

AMPUTEES BECOME ATHLETES

Carlos Gonzalez swung a red boxing glove at his trainer's jaw. As he reared up for another punch, he pivoted on his right leg - a jointed, silver pole attached to a sneaker.

Seven years ago, a shooting left Gonzalez with a wound that forced surgeons to amputate his leg to mid-thigh. He became one of almost 2 million people in the United States who have limb-loss because of vascular disease, trauma or cancer.

When he stood on his first prosthetic leg, he just wanted to walk again. But he soon grew frustrated by its limitations and moved to a new generation of prostheses that has placed Gonzalez, 32, among a growing number of amputees worldwide who are running, bicycling and swimming, sometimes faster than competitors with fully intact limbs.

Day in and day out, Gonzalez hammers away in boxing gloves and practises jujitsu, a martial art that emphasizes hand-to-hand combat. Gonzalez dreams of becoming a paralympian, but for now he'll compete in national cage fighting and martial arts competitions.

"If you put your mind to it and train properly and have the right staff and the right people in your corner, it's pretty much 'Just go for it'" said Gonzalez, "I think I can have a good time and motivate people and inspire. The most important thing is to inspire."



YOUNG VETERAN FLIES TO NEW HORIZONS

Many decisions leading up to one fateful step changed Cpl. Jessie Fletcher's life.



After treading on an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan and losing both his legs, the once avid runner began the process of learning to walk with prosthesis. Less than a year later, Fletcher defied the memory of that day and climbed to new heights flying a small Cessna passenger plane for the first time.

Last year, Fletcher and his team were in Afghanistan. They were going to scout the valley below by taking refuge in a ruined building. The team knew the region was littered with the Taliban. Fletcher found three improvised explosive devices before his next steps changed his life when he didn't see the fourth.

He lost both legs above the knee and fingers from both hands. He lost hearing on his left side and had to have eardrum replacement surgery. He was airlifted to Germany where he was stabilized before flying home to Bethesda, MD, to begin rehabilitation.

Recovery and rehabilitation has become a full-time job. Fletcher rises every morning at 6:30 am and doesn't stop rehab until 4 pm. He treats his recovery like his new job, and he knows the best way to get better is to stay at the hospital and work hard. →