

STORIES OF THE INVICTUS GAMES

This started off as an interview with three soldiers from Garrison Petawawa who competed in the 2017 Invictus Games. Brenda McPeak, Dan Graham and Mike Trauner. It was supposed to be their story of training and competing to go along with the theme of this issue: fitness and working out. Who better to tell a story like that than three soldiers who competed in a worldwide competition with other soldiers? But that's not how this story ended up.

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Photos: Submitted

This is a story about three people who embody what it means to be courageous. It's really so much more than courage, but the English language hasn't created a word big enough to describe their accomplishments. This is not a story about medals. This is a story about mettle.

BRENDA McPEAK

Of the three, Brenda is the only Invictus Games athlete still serving in the military. She's peppy, always smiling and willing to share her experience. That wasn't always how she would have considered herself.

Born in Kingston, she joined the army reserves in 1994 and became a member of the regular force in 2000 in Petawawa. She served in infantry and then air defence and now she is a MSC Operator (mobile support.) In her words, she's a driver.

After a decade of injury-free service that included a tour, Brenda was stationed in Gander, Newfoundland where she hurt her lower back. She was eventually diagnosed with four bulging disks, one of which was pinching on a nerve. The injury was actually caused overseas, where her job was continuous heavy lifting when she off-loaded the vehicles that delivered supplies to her colleagues. That sounds common enough, until you factor in the whole "soldier" thing. There is no 'nine-to-five' when you're overseas. And there's nothing quite like being overseas in the first place. No one complains of a sore back.

The Gander flare-up was the start of what would cause her to feel that her military career was in jeopardy. In 2012, the Joint

Personnel Support Unit (JPSU) said they were concerned about her ability to do her job the way her career required it to be done. They moved her into working with the Soldier On - a program within the Canadian Forces that supports veterans and serving members in adapting and overcoming permanent physical or mental health injuries through physical activity and sport.

Brenda's job was basically to get injured soldiers introduced to sports, and help them adapt a sport to work with their injury or to introduce them to a new sport. It was something she related to, having been a dedicated soccer player through high school and college. With her injury, she had to leave the sport.

"Either I was going to not work anymore, or I had to alter my lifestyle," she said.

With her injury came another problem: weight. When her ability to be as active as she had been diminished, the weight started "creeping on."

"The weight came on quickly after my injury," she says. "No matter what I did, I gained weight. I tried everything in the book and I was working out five days a week, but it didn't matter."

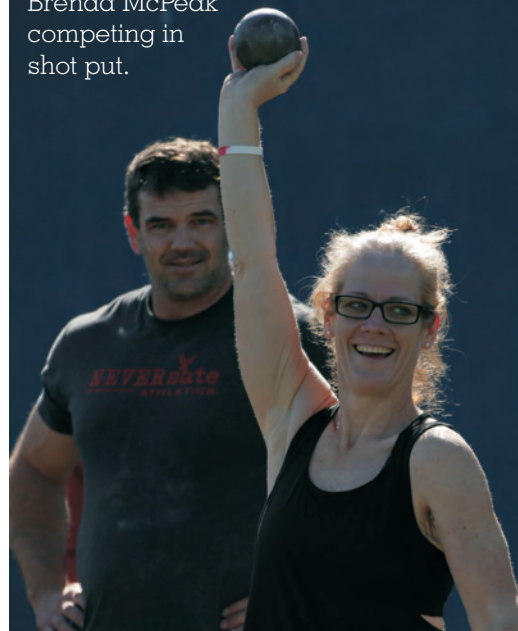
Weight is a tough thing. It's a battle many people have, and few people win. As a soldier, fitness is a real part of the job and Brenda could feel that slipping away.

"I was coming up to my 40th birthday and I wanted to live my life; I didn't want to be a recluse," she said. "I needed to find a way out of my house. I just broke down. I cried. I needed help."

After a lot of research, she made the decision to have gastric bypass surgery.

"It's a huge life-changing decision to have your stomach cut out of you," she says. "You have to be prepared to change your

Brenda McPeak competing in shot put.



The Invictus Games are an international sporting event for wounded, ill and injured soldiers, both currently serving and veterans. The Games use the power of sport to inspire recovery and generate a wider understanding of and respect for those who serve their country. Prince Harry visited the Warrior Games in Colorado in 2013 and was driven to create an expanded international version to be enjoyed worldwide.



