

Overcoming Obstacles

Veterans use endurance and obstacle-course challenges to help combat PTSD

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When Seth Napel returned from Afghanistan, he realized he was “going to have a hard time adjusting to civilian life.”

“I was on this euphoria coming off deployment, and it was not jiving with how the rest of the world worked,” said Napel, who served from 2009-10 in Mazar-I-Sharif, Afghanistan, with the 2nd Bn., 121st Inf. Regt., of the Georgia National Guard as a radio operator.



Seth Napel, a member of VFW Post 2521 in Santa Maria, Calif., uses endurance events and obstacle-course races to combat PTSD. He's currently preparing for a 30-hour obstacle-course event in April by competing in Spartan Races (shown) and GORUCK challenges.

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At his most isolated, Napel said, he drank more than “a case of beer in excess” per day. His neighbors eventually told him he had “been sitting on the back porch for about three months drinking beer and staring at the trees.”

“You don’t really realize how far you’ve gone down the hole till someone comes over [and tells you],” said Napel, who was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder in 2011.

He thought it was time for a change, but didn’t know where to start. So he cut back his alcohol intake, reduced his medications and started working out, losing 30 pounds in about three months. He said he felt like he was “still a soldier” and could live a “healthy, productive life.”

By Memorial Day 2015, Napel had competed in his first GORUCK event, an obstacle-course team challenge inspired by Special Forces training. It takes teams through a 7- to 10-mile, obstacle-filled course that can take more than 24 hours to complete, depending on the level of difficulty.

Participating in such events gave Napel “something to strive for.”

“[It’s] very much like trying to get a promotion in the military,” Napel said. “It’s built my confidence back up, being able to stay in shape, do the pushups... It’s really changed my mindset into making healthy choices.”

While Napel has refrained from alcohol and smoking, he said the “biggest perk” has been the people he meets.

“It’s really cracked me out of my shell,” Napel said.

A 2014 State of the Sport report on non-traditional running events, released by Running USA, states that obstacle races attract “those athletes who are looking for a new challenge to display their strength and skill.” It also states that trust and friendship are key components of such races.

“Many non-traditional running events are packed with an adrenaline rush, an appeal of camaraderie and a sense of accomplishment,” the report states. “Some weekend events attract as many as 25,000 participants and often look less like a running event and more like Woodstock re-invented.”

A lot of the characteristics Napel sees in “this civilian arena” echo the camaraderie he felt in the military. And that feeling knows no barriers — there are male and female competitors, ranging from athletic runners to “musclebound guys.”

Napel, a member of VFW Post 2521 in Santa Maria, Calif., said this passion did not begin with the goal of completing a GORUCK. The “real allure” came from his girlfriend, Bonnie, who mentioned that her brother was participating in a SISU Iron challenge. SISU is a Finnish word similar to those of determination, resilience and bravery.

SISU Iron is a 30-hour obstacle-course event held at San Gabriel Mountains in the Angeles National Forest, in Monrovia, Calif., that begins on a Friday night and ends Sunday morning.

Matt Trinca, co-founder of SISU Iron, said the event, first held in 2012, initially formed as a way for people to train for the now-defunct Spartan Death Race and evolved into its own challenge course.

“We want people to accomplish something really great and leave with a feeling that they did something that was outside of their comfort zone,” Trinca said, “and we wanted to be accessible to people of all different levels.”

Napel was told to start with GORUCK, Spartan races and half marathons, and he’s using those events as the “big build-up” to the April 2017 SISU Iron. Obstacle races and challenges, according to Napel, are “almost a metaphor for life itself, the adversities we go through.”

“You really push yourself to your physical limits, but you also have to rely on a lot of the leadership and Army values that you’ve learned to use when you were in the military,” Napel said.

There are roughly 75 SISU Iron attendees each year, and they also participate in community service. As it has grown, Trinca said the obstacles have become more challenging. But part of the SISU Iron goal is to disorient participants — hence the evening start time — and force them out of their comfort zone.

“It’s really intimidating, so it also forces you to bond closely with the people that you’re participating in this event with,” Trinca said. “You have to rely on them a lot for comfort and help.”

Bravo Co., a group that assists veterans, had about 10 people participate in the 2016 SISU Iron. Bravo Co., which stands for Bringing Resources and Activities to Veterans Operation, began as an obstacle-course racing team designed to help veterans, active-duty military and their families. It has evolved into a fundraising effort to help veterans attend these types of events and combat PTSD.

Trinca said a lot of athletes use events such as SISU Iron to help them manage PTSD.

“For them, this is part of their recovery, them taking control of their life, making themselves more resilient and develop[ing] coping mechanisms for when they’re stressed out,” Trinca said. “It is kind of taking yourself out of your comfort zone on purpose.”

An April 2012 study from the Journal of Exercise Physiology online states that “many individuals feel gratification in learning to train and compete in new ways, in completing challenging obstacle courses, and in experiencing the exhilarating sensations associated with such tasks as running fast over rugged terrain, climbing over high barriers, traversing narrow platforms and slogging through mud.”

Rose Wetzel, a professional obstacle-course racer, has been involved with Bravo Co. for about one year.

Since then, Wetzel, whose father served with the Marines during the Korean War, has worked to promote Bravo Co. and educate people about its mission. Coming from a family with a history of mental illnesses and veterans, Wetzel said she was “really drawn” to the

organization's efforts to help veterans and reduce stigmas surrounding mental health.

"I want to make sure people are taken care of when they come back," Wetzel said.

Though she has yet to compete with Bravo Co. veterans, when she sees them at races, she cheers them on.

Trinca said roughly a half-dozen people with some form of military background participate in SISU Iron every year, and the competition also employs veterans. He has seen SISU Iron build resiliency and expand a person's comfort zone.

"With every hour that passes that you're still in the race, that's another milestone for a lot of these people," Trinca said.

A lot of veteran participants have probably been in similar scenarios, according to Trinca, but SISU Iron brings them into the fold in "a safe environment" and into a community of people they can identify with.

"They kind of long for this camaraderie that they felt in the military," Trinca said, "and when you leave the military, it's kind of a shock transitioning to the civilian world."

Simply being at the SISU Iron event is "a big high," according to Trinca, because of seeing people push themselves beyond their limits.

"The event is just a stone in the lake, but it's going to ripple and going to have a lot of ripple effects around these people's lives," Trinca said.

Napel, who has been sober for nearly three years, also stopped smoking at the same time.

As he continues to prepare for the SISU Iron in April, he will begin studying kinesiology at Cuesta College in San Luis Obispo, Calif. He also wants to start helping others.

“I got a lot of help along the way,” Napel said. “It was a great monumental task from an entire village.”

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