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Recovery In Action



A retired Marine dives near Fort Lauderdale, Fla., with the Soldiers Undertaking Disabled Scuba (SUDS) program.



Sports rehabilitation programs help wounded warriors participate in life and overcome the mental consequences of a traumatic injury. ■ By Deborah Huso

LANCE CPL. MATIAS FERREIRA, USMC (RET), was on his first deployment to Musa Qala, Afghanistan, when his life changed forever. While helping to do a routine patrol Jan. 21, 2011, in the process of moving a forward operating base, he jumped off the roof of a compound and landed on a 30-pound IED. The bomb shattered his femur, broke his pelvis, and severed both of his legs below the knee.

His men got him into a helicopter within 25 to 30 minutes, and he received emergency blood transfusions. Within a few days, he was back in the States at what is now Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., and spent the next year and a half in rehabilitation. After spending three months doing occupational therapy to strengthen his core and regain stamina, Ferreira learned to walk and run with the use of prosthetics. He played wheelchair basketball and volleyball and engaged in track and field activities, demonstrating right away his motivation to get his life back.

Today, Ferreira is a member of the Wounded Warrior Amputee Softball Team, which travels the country playing able-bodied teams. He jumped into any sport he could. "It wasn't until after I was injured that I started doing a lot of things," he says.

When his friend Matthew White, a single below-the-knee amputee of the 82nd Airborne, told him about Soldiers Undertaking Disabled Scuba (SUDS), he was game. But after he went to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., to train in the program designed to certify wounded warriors as scuba divers, Ferreira says, "I pretty soon realized it wasn't going

to be just another check in the box. I fell in love with it."

Undersea rehabilitation

SUDS' founder started the program by happenstance. Diving instructor John Thompson, who served in the Colorado Army National Guard from 1985 to 1992, first met wounded veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan while visiting his wife, who worked at Walter Reed. "Being at Walter Reed hit me hard,"

Thompson says,

(above) A member of the Wounded Warrior Amputee Softball Team sprints across the field. **(below)** Soldiers in the SUDS program swim alongside dolphins near Curaçao.



“seeing all those severely injured young men and women.”

He went to the hospital’s American Red Cross office and asked about volunteering in their aquatic therapy program. It was then he got the idea to teach scuba to severely wounded veterans, and he held his first class in 2007. “I wanted to see if I could use scuba diving to promote rehabilitation,” he says. Fortunately, he got the green light from Walter Reed. “I’d been diving 20 years,” Thompson explains. “I knew that being in the water in a weightless environment meant that [wounded warriors] could maneuver just as well as anybody else.”

It wasn’t long before Thompson began taking wounded veterans out on the water to get scuba certified. Most of the men and women with whom he works are amputees. “One thing that’s great about diving is that you don’t have to make a lot of adaptations,” he says. “Buoyancy compensators make it possible to

Active Recovery

These resources can link wounded veterans with active, uplifting experiences to aid in their physical and emotional rehabilitation.

- Military Adaptive Sports Program, <http://warriorcare.dodlive.mil/wounded-warrior-resources/athletic-reconditioning>
- Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, (866) 251-7252, www.projecthealingwaters.org
- Salute Military Golf Association, www.smga.org
- Soldier Ride, Wounded Warrior Project, www.woundedwarriorproject.org/programs/soldier-ride.aspx
- Soldiers Undertaking Disabled Scuba, (202) 341-9750, www.sudsdiving.org
- U.S. Paralympics, www.teamusa.org/us-paralympics/military
- Warfighter Sports, Disabled Sports USA, (301) 217-0960, www.disabledsportsusa.org/programs/warfighter-sports
- Warrior Games, <http://warriorcare.dodlive.mil/tag/warrior-games>

shift weights, and web gloves and prosthetic swim legs help amputees move in the water.”

Since SUDS’ founding, Thompson has trained about 400 veterans, and some, like Ferreira, really have taken to the sport. (Ferreira has both open-water and advanced open-water certifications and is working on his rescue diver certification.) SUDS covers all expenses. “It’s not just a one-time deal,” Thompson says. “If they want to continue on and get higher certifications, we train them.” SUDS receives funding through donations as well as grants from the Combined Federal Campaign and Disabled Sports USA.

Thompson says the program typically has 10 dive trips a year to places as far-flung as Rincón, Puerto Rico, and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. “We get a number of folks who are just four months off the battlefield,” Thompson says. “They can be in a pretty dark place, but it only takes about four weeks to get them into a beautiful setting to get scuba certified.”

Myriad programs across the country offer sports rehabilitation to get

wounded warriors out of hospital beds and back participating in life.

Interaction on the links

Former PGA Tour player Jim Estes came up with the idea for the Salute Military Golf Association (SMGA) in 2007, after a Vietnam veteran and former helicopter pilot invited him to take wounded warriors from then-Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Bethesda Naval Hospital out on the green with him. “A lot of them were in desperate situations,” Estes says. “They were looking for things to do.”

So Estes decided to start a golf clinic for veterans undergoing long-term rehabilitation. He raised \$30,000 through his first fundraiser to give veterans free lessons and had six soldiers attend his first clinic. Most of the 1,500 veterans who have participated in SMGA are amputees and those overcoming brain injuries.

“Before we start lessons, we do a physical assessment on what parts of the body they can use to make the swing,” Estes explains. Amputees can compensate for lost limbs using a three-wheeled vehicle. Special gloves help those with missing fingers or nerve damage to grip the clubs better. [CONTINUES ON PAGE 90]



The Salute Military Golf Association teaches wounded warriors how to play golf.

PHOTOS: ABOVE, COURTESY SALUTE MILITARY GOLF ASSOCIATION; FACING PAGE, LEFT, COURTESY SOLDIERS UNDERTAKING DISABLED SCUBA; ABOVE LEFT, COURTESY WOUNDED WARRIOR AMPUTEE SOFTBALL TEAM