Brenda McPeak competing in sledge hockey.

life. I thought, “This is where I’m at. I want to live. I don’t want to continue down this road.”

She went to the doctor in 2014 and he put her on a year-long process of lifestyle changes. From the beginning of that plan, she never had a doubt that she could achieve it, but she was glad to have a year to make the necessary changes first. Those changes included gradually cutting out sugar and carbonation, to name a few. As people found out she was preparing for surgery, they weren’t shy with the comments. But for Brenda, the concern was much greater.

“I made this decision for myself,” she says. “People were telling me I was taking the easy way out, but I had this surgery not knowing where it would put my career. Could I survive in the field when I go out? Could I survive overseas?”

Again, the life of a soldier has a bit of a different path to it.

Brenda had surgery in January 2016 and she set a goal to go to the Invictus Games in 2017. It would be her test - to make it through surgery and all the way back from injury. As she learned how to live her new life, she was worried that she wasn’t “injured enough” to go to the Games. She worried people might not consider her worthy of being on Team Canada. But for her, the Games represented achieving a goal, and it didn’t matter if anyone knew what she had actually been through to get there.

“There are days when my body rejects certain food and I get pains and end up curled up in a ball,” she says, “but I accept that and I have learned how to move on. I still have body issues and I’m still shy, but I’m not a pushover like I used to be.”

That was what she took out of the Invictus Games more than anything else.

Most people have difficulty setting goals

that are achievable. Brenda McPeak set a goal to change her entire way of living so that she wouldn’t be a recluse in her own home. From the day she asked for help until the day she reached her goal was two and a half years. Think about that the next time you give up on a New Year’s resolution.

“I’m not a resolution person anymore,” she says. “My resolution is for life. There are days that I don’t work out because I just can’t do it, but I made a life-changing decision and I’m not willing to go back on it.”

Brenda is quick to say she’s not an advocate for gastric bypass surgery. While it may be for some people, she feels the more important step is knowing that you need help and then seeking out health professionals who have something to offer.

“For the majority of my life I was a follower,” she says. “It wasn’t until I became a leader that I wanted to make a change.”

Of course, Brenda has another goal, and this time it’s a half marathon in the Spring of 2018 and then a full marathon that fall. She says it as self-assuredly as she said anything, and then, after a moment, she laughed.

“I was never a runner,” she says, “but after the surgery I did a Couch-to- 5K. Who would have thought?”

It wasn’t so long ago that she was concerned about being reclusive. Now, she’s training for marathons. You really can change your life if you want it bad enough.

DAN GRAHAM

Dan was on the driving range of his local golf course one day when a passer-by made a comment, “It must be nice to practice golf all day.” Dan quickly replied, “It must be

nice to have your sanity.”

Dan went to the Invictus Games in golf: 2017 was the first time golf was one of the sports available. He played at the prestigious St. George’s Golf & Country Club - a private course that most golfers never get the chance to play. Dan walked away with a bronze medal from the Games, but it was a miracle that he even made it there.

Dan’s military career spanned 15 years and all of it in infantry. His peers often referred to him as “the golden boy” for being able to do anything for anyone at anytime. Dan was a generational soldier, following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. The military was in his blood.

In his career, he had three deployments: one to Bosnia and two to Afghanistan. He lost a lot of friends in Afghanistan, and as he tells the story, he recalls the names of guys who didn’t make it: Rick, Frank, Will, Shane, Mark...

Dan had survived his first deployment to Afghanistan and when he returned, he was put into leadership training. There were some tough times at home, but he still managed to excel in his work. But when the time came for the next deployment, he wasn’t on the list.

“The first wave of replacements was sent and I was passed over,” he says. “I buried those guys. The next month more soldiers were killed and I had to bury them too. Then another group went over and there was another wave of deaths. I was just staying home, burying my friends. I felt like the families were looking at me and wondering why I wasn’t there.”

The military wasn’t deploying soldiers who held leadership roles and the alternative for Dan was more than he could handle. He knew he couldn’t keep burying friends, so he told the military that either he deployed on the next wave, or he was filing his papers to get out of the military altogether. They agreed to send him with the next wave.

