

Leaving the pain behind

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Iraq vets find Hope & Possibility in 5-mile race

THE ACHILLES Track Club will sponsor the third annual "Hope and Possibility Race" today, when more than 2,500 runners suffering from various types of disabilities tackle a five-mile course through Central Park. This year, approximately 90 veterans of the war in Iraq — about 45 each from the Walter Reed Medical Center and the Naval Medical Center San Diego — will walk, run or use a hand-crank bicycle to negotiate the course. Some have lost limbs, while others are recovering from head injuries and vision and hearing impairments. The Daily News spoke with several of the war veterans before their first competitive event since sustaining their injuries.

Last Sept. 17, Lance Corporal Nathan Borquez's 20th birthday began with a 4 a.m. mounted patrol near the Abu Ghraib prison west of Baghdad, his unit (3rd Battalion, 1st Marines) responding to insurgent activity.

Moments into the dawn exercise, Lcpl. Borquez's Humvee struck a roadside bomb and the Phoenix, Ariz. native was nearly knocked unconscious taking shrapnel to the back of his head. He would recover quickly enough to return to his unit within a few days.

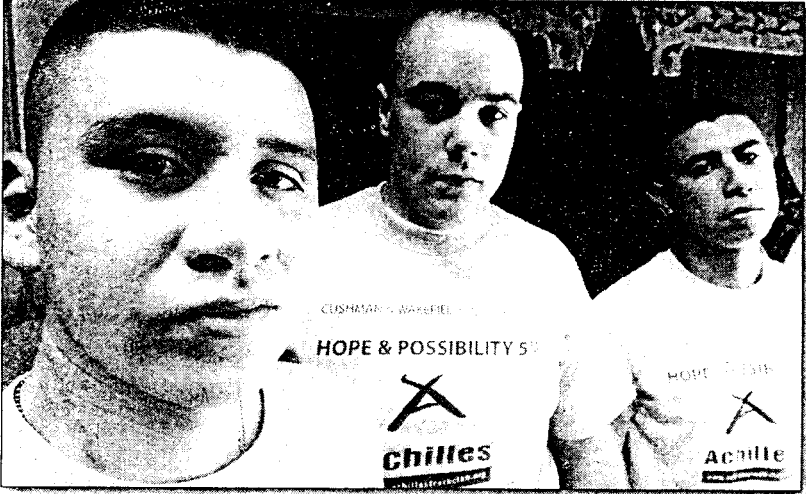
But just over a month later in an eerily similar incident, Borquez's Marine career came to a premature end.

"The second time, I was in the gun turret operating a 240 Gulf machine gun on a seven-ton truck, just outside Fallujah," he says. "The vehicle struck an IED (improvised explosive device) again and that time I caught a fragment to the side of the head. I was knocked out and don't remember anything. My helmet saved me both times."

Lcpl. Borquez was diagnosed with a severe concussion and eight months after the accident still suffers from vertigo, memory loss, hearing problems and migraines. He says once he fully recovers, he hopes to become a police officer in Phocnix.

"It's hard to keep balance walking," he says. "I'm doing a lot of physical therapy, but they tell me it'll take about a year or two for the head injury to heal."

He says that today's race "will probably be pretty challenging. I'm going to walk it. I've just got to try whatever I can. I'm anxious to see how I do."



Lance Corporals Hector Arredondo (l), William Stevens and Nate Borquez will all participate in today's race.

A month into his deployment, Lance Corporal Hector Arredondo — also 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines — was on a nighttime foot patrol near Fallujah when a mortar round exploded "five or six feet in front" of him.

"I really couldn't move — I remember being in a lot of pain and dazed," says the 20-year-old Terra Bella, Calif. native who enlisted in the Marines straight out of high school. "I caught debris in my left hand, right shoulder and my neck. I also thought I broke my ribs because I had trouble breathing."

Another corporal came to Arredondo's aid and he was quickly Medevac-ed to a MASH unit. Lcpl. Arredondo had in fact suffered a collapsed right lung in addition to the lacerations. "I lost a lot of blood," he says. "I still have limited range of motion in my hand and the nerves in my shoulder are screwed. I'm not going to get them back."

