

The Courage to Come Back

Melissa Stockwell, 36, was the first American female soldier to lose a limb in Iraq. Rather than let it defeat her, she used it as fuel to succeed.

AS TOLD TO LESLIE GOLDMAN

When I woke up in a Baghdad emergency room on April 13, 2004, images of a Humvee, a cracked windshield and so much blood flooded my mind. I was 24, and suddenly, without warning, I had only one leg. I couldn't stop worrying about what my life was going to become. But as I saw more and more veterans admitted with injuries worse than mine, I realized I was lucky. I had three working limbs and my vision. I was alive.

Jumping in

★★★★★★★★★★★★

After months of seemingly endless surgeries and an *E. coli* infection, I learned how to walk with a prosthetic leg—but it was when I slid into the pool for a therapy session that I suddenly felt whole again. As I grew stronger, I swam lap after lap at the outpatient pool, completely forgetting that I was missing a limb. The water was both incredibly calming and energizing—I could be active without feeling disabled.

A few weeks later, the U.S. Paralympics Committee visited us wounded warriors at the hospital, and I realized the pool was reawakening my inner athlete. I began

focusing my fitness efforts on swimming—practicing for hours until my arms ached. Eventually, in 2009, I added running and biking for another challenge, and became a paratriathlete. Though training can be grueling, I get endless support from my husband, Brian, and my 22-month-old son, Dallas. (He wears a “Go Mom Go” onesie to all my races!) But the highlight of my week is taking Dallas to swim classes—he’s not doing freestyle yet, but he loves splashing, and I love sharing my passion with him.

The gold lining

★★★★★★★★★★★★

Losing my leg was never part of my script for the future, but I'd do it all over again. It taught me that regardless of what happens, you have a choice. You can choose to be fearful, or you can be positive and share your talents with others. Everyone has “bombs” in life—unexpected events that rock your world. It's up to you to decide how to react. I may be the only mom in swim class who takes off her leg before diving in, but I'm still here, I have an adorable son and an amazing husband, and the world is truly a great place.

Melissa is ranked second in the world among paratriathletes in her disability classification, and she's currently training for the Rio 2016 Games.