Dan talks about being in Afghanistan the way anyone else would talk about a normal day at work. Of course, there was nothing normal about it. A lone gunman once just missed his head. Another vehicle that was following the one he was in hit an IED. A good friend lost his life in a post where Dan had stood just 24 hours earlier, again to an IED. This became his daily life.

“The first week or so you’re a little jumpy,” he says, “but then you just get desensitized to it. You learn to expect it.”

He insists that being in danger was easier than being at home when it came to loss of life. At home, he says, you have so much time to reflect and think about it, but overseas you don’t have that time. Dan finished his second tour in the fall of 2017. He had made it home, alive.

After coming home, Dan was posted to Gagetown, New Brunswick where his new role would be to teach new recruits. Deaths from deployments continued and he couldn't escape them. A key moment was when he endured three deaths in a row: a mentor, his best friend and then a family friend who took his own life.

"I don't remember shedding a tear," he said.

He thought something was wrong that he wasn't crying, but someone who had been to counselling told him that might just be how his mind was dealing with it. Dan decided that was probably the case. Plus, Dan thought he was dealing with it through his job. Teaching infantry allowed him to get all of his emotions out, so he thought.

That's when he decided to take up golf. What he loved about the game was the challenge. He would practice and practice for hours sometimes before he figured out a problem. On the course, no two rounds were ever the same and he felt the game could never really be mastered. It was 100 per cent accountability in golf and he thrived on that. Most golfers detest that part of the game.

"There is no one else to blame in golf," he says. "In team sports, I could never accept people not caring as much as I did. I felt they didn't work as hard as I did. In golf, I'm in complete control. There is no one else."

It seemed Dan had found his way, and it also seemed that everyone agreed. He was promoted to sergeant in 2010 and then posted back to Petawawa in 2011. He was "excited" to get back to his team and his unit. Everything was going better than Dan could have imagined.

"I went hard for two years," he says.

In 2013, he even accepted a request to join the Ironman team when the competition was just five weeks away. The Ironman is a 50-kilometre run with a rucksack and Dan had never done one, let alone prepare for one in just five weeks. But the first day of training he ran 21 kilometres - more than he had ever run in his life at one time. He came fourth that training day and was pretty proud of himself. He set a goal to finish the Ironman in under eight hours; he finished in 7 hours and 52 minutes. Another box checked.

He had an injury from the Ironman that caused him to need a minor surgery. He was given Oxycontin for the pain so he could relax. He recovered physically, but mentally he was struggling. He was prone to sudden emotional outbursts and seemed always to be in a "fight or flight" mode.

Also that year, his relationship ended and he was fighting for custody of his children. He was also fighting for his soldiers - trying to get them what they needed for training and operations. And then there was this wave of memories that started taking over; memories of burying his friends - what he had done the last time he was stationed in Petawawa. The simplest things were sending him into these outbursts and for seemingly no reason. It was as if he couldn't control it.

One of those outbursts came at home. His daughter, who was in the room, witnessed the whole thing. He yelled so loudly that when he finally made eye contact with his daughter, she could barely breathe she was so scared.

"I saw the one person I loved most in the world and she was in fear of me," he says.

"There were so many ways to justify the way I was, but nothing could justify how I yelled at my daughter."

Dan tried to control his emotions, but he knew he was losing the battle. He thought going off oxy would help, and it did for a while, but then it all came back. One night, he headed downstairs, pulled out his barrack box and stood on it. He fixed a repelling rope to the ceiling and put rope around his neck. He stood there and stood there and stood there. The only thing that stopped him from going further was he didn't know who would feed his kids breakfast in the morning if he wasn't there.

"My kids saved my life," he says.

The next morning he drove to the Warrior Sports Centre medical facility on base and flagged down a nurse.

"I am not ok," he told her.

He was right; he wasn't ok. When he finally got in front of a therapist, she told him he had PTSD. It broke him.

"I surrendered it all," he says. "The flood-gates were opened. I stopped everything. I even sold my golf clubs. I didn't want to be anywhere but in my bubble."

He stayed in his bubble for quite while. His medication regimen was intense, to say the least. There was a lot to get through, but there was something in him that just wouldn't quit. Eventually he picked up some golf clubs again, but his career had come to an end. In 2015, he was released from the military.

"The big thing about being out of the military is not being part of something," he says. "I joined straight out of high school. Now, I don't know where I fit in."



Dan Graham on the course at St. George's Golf & Country Club.