Adds Arredondo: "I want to

stay in law enforcement, maybe a corrections officer. "But I wouldn't change my (war) experience for anything — except for getting hurt."

Lance Corporal William Stevens now wears a prosthetic where the front half of his right foot used to be. But the 21-year-old only child from Ashland, Ky. says he has no regrets or bitterness since that early-morning fire fight with Iranian, Syrian and Saudi Arabian insurgents holed up in a Kufa police station south of Baghdad.

"My unit (1st Battalion, 4th Marines) wants me back. I'd love to go back if I could. Everybody I was with, the morale was real high," he says. "Both my granddads were in the military. One fought in Korea and World War II and the other in Korea only. They support it. They'd rather take the fight to them and that's pretty much the way I feel."

Lcpl. Stevens' foot was pierced with a bullet that ricocheted off the ground during a two-hour battle outside the station.

"It was a fireworks show, RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades), gunshots — I happened to catch one in the foot and it hit one of the main arteries. The hole was four inches long and two inches wide," he says.

The injury was so severe, doctors told Lcpl. Stevens that amputation was the only option. After a year of being limited to mostly a stationary bike, Lcpl. Stevens says he is ready to attempt a greater milestone.

"I still have trouble keeping balance," he says. "But I'm going to try to run (today)."

Not all the runners suffered their injuries in the Iraq War.

Rosemary Salak served 23 years in the Army as an organizational liaison to commanders and never had so much as a scratch. But in January, the 50-year-old mother of three was involved in what she calls a "minor fender bender" on a snowy road in Alexandria, Va. "I got out of my car to exchange insurance information with the other person

and another car rammed his car," she says. "I got caught right under the bumper of his car. The tibia and fibula broke completely through my skin. I had seven surgeries in two weeks but so much tissue died they had to amputate."

Salak is now fitted with a plastic prosthetic leg, but it hasn't stopped her from leading an active life. She will participate in today's race using a hand-crank cycle. Salak volunteers at Walter Reed, talking with veterans of the war in Iraq and helping them cope with similar injuries. "They're an inspiration to so many people," she says of the veterans.

John Keith appreciated Salak's efforts. The 38-year-old father of two was a medic with

the Army's 1st Cavalry Division until Nov. 9, when the Humvee he was riding in suffered a direct hit from an RPG. "It was a compression blast, so the impact was so strong it shattered all the bones in my left leg," he says. "But if you get down, the healing process is a lot longer."

Sgt. Keith will use a hand-crank cycle today, too. "I can walk, but it's not pretty," he says.

Sergeant Orlando Gill bleeds pinstripes — always has, a ways will. And while the Bronx native can't wait to see another chapter of the Subway Series against the hated Mets tonight, Gill will take a break from the baseball talk to carve out a unique chapter of his own.

Last Oct. 2, Sgt. Gill was on patrol in the western corridor of the Sunni Triangle with the Army's Second Infantry Division — "not one of the safest areas" — when his right leg took a "direct hit" from a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG). The 32-year-old divorced father of one never blacked out after the explosion, but knew his life was irrevocably changed.

"The tibia and fibula were completely shattered. All the nerves were damaged. I would have been surprised if doctor said they could have saved it," says Sgt. Gill, sporting a Yankee's cap and No. 11 pinstripe jersey. "They took the leg of me in Baghdad — four inches below the knee."

But after months of rehab at Walter Reed, Gill has never looked back.

"My belief in life is that if you don't get challenged, you're dead," he says. "And I don't concentrate on the what ifs. I think about what will be."

Sgt. Gill will attempt to complete today's five-mile course in his special hand-crank cycle. Down the road, he hopes to "reclass into the medical field" and help other wounded veterans like himself.

"The best morale we have is what we can share with other soldiers," he says. "If soldiers come in hurt, what better way to keep them positive than to tell them they can."



Sgt. John Keith, an army medic, had his leg shattered after the Humvee he was riding in took a direct hit from an RPG.



LTC (Ret.) Rosemary Salak (with sons Jason, 18, and Matthew, 13) will run in Hope and Possibility Race.

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