



Part II "GET THE HELL OUTTA MY ROOM"

Part I "Allah be with you"

Part II "Get the hell out of my room"

Part III "That game's for sissies"

Part IV "His head was the size of a basketball"

By **William Nack**, Special to ESPN.com

What so many in this band of wounded brothers have in common -- aside from the absence of self-pity and their resolve to live a "normal life" again -- is not only that they escaped death, which is miracle enough given what they went through, but also that they've since come back to begin a vibrant, active life anew.

The experiences of two Army veterans, Lt. Steven Rice, 24, and Sgt. Chris Schneider, 29, represent a kind of clinic -- showcased by Disabled Sports USA -- on how sports can work as a transforming mechanism in the process of rehabilitating wounded soldiers and as healing therapy for their psychological as well as physical problems.

On Dec. 27, 2003, Rice and his men were on a reconnaissance patrol when he got a call that a unit of American troops had come under fire and needed help. Rushing to provide support, Rice nearly was blown away in the explosion of a 155mm shell buried on the roadside. "Someone was sitting on the overpass and watching me," Rice says. "He probably saw that I was in charge and set it off with a cell phone."

"THE SHRAPNEL HAD SPUN THROUGH MY ANKLE AND RIPPED OUT THOSE VITAL BALL-AND-SOCKET JOINTS IN THE FOOT AND BLEW OFF MY BIG TOE."

Sprawled on the ground, he implored his men to get him to a hospital. "The shrapnel had spun through my ankle and ripped out those vital ball-and-socket joints in the foot and blew off my big toe," Rice says. "It had to be sewn back on."

Doctors managed to save Rice's foot, but the injury left him in intense pain and in a constant state of surgical recovery; in all, he endured 18 operations to save the foot. While Rice was at Walter Reed, Kirk Bauer of Disabled Sports USA visited him and declared, "This may seem bad now, but I'm gonna have you up and skiing in a couple of months."

"Get the hell outta my room," Rice demanded.

Michael Temchine
Special to ESPN.com



It took a while for Steven Rice to warm up to Kirk Bauer and the idea of using Disabled Sports USA.

Schneider arrived at Reed not long after Rice. Seventeen days after the lieutenant went down, Schneider was riding in a 2½-ton cargo truck, on a narrow, two-lane road some 45 miles northeast of Baghdad, when the truck's head-on crash with another truck catapulted him about 120 feet through the air.

A heavy equipment tractor-trailer, weighing some 100 tons, plunged off the road to avoid the accident and roared to a dusty stop on the soft desert sand. Two of its giant tires crushed Schneider's left hip, breaking it in two places and pinching off the nerves. He could feel nothing.

Looking up, though, he could see everything: the iron bottom of the giant truck, which was carrying an M-88 tank recovery vehicle on its bed; his left leg caught between a pair of dual tires and bleeding profusely; and, suddenly, a Special Forces medic, the man who would save his life, sprinkling a blood-clotting powder on the wound.

As soldiers tried to dig Schneider out, his blood pressure dropped so quickly the medic could not find a vein to take the IV. The wounded soldier was too unstable for morphine. The medic couldn't apply a tourniquet because the gushing wound was wedged between the tires. "It opened my leg like a banana. It turned everything but the bones to pulp," Schneider says. "So for 20 minutes, all I had was that medic and his QuikClot."

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By the time they got him to a hospital, he was nearly dead. After Schneider flatlined twice, doctors never expected him to wake up from his surgery. When he survived that, they did not think he would survive the flight to Germany, let alone the long trip to Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. "Fortunately, I survived them all," Schneider says. The doctors finally stabilized him at Reed, but when he awoke two weeks after the accident, he learned from his wife, Cassandra -- the mother of their two small children, Eli and Talia -- that his leg was gone.

"It was a shock," he says. "Then I started thinking about it. How is this going to affect my life? What am I gonna do?"

So there, at Walter Reed, Rice and Schneider began battling two altogether different feelings: Schneider slipped into depression; Rice did not.

His injured foot mangled and in constant pain, and unable to run or even cycle without the throbbing hurt, Rice grew too angry to be depressed. He had been an active runner and soccer player. He had been a black belt instructor in a Korean martial art, hapkido. Sports had always been a part of Rice's life, as they had been for the golfing Schneider.