As he improved, his friends were trying to get him to sign up for the Invictus Games. He ignored it at first, but he eventually connected with Soldier On and registered, never thinking he would be considered.

"I signed up to have a goal, to have a purpose again," he said. "It was something to do, something to shoot for. I had been sorely missing that."

He was excited and suddenly his goal became real. He remembers being terrified.

Team Canada had training camps and Dan's first camp was in Victoria. He met Jay, another guy from the golf team and they teed it up together. They would eventually become close friends.

The next camp in Kingston was tough. He and Jay practiced and played together, which was good, but Kingston also held a golf

MIKE TRAUNER

It's hard to know where to begin in telling Mike Trauner's story. If we start at the Invictus Games, it's the story of a double gold medalist. His was the gold medal ceremony that made every newspaper headline in Canada, with Prince Harry putting that gold medal around Mike's neck. It was appropriate the British Royal made that presentation, as it was Prince Harry who had personally challenged Mike to compete at the Games a year earlier. Mike was not only the most disabled member of the Petawawa contingent to compete at the

he had three breaks in his left arm and 25 breaks in his left hand, and he had shrapnel everywhere, including in his eyes.

"On paper," he says, "I was 107 per cent injured."

Leah met Mike in Germany and the next month, in January 2009, they were flown to the Ottawa Rehabilitation Centre. His injuries were described as "catastrophic" and they assigned him a therapist who specialized in catastrophically injured people. He would live at the Rehab Centre for the next 13 months.

Initially, his physiotherapist suggested that a realistic goal would be to eventually walk, with two canes for 500 metres. She said he would need a wheelchair for most of his day. Mike wasn't so keen on that goal, and after just six weeks, Mike stood on two prosthetic



Mike Trauner



Brenda McPeck



Dan Graham



tournament to raise funds for Soldier On. The day became sensory overload - too many people, too loud, too much of everything. He drove home right after the reception. Jay totally understood.

At the Games, golf was an 18-hole Stableford competition. Dan says he had a terrible day off the tee, not hitting his first fairway until the 11th hole. The entire experience was a challenge starting with never having played in front of so many. He hadn't expected to medal, but at the end of the competition, not only did he win a bronze medal, he tied with Jay and they shared bronze medals for Canada together.

"Leaving the Games and seeing all those different athletes, some with no limbs and who were competing, you cannot leave the Invictus Games with the feeling that you cannot do something," he says. There is no quit."

His PTSD struggle continues, though he is able to manage it much better. He can identify triggers and feelings and he has a way to deal with things now. His "hyper-vigilance" is something he still can't shut off, so trips to a mall or the beach, with so many people, leave him exhausted. It's all he can do to make it through those outings, but he does it for his kids, for his fiancé and as a challenge for himself. Sometimes being the most vulnerable is necessary to be the most strong.

And besides, there is no quit.

Games, he was the most disabled member of all the Team Canada athletes.

In September 2008, Mike was deployed to Afghanistan. A few days before he deployed, he and his fiancé, Leah, had friends over for dinner. All the guys were deploying with Mike. They had lost several friends in the Afghanistan mission already, and Leah says they knew that one of them was going to get a phone call. Three months later, it was her.

Mike was part of contingent that was on patrol one night when they were the target of a remotely-detonated IED. The explosion was catastrophic. Mike remembers regaining consciousness when he heard someone radioing in for assistance, reporting there were casualties and a double amputation. He knew he wasn't dead but his body was actually smoking. He saw that his glove had melted in the explosion and he remembered that he should stay as still as possible. He did. He actually died on the battlefield!

He was revived and airlifted to a field hospital in Kandahar. He knew now that he didn't have any legs. While he was at the field hospital, he flatlined. Again, he came back. When he was stable enough, they flew him to Germany.

Back home in Petawawa, a few military members came knocking at Leah's door. They started by telling her Mike was alive, and then they briefed her on his injuries, which were enormous. He had lost both legs one above the knee and one below the knee,

legs. Shortly thereafter, he walked six lengths of the parallel bars. Leah was taking video of Mike's progress and sending them to the troops back in Afghanistan to boost their spirits. In five months, he had gone from parallel bars to walking independently. Mike says that walking with prosthetics is like walking on stilts.

