

My Journey

By 2012 Paralympic Hopeful Eric Hollen

Editor's Note: Welcome to the new Paralympic section of the magazine. Over the next few issues, expect to learn about the history, equipment, events and amazing athletes of the Paralympic side of USA Shooting. Paralympic athletes embody the true spirit of sportsmanship, athletic competition and triumph over tragedy. There are currently six athletes on the National Paralympic Team—Mike Dickey, Danielle Fong, Eric Hollen, Kisha Makerney, Tom Monto and Josh Olson. You will learn more about each in the upcoming issues, but for check out their biographies on www.usashooting.org. As with all National Team members, I sent biography forms to our four Paralympic athletes. The below is an excerpt from Eric Hollen's biography that caught my attention. This piece evokes strong passion for the sport Hollen loves, and how he used shooting, coupled with academics, as a vehicle for recovery and creating the amazing person Hollen is today. Enjoy!

When I got hurt, I had to go through the five stages of grief: anger, denial, bargaining, depression and acceptance in order to complete my mental recovery process. My entire recovery took about 18 months. I worked hard because I wanted to get myself back to the guy I was prior to the bone shattering moment that broke my body. I had never had a physical limitation before in my life, so I thought, "okay, I'll just train my way out of this." You have to understand I was psychologically focused on my physical ability.

I was six feet and four inches, weighed 230 pounds and had no physical limitations. When I pushed on something, it usually moved—I liked that. My accident changed everything, for the first time in my life I was physically and emotionally broken. I was shattered, devastated and truly broken. As a Special Operations Army Ranger, I had been scared before, but there is a difference between being scared and being afraid. And that was the first time in my life that I was truly afraid. In the line of duty, there are numerous times that you feel adrenaline dump and a little pit in your stomach that heightens your awareness, but it's all about performance and action. But to feel afraid is different and that fear is paralyzing. It causes mental impairment and creates an inability to act. I was mentally and physically paralyzed.

I did not dwell on the negative aspects of my injury, that's not to say that I did not cry in the shower when my legs were shrinking. I did not realize at that time my injury was going to provide me with a new chance at life. Maybe I was not going to be able to live my life as I had planned, but when does life ever go as planned? I trained for 18 months to get

better—my sole focus was to regain my ability that I had prior to my catastrophic life-changing injury. Yes I was in denial, but you have to understand that I had been trained to work through adversity to never accept defeat and to fight through to complete the mission at all cost.

I used that mindset to cope. I wanted to get my legs working, so I used the skill sets that I had been trained to develop—mental and physical strength. For the first time in my life all the focused determination that led to success in the past was not working. My body was damaged past the point of my ability to fix it through training, so I was moving into acceptance of my new paradigm. I don't mean to say that this is the most devastating injury ever faced in the world of injury, but it's my injury. This journey was the path that I had to travel.

School and shooting became my new focus. Well maybe not so much school, but definitely shooting. Just kidding, school was providing me with a voice and the ability to focus my thoughts toward a new goal. I want to help newly injured Veterans find success through injury—school will provide the avenue to reach that goal. Sport is way more fun, and has provided me with a deeper sense of self and clarity of purpose. To me the sport of shooting helps me live in the moment.

There comes a peace during practice where all the everyday distractions fade—all the blunders made, failures past, accidents, injuries and nerve pain all are momentarily gone. The sights become clear and the focus is on total performance of function; the task at hand is complete and overpowering—all effort is maximized on the shot. I am totally

committed to the moment, and understanding that this is what it takes to reach the next level. This is what it means to be an Olympian and this is how I live my life—with complete dedication to those dear to me. To some this may be extreme, but life is for living and maximizing opportunities.

To me, the concept of wearing "USA" on my back in the Paralympic Games in 2012 means that I have found my way through the fear factor. I have found a new sense of self and I have leveled the playing field from Special Operations soldier to Paralympic athlete. I have eclipsed all previous expectations of who I wanted to be and created a new pinnacle that exceeded all previous achievements and I did it without the use of my legs. My worst case scenario has become a vehicle of opportunity that I could not have ever reached without the devastating loss that had to occur. The darkest moment did not last, and I found the light at the end of the tunnel through academics and athletics.