"ALL THOSE THINGS I WANTED TO DO, THOSE THINGS I'D BEEN DOING ALL MY LIFE, THEY VANISHED RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME."

"All those things I wanted to do, those things I'd been doing all my life, they vanished right in front of me," Rice says. "I didn't realize how angry I was. My family told me I was upset and pissed off at the world. I didn't understand that until I finally had the foot amputated."

It was a year after that hidden artillery round had mangled his foot in Iraq that Rice finally gave up on more surgeries and decided to have it cut off, vowing to himself: "This is what we're gonna do and not look back."

Michael Temchine
Special to ESPN.com



Since finding the outlet of sports, Steven Rice has regained his sense of humor.

The anger, along with the pain, suddenly vanished. So Bauer came around again and told Rice, "I think you're ready now."

The next few months completely changed the direction of Rice's life. Six weeks after the final surgery, Bauer's group whisked him off to a skiing event. Supported through corporate and private donations -- no government money is involved -- Disabled Sports USA picked up all the expenses for lodging and travel, then pointed Rice down a steep hill. He soon found himself kayaking on the Potomac, then later cycling in Colorado in a 500-mile race to raise money for a sister organization, the Wounded Warrior Project.

Just as Rice got over his anger, sports raised Schneider from his depression. Not long after Bauer had stopped by to see him at Walter Reed, Schneider was flying out to a sports clinic in Long Beach, Calif., where instructors prodded and pushed him to try all events. It was May 2004, four months after he flatlined twice, and his body was still weak as it recovered from the trauma. "I had no clue how many things I'd be able to do," Schneider says. "I was still very new on the prosthetic."

And not all that confident on it -- until, that is, he got swept up in the energy of the thing and began to try everything. He climbed rocks. He scuba dived. He bicycled. He paddled the outrigger canoe. Schneider felt liberated, unshackled from his disability.

"It was amazing," he says. "The hardest thing for me to do was the water-skiing. I refused to do it on anything other than my one leg. I didn't want to go out on one of those sitting skis."

It was, he says, a matter of pride.

Michael Temchine
Special to ESPN.com



Spec. Richard Ingram, right, and Sgt. Tim Gustafson paddle the double-hulled "Wounded Warrior" to shore. The Kent Island Outrigger Canoe Club helps Disabled Sports USA to train disabled veterans in the sport of outrigger canoeing.

Schneider figures he spent 25 minutes repeatedly falling off that one ski. He quickly grew exhausted, so tired and weak after falling the second time that he did not think he could go on. At his instructors' urging, he persevered. "I won't say I mastered it, but I got up for 30 seconds and water-skied," Schneider says. "It's completely different having only one leg to do it. You don't have that second foot to keep your ski straight or to get your balance on. I pushed myself past limits that I thought I was not going to be able to get past."

Finding those limits and stretching them are the constant challenges offered, physically and psychologically, in the arenas of sport. Disabled servicemen, in particular, cherish and value those challenges on their roads back.

"Going out there and doing those events is physical therapy in itself because of the exertion and attention you have to put into it," Schneider says. "It is also psychologically fulfilling because you're finding where your limits are and finding if you can get past them. It [sports] gives you barriers. It's like climbing a mountain. Your goal is to climb it and see the other side. Once you get there, it's a physical and psychological high. It gives you a sense of elation knowing that you've conquered a doubt in your mind."

Rice sees the rehab process as just another branch on a much larger tree, one familiar to all.

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A picturesque day near Kent Island is a welcome respite for disabled soldiers on Chesapeake Bay.

"Life is all about coping skills and how you get through hard times," he says. "Instead of sitting at the hospital and not going through physical therapy -- instead of saying 'Woe is me. Woe is me. My life is gonna end.' -- I decided to go the other way. I got up on my prosthetic as soon as possible and I pushed it and I pushed it to the limit.

"You've gotta get out in the sunshine and go out on a cold January day and go flying down the side of a mountain. That makes you feel good. It wakes you up. It lets you know that you're alive. It lets you know there's more than this limb that's hanging off your body.

"It says to you: I can still do things!"

William Nack, a former writer for Sports Illustrated, is a contributor to ESPN.com.

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