

Wounded Heroes – First Team To Complete Megavalanche Challenge

A Help for Heroes team of eight wounded, injured and sick military personnel and veterans has successfully taken on Megavalanche, one of mountain biking's toughest challenges...

In so doing, the group became the first disabled team to complete the epic event - one of the longest downhill races in the world. In addition, one of them – Lance Corporal Rachel Kipling – became the first female to compete alongside the men as usually there is a separate women's race. Rachel is still serving but receiving support for mental ill health.

The team was led and trained by Colour Sergeant Roger Coates, who runs the Battle Back programme at Help for Heroes Recovery Centre, Phoenix House, in Catterick. Help for Heroes is a founding patron of Battle Back - an MOD initiative that uses adaptive adventure training and sports rehabilitation to help seriously wounded service personnel gain independence and confidence.

The Alpe d'Huez Megavalanche takes 1,400 participants from 20 countries through four days of training and racing from Le Pic Blanc to Allemont.

As part of the Charity's extensive Sports Recovery programme, the Help for Heroes cyclists began training in January, beginning with a weekend in Hamsterley Forest and finding progressively more difficult venues to practice, ending up at Fort William on the slopes of Ben Nevis.

“We tried to find as much variety on our training weekends to really challenge our team and give them as much experience as possible,” said Colour Sgt Coates. “But what we couldn't replicate from Megavalanche was snow and that very thin mountain air that you get at high altitude, so it was essential that we arrived in the French Alps early enough to practice in these conditions before we undertook the real thing.”

Having personally entered Megavalanche twice, CSgt Coates knew exactly what training, equipment, commitment and motivation was needed to take part. “Sport provides optimism, self-belief and confidence in what can be achieved, and this is proven to be of particular importance to this group,” he said. “All of these benefits can be translated outside of sport and into day to day life. Sport helps with coping strategies and resilience – which is so important on an individual's recovery journey.”

The race saw riders hit speeds of up to 60kph down a black diamond ski run, among some of the world's top downhill bikers. To avoid injury, the Help for Heroes riders didn't take part in the infamous mass start but held back to ensure their safety. They then worked as a team, rather than as individuals, helping each other as they crossed the 2km frozen glacier - pushing, pulling, dragging and lifting each other from one icy plateau to another.

The next 20km saw them twisting and turning through a dense mountainside forest with a couple of short but tortuous climbs thrown in for good measure.

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Finally they descended along a steep forest track at high speed, across the finish line and into the history books!

"It went 100% to plan," said Roger. "We had such a robust plan in place that, even when one of the team members misjudged a jump, fell off and broke his wrist, we were able to immediately get him to Grenoble hospital where they treated him like a king while our reserve rider easily slotted into his place as he had trained with us throughout, was able to take his place."

"The French authorities welcomed us, as did the other participants and the locals with invitations to barbecues and free beers at the local bar, all of which made our guys feel special " like the heroes that they are!"

Simon Taylor was one of the veterans who took part in Megavalanche. The former sergeant with the Light Dragoons served in Bosnia and Iraq before being deployed to Afghanistan. While on a routine patrol in 2009, his vehicle hit an improvised explosive device. He suffered a multitude of broken bones, a traumatic brain injury, a collapsed lung, spinal fractures and a shattered ankle.

As a result of the injuries, in 2011 Simon's right leg was amputated below the knee, a cage fitted around his spine, his shoulder pinned and arm plated. He also suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder stemming from feelings of guilt for his comrade who died in the incident.

Simon had always been active in the army, with running his favoured sport: his escape. But, post-injury, that was no longer an option. Someone suggested mountain biking and Help for Heroes funded him a bike.

“On my first time out on it, I went further in a 15 minute ride than I’d been in the last two years. I became addicted. It’s a way of helping with the psychological side of things, getting out and about in nature. It gives me the space to get my head together,” said Simon. “Megavalanche was an amazing experience but it was hard and, if I’m brutally honest, so the top, looking down the snow-covered black diamond ski slope. I did wonder for a moment why, having broken everything and lost a leg, I was doing it!

“But we all enjoyed it and I feel like it was a ‘coming of age’ for me. I have been fighting to prove that, even with my injuries, I can do mountain biking but people thought it was too dangerous. But now I have done Megavalanche, I feel I have proved my point!”

Help for Heroes has been involved with Sports Recovery since 2008 and offers 300 events across 50 different sports enabling over wounded, injured and sick service personnel and veterans to take part in adaptive sports from grassroots through to performance level.

Sports Recovery works in conjunction with the DSATC as part of the Battle Back programme. Serving Men and Women are engaged as part of the Defence Recovery Capability programme which ensures that they have access to the key services and resources to enable their return to duty or a smooth transition to civilian life.

Further Information

For more information about how Help for Heroes can support you if you’re wounded, injured or sick, visit: www.helpforheroes.org.uk

About Help For Heroes

Help for Heroes offers comprehensive support to those who have suffered life-changing injuries and illnesses while serving our country. This support is provided through grants direct to our Heroes and their families, grants to other charities and through four Recovery Centres across the UK.Â

A recent study launched in January 2016 by Kingâ€™s College London and Help for Heroes found, of the 750,000 men and women who served as Regulars between 1991 and 2014, at least 66,000 need long term support.
www.helpforheroes.org.ukÂ

About The Defence Recovery Capability

Recovery is defined as the activities, courses and mentoring that enable a wounded, injured or sick Serviceman or woman to be able to return to duty or transition into civilian life. It is distinct from rehabilitation, which primarily relates to clinical medical treatment, but may involve some elements of it as the two often work together.Â

The Army Recovery Capability is the Armyâ€™s branch of the wider Defence Recovery Capability â€“ a Ministry of Defence led initiative in partnership with Help for Heroes and The Royal British Legion alongside other Service charities and agencies to provide wounded, injured and sick personnel with the recovery services and resources they need to help them either return to duty or make a smooth transition into an appropriately skilled civilian life.

For the Army Recovery Capability (ARC) this is achieved by a team of dedicated military professionals, including medical and welfare specialists, Personnel Recovery Officers working from eleven Personnel Recovery Units in regions across the UK and Germany, together with the use of five purpose built Personnel Recovery Centres and the Battle Back Centre at Lilleshall to offer a full range of courses, mentoring, medical support, adaptive sports and adventurous training within a conducive military environment.Â