His progress was so rapid his physiotherapist was actually worried he might push himself too far and become re-injured. He worked out five to six hours a day, often tiring out his therapist. And it wasn't just his lower body, his rebuilt hand was still a work in progress as well. His therapist told the Ottawa Citizen, "There's some strength in him that's really different."

After 13 months of rehab, Mike returned home to Petawawa. He would have a few more surgeries, including one in 2015 that repaired skin grafts on one of his legs. It left him more in the wheelchair than he would have preferred, but he eventually recovered.

"When you tally everything together, I shouldn't have lived," he says. "18 surgeries and 18 blood transfusions, yeah, I'm surprised to be here."

He still has some shrapnel in his body, but the doctors take it out as it becomes bothersome. (He actually keeps the pieces of shrapnel in a jar!) He and Leah were married in 2015. In her words, they do everything today that they always used to do, just a little differently.

You can Google Mike to see what all he has been up in the past decade. He has spoken at many events, walked with the Olympic Torch, earned the Medal of Military Valour, been declared an ambassador for Cambrian College and the list goes on. His country considers him a hero, and he lives up to it, hoping that his story will benefit others who are struggling. He has graciously accepted that role, as intrusive as it can be at times. But when Prince Harry challenged him to compete at the Invictus Games, it was an opportunity that challenged him personally. It was putting himself to the test, something he had excelled at in his rehabilitation, and part of him really wanted a goal to strive for again.

“I told [Prince Harry] that I accepted the challenge,” Mike says when they first met. “If I can command a firefight, what’s doing some sports in front of people?”

The thing is, Mike’s version of “doing some sports” isn’t as casual as he makes it sound. He was immediately in training mode. He had done some rowing in 2009 but had to put it on hold for some of his many surgeries. But, he enjoyed it and one time thought about competing in the Paralympic Games. So, he decided to compete in rowing at the Invictus Games. He also chose to compete in hand cycling, something he seems to be less passionate about, although for some reason, he does it.

“I used to love cycling,” he says, “but this is much different. It’s hand cycling so it’s really hard. It sucks so much.”

He once hand-cycled with a buddy out to Round Lake - a 51km ride. It was a chilly and rainy day and the duo finished freezing and soaked from head to toe. But as hard as it was, they thought it was worth it!

Mike’s training consisted of two sessions a day, six days a week. He slowed down in the off-season to training once a day. He had two coaches and his basement is a training centre with a rowing machine, hand cycling bike and an elliptical. (Yes, Mike does the elliptical with his prosthetic legs!)

His equipment sets up to automatically record his time and report it to his coaches. They would provide feedback and make workout suggestions. It was pretty intense. He describes his training as any high-level athlete would, not as a man who was, not that long ago, 107 per cent injured.

“If you would have asked me 10 years ago if I could have made it through this, I would have said, “No,” Mike says. “But I guess life is only as hard as you make it.”

When he went to the Games, he had a goal to clock more than 1000 metres in the four-minute endurance in rowing. His plan was a steady pace for the first three minutes, and then to really pick it up for the last minute, all the way to the finish line. He could see other competitors getting ahead of him and it only made him work harder. Then he saw the Canadian Flag and he rowed his heart out. When he crossed the finish line, he found Leah in the crowd.

“Leah was bawling, so I thought I must have done pretty good,” he says with a

smile. It was good - as good as gold.

His other rowing event was the one-minute sprint. His goal for this one was to make 300 metres. When he got in position to start, the confidence of a seasoned athlete came over him.

“I’m taking this,” he said to himself.

He missed his goal by one metre, but he blew the field away for his second gold.

