

At 25 years old, Challenged Athletes is still changing lives

By Pam Kragen

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SAN DIEGO — When Dani Burt woke up from a 45-day coma in 2004 to discover most of her right leg had been amputated after a motorcycle crash, she was so despondent the hospital put her on suicide watch.

“It was the worst emotions all at once,” she said.

Four weeks later, the clouds lifted when a stranger showed up at her bedside at Sharp Memorial Rehabilitation Center.

Clint Mabry, then a program manager for the Challenged Athletes Foundation, lost his right leg in a crash. He told the 19-year-old Burt that the San Diego nonprofit could support her recovery through adaptive sports grants.

“He was showing me pictures of amputees in triathlons, running, biking and swimming,” she said. “Back then, it was really hard getting control of all the negative thoughts in my mind about growing up in a society where there’s a preconceived notion about what it means to have a disability.

Seeing people more athletic than I had been with two legs was important for me.”

Today, Burt is the reigning women’s ISA World Adaptive Surfing Champion and the world’s first known female above-the-knee amputee surfer.

She is a doctor of physical therapy at Sharp Memorial in north San Diego, where she works with injured and amputee patients in the same place she rehabbed 14 years ago.

Now 34, Burt lives just south of the hospital with her wife of one year, Cuylla Coogan. She said without Challenged Athletes, she would never have developed the confidence and athleticism to persevere through school and learn to surf at an international level.

“Sports gives me so much,” she said. “It made me stronger, improved my balance



Dani Burt heads toward the water before the sun was up. Burt, who lost her leg above the knee in a 2004 motorcycle accident, is the first known female above-the-knee amputee surfer in the world.

John Gibbins/San Diego Union-Tribune via TNS

and endurance and it taught me I can always find a way to make things possible.”

Burt is one of more than 200 disabled athletes from around the country that participated in Challenged Athletes’ 25th anniversary celebration that ran Oct. 13-21. The fundraising events associated with the anniversary raised \$3.2 million.

Since the first Tri Challenge in 1994, CAF has raised more than \$100 million for 23,000 individual grants to individuals like Burt for adaptive sports equipment, training and competition expenses.

That’s not bad for a grassroots group started by three San Diego triathlon enthusiasts — Bob Babbitt, Jeffrey Essakow and Rick Kozlowski — who were looking to do a onetime favor for a friend.

In 1992, Jim MacLaren, a below-the-knee amputee, made headlines by finishing the Ironman World Championship in 10 hours, 42 minutes. A year later, he was rendered quadriplegic when a car struck his bike during an Orange County triathlon. MacLaren needed \$25,000 for a hand-controlled van, so the trio organized the 1994 Tri Challenge to raise it.

At the time, Babbitt was the publisher of Competitor Magazine, Essakow was an accountant for triathlete Scott Tinley’s sportswear company and Kozlowski had started his now-long-established special events firm Koz Events.

The race raised \$49,000 and attracted able-bodied athletes like Tinley and a handful of women amputees

who had been inspired to compete by MacLaren.

Babbitt said the women surprised the trio when they told them insurance companies won’t pay for adaptive sports equipment, so they decided to start the Challenged Athletes Foundation.

“At the time, charity was Sally Struthers on late-night TV saying, ‘Please help these poor people,’ to sad violin music,” Babbitt said. “Coming from Competitor, I knew we had the opportunity to change the equation.”

CAF’s first star athlete was grade-schooler Rudy Garcia-Tolson, who lost both legs to a genetic disorder at age 5. Babbitt said his portrait, shot in a hero pose at Crown Point, told the viewer: “Don’t feel sorry for me. Give me a piece of equipment and I’ll take you down.”

Now 30, Garcia-Tolson is a four-time Paralympian.

Virginia Tinley, who is Scott’s wife and a marathon runner herself, came onboard as CAF’s first paid employee in 1998. As executive director and senior director of philanthropy, she oversees a \$10 million annual budget and a staff of 26.

“We started from the humblest of beginnings,” she said. “But over the last 25 years we’ve become the only organization in the world that funds the vast number of (adaptive) sports that we do.”

Last year alone, CAF distributed \$4.3 million in 2,806 grants worldwide for athletes ages 5 to 83 in 95 sports. This included grants for racing wheelchairs, beeping baseballs, running prosthetics, hand cycles and adaptive

bikes, as well as competition training, travel and fees.

Another 372 grants totaling nearly \$510,000 went to veterans, military personnel and first responders through its Operation Rebound program. It presented camps and clinics for more than 700 athletes nationwide, including several local camps through its 3-year-old Junior Seau Foundation Youth Adaptive Surf Program.

