



I Will Never Quit: The Story of Johnathan Holsey, Wounded Warrior

For W01 Johnathan Holsey, the end of the race was just the beginning.

“It was a good achievement,” said Holsey of the day he crossed the finish line at the New York City Marathon. “When you start doing stuff like that, you realize you can do more and that life is probably just beginning.”

Holsey, who lost his left leg in 2004 to a roadside bomb in Iraq, had planned to compete in the 2005 marathon with the help of a hand crank bike. But when he blew out a tire halfway through, Holsey knew quitting wasn't an option.

“If I start something, I'm going to finish it,” he said. “Even when the bike wrecked I knew I had to finish. We can't just sit here. We're going to finish.”



Finish he did. Holsey ran the second leg of the marathon and – now knowing he could run long distances with his prosthetic leg - went on to compete in the 2008 Army Ten-Miler. He'll lace up his sneakers again this year with a goal of shaving several minutes off of last year's time of 1:29.

“The Army Ten-Miler is amazing,” he said. “(The spectators) are all there for the same reason. Cheering people on to get to the finish line... It just shows that society is still here to support us as soldiers. (People are yelling) ‘Thank you for your service!’ You're hearing that all throughout the run. That's your motivator even when you want to stop.”

Holsey's journey to the Army Ten-Miler finish line was not an easy one.

But Holsey clearly has the spirit of a soldier in him.

Holsey, who was serving as a human resources specialist Staff Sgt. at the time, was out on a daily convoy on Ramadi's infamous Route Michigan when an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) hit his vehicle on Nov. 10, 2004.

“That whole day is like a blur,” he recalled. “I was knocked unconscious. I could hear the guys in my vehicle saying ‘They got us! They got us!’ I can even remember gun fire, but when you're going through it you don't really know what's going on.”

Holsey was airlifted to a hospital in Germany and then returned to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington for his long recovery.

After a few days of trying to save his leg, doctors told Holsey that amputating his left leg from the knee down was the best option, but it was his choice.

“I started crying. I broke down at that point,” said Holsey, 37.

Ultimately, he decided to take his doctors’ advice and his leg was amputated on Nov. 24, 2004.

“The pain part of it was excruciating. It was painful,” said Holsey matter-of-factly. “It wasn’t an easy thing...but my doctors and nurses at Walter Reed did a lot to make sure I was taken care of.”

One of the best things they did, said Holsey, was getting him involved with the Wounded Warrior Program.

The U.S. Army Wounded Warrior Program supports severely wounded, injured and ill soldiers from the Global War on Terrorism and their families. The program is designed to help soldiers and their families heal both physically and emotionally through medical care, educational opportunities, career guidance and other support programs.

For Holsey - who has two sons, 15 and 19 - that meant interacting with other amputees and learning that his life would go on despite this life-altering experience.

“I’d look at other amputees and see them walking and think ‘Okay, I’ll be able to walk again at some point.’”

Holsey stayed at Walter Reed until March of 2006 – more than a year after his amputation - and would return on Tuesdays and Thursdays after his release to run with fellow amputees.

The group runs helped him prepare physically, he said, while solo runs, helped him heal emotionally.

“I started running by myself to take that time to think,” he said. “Listen to the birds, listen to the water. Take that time to reflect on life, decisions I made – good, bad or indifferent. Just reflect on what I’ve achieved and what I want to achieve later. That’s my outlet.”

Leaving the Army, Holsey said, was never an option.

In fact, Holsey made history after his injury by becoming the first amputee to be accepted and complete Army Warrant Officer School.

“I’ve never feared going back,” said Holsey, who actually went to Qatar for three months post-Walter Reed. “We do that. That’s what we do. We’re soldiers.”

Showing that he’s still a soldier – despite his injury – is one of the reasons Holsey runs the Army Ten-Miler.

“You’re still part of this Army. You’re still doing what everybody else is doing,” he said. “I’m out there. We’re a part of that same group. I’m running along with the rest of them and that makes a big difference.”

Each year, about 40 Wounded Warriors like Holsey run (or race in a wheelchair or use a hand crank bike) in the Army Ten-Miler. They call themselves the Missing Parts in Action Team and come from both Walter Reed and Brooke Army Medical Center in Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

But for all the motivation Holsey has drawn from other soldiers, many soldiers find their motivation in Holsey and the other Wounded Warriors.

For example, said Holsey, runners along the course pass him and tell him he’s the reason they’re running. He’s where they’re getting their inspiration.

“I’ve had that so many times. In the military, I impact people I don’t even know. (People will say) ‘I’ve heard your story. I read about you. You keep me going.’ And I think ‘Okay, I’ve done something. You don’t always know how you touch people.’”

No doubt he’ll motivate many runners again this year to get across that finish line.

“The biggest accomplishment is when you run across that finish line,” he said. “In between that first mile and that last mile you’re going to have some hard times in there. Hard times are just nature, but when you get across that finish line and everybody’s cheering for you...that the moment when you think it’s all worth it.”