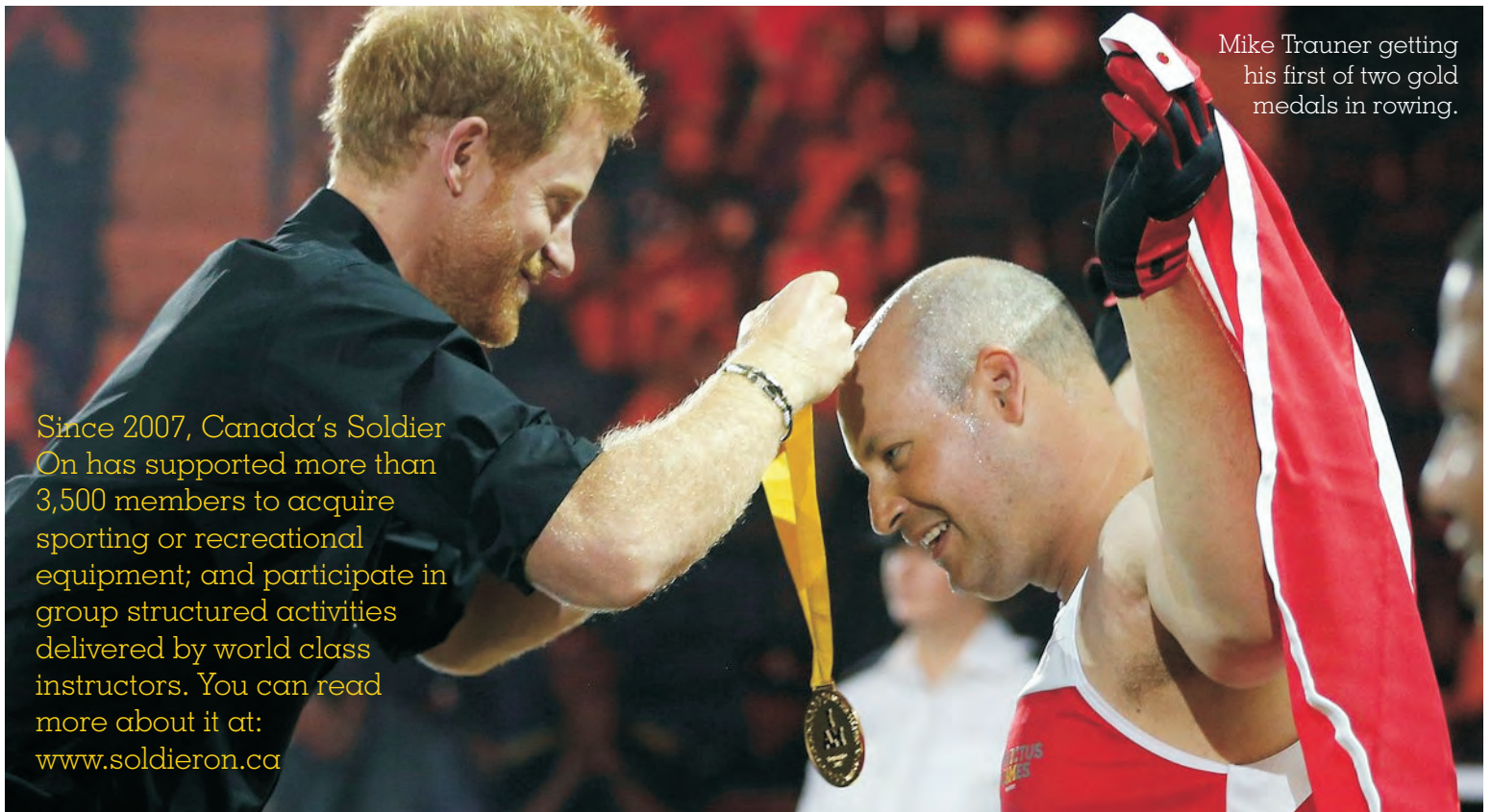
He has already registered for the 2018 Games in Australia. And, he’s thinking about the Paralympic Games. He’s also thinking about working with people in a fitness capacity. (You might imagine that no one would dare say, “I can’t do it” to Mike Trauner.)

“Sometimes people just want to find the easiest way to do things,” he says, “but you should challenge yourself. For me, it’s easier to use a wheelchair and it’s harder to walk, but I prefer to walk.”

Fitness is going to be a constant part of Mike Trauner’s life. He says you want to be as light as possible on prosthetics because it’s less painful that way. And Mike has pain, every day, but he just chooses to see past it.

“I can mentally shut it off,” he says of the pain. “I don’t really know how I do it. I just do it.”

From 107 per cent catastrophically injured, to double gold medalist. Thus far, that is the life story of Mike Trauner. But when you can die twice and still be alive, it makes you think that this guy has barely scratched the surface of his potential.



Mike Trauner getting his first of two gold medals in rowing.

Since 2007, Canada’s Soldier On has supported more than 3,500 members to acquire sporting or recreational equipment; and participate in group structured activities delivered by world class instructors. You can read more about it at: www.soldieron.ca