Not all grantees aspire to compete at the international level like Burt and Garcia-Tolson.

Tinley said a major part of CAF’s mission is to give non-active people with disabilities a chance to try sports.

CAF is now working with the California Interscholastic Federation to encourage high school students with disabilities to get involved in school athletics.

The organization’s most beloved supporter was film star Robin Williams, who died in 2014.

For 11 years beginning in 1998, Williams raised money and awareness by competing in the Tri Challenge on “Team Braveheart” with Scott Tinley and Garcia-Tolson.

Babbitt, who sold Competitor years ago and now works for CAF as a vice president and ambassador, recently received the Jim MacLaren Award for his tireless dedication to the organization. MacLaren passed away in 2010.

Babbitt said he is humbled about receiving awards and the biggest reward for him is meeting athletes whose lives have been changed by CAF grants.

“I was at the Paralympics in Rio in 2016 and a woman came up to me in the lobby of my hotel and told me that eight years before we gave her son a grant for a running leg. The next night he would compete in the finals of the 200-meter. Seeing the joy of a child who gets that piece of equipment and then makes magic with it is the best part of my job.”

GUIDEBOOKS

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interested in. The challenge for local authors of fiction is a whole other animal,” Beans said. “If the ultimate goal is to sell copies, nonfiction is the much easier way to go,” Beans said. “No matter which subject you’re writing about, there’s someone out there interested. And in the case of guidebooks of Bend, there are a lot of people interested.”

A natural, local connection

Bend resident Lucas Alberg made signing a book deal look easy. Maybe that’s because he’s experienced in both professional writing and marketing. Alberg, 39, has worked as Hydro Flask’s public relations and communications manager since 2012. While visiting an outdoor trade show in Salt Lake City several years ago, Alberg introduced himself to employees staffing the booth

belonging to Wilderness Press, an outdoor publisher. The accomplished runner told them about his idea for a guidebook dedicated to Central Oregon trail running.

“There really (wasn’t) a one-stop resource for trail running here,” said Alberg, noting how unlikely that was given Bend’s robust running community. “I was running on all the trails anyway, and I’m also a math geek. I’ve always pored over maps, trying to find new routes to see what’s around the corner. I had exhausted all the trails.”

The Wilderness Press representatives were intrigued and told him to send a book proposal. Alberg returned to Bend and fired off the proposal he had already prepared with help from a friend who had written a few Northwest mountain biking guidebooks. For good measure, Alberg also sent it out to a couple other publish-

ers. Tim Jackson, the senior acquisitions editor at AdventureKEEN, which publishes the Wilderness Press imprint, received Alberg’s proposal. Jackson sifts through about 100 solicited and unsolicited submissions each year. He acquires about 12 to 15 new books. He also commissions 20 or so revisions of titles with enduring relevancy. Alberg’s proposal stood out, Jackson said. The nine-page document was “an example of the more professional, organized and very detailed outline we receive,” Jackson said, adding that Alberg’s previously published articles, most recently in Bend Magazine, spoke to his reliability and skill. Alberg also sent sample chapters, which detailed 6- to 8-mile loops at Smith Rock State Park, Whychus Canyon Preserve and the Big Obsidian Flow Trail.

“It was very nicely done,” Jackson said.

DEER

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back to town and go to work Monday.

Signals

Justin and I hunted again in the morning and this time did not see a single deer in the canyons.

We were back in the lower reaches of Swamp Creek by mid-morning when we spotted sage grouse.

Sage grouse, biologists like to tell us, are a bellwether bird. In an article by Courtney Flatt for Oregon Public Broadcasting, Flatt wrote: “Sage grouse are considered an indicator species; their health is indicative of the ecosystem’s bigger picture and the health of more than 350 other types of wildlife that live there.” True that.

I snapped pictures of sage grouse while the feathered forecasters legged it across the trail.

Aamodt was smart enough to look around.

“A buck!”

I dropped the camera and grabbed my rifle. Headed uphill through tall sage, the buck flickered in and out of view, now quartering away, and it was all I was going to see of him.

The three-position safety was all the way forward and three pounds of pressure broke the trigger.

We walked up the hill and Aamodt found it where one side of that rack jutted up through the sagebrush.

We guessed this buck’s age at 6 years, its weight at 250 pounds. Its antlers stretched the tape to 27 inches at the greatest spread. There were three points on one side and four on the other. One of the oldest deer we had seen in three days of hunting, it was not the buck we had been hunting, but it was the buck the sage grouse indicated to us. Who am I to argue with sage grouse?

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