

[Difference Maker](#)

Bryan Hoddle helps wounded vets run – and dream – again

He's more than a track coach: He's a counselor and a friend, listening to a life story.

By Gail Wood, Contributor / April 5, 2013



Track coach Bryan Hoddle (l.) runs with Steve Baskis, a blind Army veteran, at the 2013 Introduction to Paralympic Sports Camp at the Lakeshore Foundation in Homewood, Ala.

Bernard Troncale/Lakeshore Foundation

[Enlarge](#)

[Share on stumbleupon](#) [Share on email](#)

Olympia, Wash.

Strangely, this is where the inspiring transformation often begins – on a track.

It's here, with Bryan Hoddle coaching and shouting encouragement as a group of wounded soldiers begins to run, that something extraordinary occurs. These men, many in shorts and

running on high-tech prosthetics because they are missing one or both legs, begin to redefine who they are.

"They start to see themselves as athletes again," Mr. Hoddle says. "These guys, who have lost so much, start to think, 'Yeah, I can do this.' "

It's a special moment. And it's one that he has been part of for nearly a decade.

RECOMMENDED: [10 quotes from people who made a difference](#)

Since 2004, Hoddle, who once served as the head track coach for the [United States Paralympic Team](#), has helped soldiers wounded while fighting in the [Middle East](#) get their lives back by teaching them how to run again. He also teaches them how to cope and dream again.

A couple of times a year Hoddle visits either [Walter Reed](#) National Military Medical Center in [Washington, D.C.](#), or the Lakeshore Foundation in [Homewood, Ala.](#), to work with wounded vets. He figures he has spent time with more than 1,000 of them, helping them get their lives back.

"I do it because my grandfather was a soldier in World War II, and he is my hero," says Hoddle, a middle school history teacher in Tenino, Wash. "It's my way of honoring him. Plus, I love the military big time."

[Editor's note: Due to an editing error the original version of this story incorrectly identified the town where Mr. Hoddle teaches.]

On the last weekend of February, Hoddle, who lives in [Olympia, Wash.](#), flew to the Lakeshore Foundation to work with 24 wounded vets. The ambitions of these soldiers, coupled with increased government funding and huge improvements in prosthetics, have made sports a more prominent part of rehabilitation than in previous wars.

"Bryan gives a lot of them hope and helps them to see something they might not be able to see in themselves," says Mandy Goff, associate director of athletics and recreation at the Lakeshore Foundation. "We always ask him back because he has a high level of knowledge of track and field. He does a great job."

The whole premise of Lakeshore is that sports can make a big difference. "We love to see lives changed through sports," Ms. Goff says. "So does Bryan."

On his recent visit to Lakeshore, Hoddle told one soldier who lost his leg in a bomb blast in [Afghanistan](#) that he had the talent to make the US Paralympic Team.

"He was so shocked," Hoddle says. "He said, 'My life is about to change.' "

[Steve Martin](#) was blown out of a [Humvee](#) when it hit a roadside bomb in Afghanistan Sept. 24, 2008, and incurred severe injuries to both legs. Another soldier, who lost his left foot in the blast, shot and killed several [Taliban](#) insurgents, saving Mr. Martin's life.

In the next 14 months, Martin underwent 14 surgeries in an attempt to save his legs. Finally, realizing he'd never be able to walk, he underwent a double amputation below the knees.

"It was actually a very easy decision for me," Martin says. "I didn't want to be in a wheelchair the rest of my life. Don't get me wrong. I wish all this wouldn't have happened. But it wasn't a hard decision. I've moved on."

Martin was a speedy sprinter in high school, running the 400 meters event in 47 seconds. Later he played wide receiver on a junior college football team for a year before enlisting in the Army.

A year and a half after his amputation, Martin ran his first marathon. He's planning on running a half marathon with Hoddle, who has flown to Martin's home in [Arizona](#) several times to help him with his running form.

The two send texts back and forth, with Martin often wanting tips on training. "The guy really knows his stuff," Martin says. "He knows how to coach. He's been a huge help."

Eric Keller of [Ohio](#) can't remember a specific explosion that left him with a traumatic brain injury while serving in [Iraq](#) with the [Army's 1st Infantry Division](#) in 2004. But 17 months after coming home, he had a stroke at age 23 on Oct. 3, 2007, hospitalizing him and temporarily paralyzing his right leg.

"Before my stroke I was doing a couple hundred push-ups and sit-ups a day," Mr. Keller says. "And I was running."

Then suddenly he couldn't do anything. He was angry, Keller says. "But I decided I was going to run again."

Within a week, Keller was 98 percent recovered, and he soon began running. At Lakeshore, he met Hoddle.

"Bryan was a big help," Keller says. "We've stayed in contact. I'll call him, and we'll talk. We've become friends."

Danielle Green's reminders of war aren't just memories. There's also the prosthetic that has replaced her missing left arm, the one she used to call "Bread and Butter" when she played basketball at the [University of Notre Dame](#).

"Yeah, I lost my Bread and Butter," she says as she rubs her prosthetic. "But I'm here. I look at it that way. That I'm here. That puts it all in perspective."

Ms. Green's left arm was blown off by a rocket while she was providing security on a rooftop of a police station in [Baghdad](#). She's gone from athlete to soldier and now, she hopes, back to athlete again. Green came to Olympia to talk with Hoddle.

"It's about giving them hope," Hoddle says.

Hoddle started coaching Paralympic athletes in 1996, when he met Tony Volpentest, who was born without hands and feet. At the time, Mr. Volpentest was the Paralympic champion in the 100 and 200 meters. That eventually helped open the door for Hoddle to become the US Paralympics head track coach.

Hoddle made his first trip to [Walter Reed Army Medical Center](#) in September 2004, going there directly from the summer [Paralympics](#) in [Athens](#). He wasn't prepared for what he saw as he walked into a room to meet wounded vets.

"I see a soldier who has a head injury stacking wood blocks," Hoddle says. "Another guy sitting next to him doesn't have an arm and a leg. I remember stepping out of the room and thinking 'What am I getting myself into?' It overwhelmed me to see all of these guys and their injuries. Roadside bombs are brutal."

On that first trip, Hoddle made an important discovery about the role he could play. He wasn't just a coach, showing a former soldier how to run on a prosthetic. He was also a counselor, a friend listening to a life story.

"That's the one thing I've learned on my trips," Hoddle says. "I'm there to listen."

At the Lakeshore Foundation, which emphasizes the beneficial effect of physical activity on those with disabilities, Hoddle first meets the wounded vets he will be working with at a dinner.

"I spend most of my time just talking with guys," he says. "I'll get my food, and guys will come around. And by the end of my time there, I'll know almost everyone's story."

One of the first things Hoddle asks the veterans is whether they were involved in sports before they were injured. Typically, they had been. Hoddle then dangles the idea of competing in track, whether it's running or throwing the shot put or discus.

At Walter Reed, he met a soldier who had lost a leg and was a huge baseball fan. Hoddle gave him a Seattle Mariners baseball cap signed by one of the coaches.

RECOMMENDED: [10 quotes from people who made a difference](#)

"Before his injury, this guy could do a 360 [spin and] cradle dunk a basketball," Hoddle says. "He was a tremendous athlete. I watched him run, and I thought he could be a Paralympic gold medalist. He was special."

Hodde told the soldier that, giving him a dream. "If we learned anything from [Vietnam](#), it's to give them something to shoot for," Hodde says. "It's giving them a goal."

More than 43,000 [US](#) veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have been wounded in combat. "These guys have been in hell," Hodde says. "What I really want to do is give them hope and give them direction. It's important that they know that they're still the same person they were."