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Healing wounds; Iraqi bomb took Anchorage soldier's legs, but not his heart and spirit

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Latseen Benson saw it as he walked around his Humvee on the outskirts of Kirkuk in Iraq.

A sack that looked like a "purple pillow case" sat half-buried five feet away.

The 26-year-old infantry team leader's mission was to secure the area and check for improvised explosive devices. His unit was chasing a suspicious vehicle when his gunner told him to stop and investigate the object.

Somewhere, an Iraqi insurgent was watching and pressed a button, triggering the IED.

What happened next eventually landed the Anchorage native into this week's 26th annual National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

"My pinkie was gone, and my wrist was severed," Benson said. "I saw chunks of meat on the ground. I didn't look at my legs because I thought I would go into shock."

He didn't have to look. They weren't there.

The day was Nov. 13, 2005. And today, a remarkable 7 1/2 months after having both legs amputated, the member of the 101st Airborne is well enough to compete in archery, handcycling, basketball and track at the largest annual wheelchair sports event in the world.

"Every day with him is a surprise," said his mother, Diane Benson, from her home in Eagle River. "That would be his life too."

Of the 550 athletes set to compete at venues around Anchorage through Saturday, Benson is one of the newest to be injured, one of 14 Alaskans and one of 10 percent injured during combat.

The last time Benson was in Alaska, he had his legs. Sunday, in his longest trip away from the Army's Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C., he flew to Anchorage, where he was welcomed by Anchorage Mayor Mark Begich and a troupe of Native dancers, honoring his sacrifice and the Purple Heart he received Dec. 20.

"I never got to play high school ball," Benson said by cell phone earlier in the week. "Now's my chance."

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Benson is far from the most experienced athlete among the disabled veterans. Some have been practicing for decades. He's tried his four sports only a handful of times.

Benson doesn't own a bow, which is one reason he tried archery. He's played wheelchair basketball once a week with other amputees. He doesn't own a racing wheelchair designed for track -- or even a handcycle.

"Technically, I train for that every day just getting around," Benson said, laughing. "This awakened my desire to compete with men, women, anyone. It appeals to who I am."

Benson's tough spirit was clear from his first bicycle ride as a youngster -- when he joined his uncle on a 27-mile ride, he said.

"He was just a little, shivering guy," said Diane, who is running in the Democratic primary for U.S. representative. "I found out I had to get used to that sort of attitude. It's always been a part of him to do things beyond the norm."

Nothing changed when he turned 17.

"He called me up one morning and said he was going on a bike ride down the West Coast," Diane said. "I knew he wasn't my little boy anymore."

Latseen Benson may have lost his legs, but he never lost his adventuresome spirit.

Only five months after the injury, Latseen decided he wanted to try monoskiing, so he attended the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. He had skied before his injury, so it didn't take him long to figure out the monoski.

"Those first 2 1/2 months he was barely a person -- he was not moving," Diane said. "From that point, he's skiing down a doggone mountain in Snowmass, Colorado."

Latseen went on to ski in New Hampshire and New York and then took up handcycling, all while recovering at Walter Reed from multiple surgeries and undergoing physical and occupational therapy.

Diane was there the first time her son decided to play wheelchair basketball at the center.

"I don't chew my nails, but I felt like I did that day," Diane said. "(It had been) a couple months and his wounds were still healing. They're not even closed up yet."

She shudders at recalling the pieces of the wheelchairs scattered on the court from collisions during the highly competitive game. At the time, she said, pieces of shrapnel were still leeching out of her son's body.

Benson continued to push his physical limits, riding two legs in the World T.E.A.M. Sports Ride Across America in April. At one point, he lost control of his handcycle going nearly 30 mph down a hill.

"I skipped around on the pavement for a while," he said. "I had road rash on what was left of my legs."

He could barely move for the next month, eventually recovering enough for his wife, Jessica, who helps him train, to pace him on her bicycle while he rides the wheelchair.

"She pushes me every day to do the best I can," Latseen said.

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Wheelchair games