any of them. They're more focused and committed than any other team I've ever coached."

With a host of inspiring accomplishments under their belts, the wounded warriors continue to show us that no challenge is too great for the human spirit to overcome. Through hard work and perseverance these athletes continue to celebrate the spirit of competition, serving as role models for service members the world over. "It's an absolute joy to work with these athletes," Cami exclaims. "Many have post traumatic stress syndrome or traumatic brain injuries and dealing with those issues is completely new for me. What's most important to me is how these men and women grow as people after they complete these games. They'll all face the same question: now what? I've become fit for this event, do I carry this through in my own life? Do I continue to grow as an athlete?"

Cami and her fellow graduate coaches are optimistic for the future. The Warrior Games are only in their second year, and already the fledgling program is garnering national attention. The stage is set for what will surely become one of the most successful programs in military history. "I'm hoping there will be more programs developed after the games that will help bridge the gaps so that these service members stay active and stay healthy year round," Cami says, filled with pride for her students.

As our wounded service members continue to come home from the war front, the Warrior Games will be waiting with their next challenge. The future will see no shortage of brave men and women who are ready to step onto the field and prove to the world that they can achieve anything, and that nothing will stand in the way of their undaunted triumph. ▣