

Iraq mission transforms average athlete into All American

By Tech. Sgt. Alex Salmon
Staff Photojournalist

Alone, running along a dried river bed, a Soldier's feet land softly in the dusty sand. Focused on preparing for the Army physical fitness test, he doesn't notice a rapidly approaching sandstorm until it's too late.

Finding himself engulfed in the reddish blanket of swirling sand, the Soldier covers his mouth and nose as best he can, and crouches by what small brush the Iraqi desert provides. He prays he's not sharing his makeshift shelter with other desert inhabitants, particularly scorpions.

As quickly as the sandstorm strikes, it is over. As the Soldier returns to camp he can't help but think how different this workout is than those he goes through as a member of the track and field team at the Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, Neb.

"I think I swallowed enough sand that I figured I'd never be a very good athlete," said Staff Sgt. Derek Carson, an intelligence analyst with the 67th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade in Lincoln.

Carson spent time away from a promising academic and track career at Wesleyan when he was deployed to AlAsad Air Base with the 67th Area Support Group in 2005-06, but returned from Iraq a more focused student and determined athlete.

Carson enlisted in Nebraska Army National Guard prior to his freshman year at Wesleyan, but didn't attend basic military training and advanced individual training until he had finished his first year, allowing him to participate in a full track season. He then deployed to Iraq before he was able to compete in another season of track.

Prior to his Army training and

deployment to Iraq, Carson was a relatively average athlete, said Ted Bulling, director of track and field and cross country, and Carson's coach at Wesleyan. When Carson returned to the track, Bulling said he saw a different competitor.

"Since he got back from his last tour he became very, very focused on his goals," said Bulling. "I'm sure before he was deployed he still had the goal of being a great athlete and doing well in school, but it seemed like when he got back he knew how to go about accomplishing it."

Carson, who just finished his senior year, echoed Bulling.

"I think that once I got back from Iraq was kind of a turning point," said Carson. "I think I was just a lot more ready. Ready to go, ready to embrace it more whole heartedly than I did before."

Carson used his new-found confidence, focus and determination when he qualified for and competed in the 2009 NCAA Outdoor Division III Track and Field Championship at Marietta College in Marietta, Ohio.

Carson's 400-meter relay team placed second and his 1600-meter team placed third. Carson also placed eighth in the 400-meter individual race.

A 2008 Academic All-American and 2009 hopeful, Carson has been running since he was a child. He's been running competitively since the sixth grade.

The wiry Carson said he has always enjoyed the competition,



Photo by Tech. Sgt. Alex Salmon

All American Soldier: Staff Sgt. Derek Carson, an intelligence analyst with the 67th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade, stands on the track at Nebraska Wesleyan University with the tools of his trade. Carson recently earned All American honors after competing in the 2009 NCAA Division III Track and Field Championship.

atmosphere and camaraderie of a track meet.

"It's been a sport I've always felt really relaxed while doing," said Carson. "I'm pretty competitive as it is and I really like the opportunity to compete and maybe get to know the people that you're running against."

Although Carson's Army training and deployment to Iraq was nothing like the collegiate track scene, Carson gives a lot of credit to the Guard for keeping him fit and actually increasing his strength.

"I was able to stay in pretty good shape," said Carson. "The military brought me to a higher physical level than I'd ever been at before and I was just able to continually build on that."

Not only did Carson gain raw physical strength, he gained

a mental edge that few of his competitors enjoyed.

"Basic training breaks you down mentally and physically so you can build yourself back up," said Carson. "I kind of used that same mind frame when I got back."

"I knew my body wasn't ready to really be at the level I wanted it, but mentally I was prepared. I knew it was going to be painful, I knew it was going to be a lot of work, a lot of time and a lot of effort, but it wasn't that big of a deal after some of the stuff the military puts you through just to make you into a Soldier," he said.

In addition to Carson's individual athletic improvement on the track, his attitude, leadership and hard work have proven beneficial to the entire team, said Bulling.

"He was a leader by example, and without question our hardest worker," said Bulling.

"It just kind of brought everyone's level up," said Bulling.

Although Carson has found success on the track and in the military, his true focus has always been on academics. Carson graduated from Wesleyan this spring with a 3.904 GPA in History. He again credits his military training for much of his success in the classroom.

"I think it's helped me focus more," said Carson. "It's given me a better sense of what needs to be done and how I should go about getting it done."

Carson said the intelligence training he received from the Army has given him a focus on what he may want to do for a career. "When I went through AIT I definitely realized this is something that I really do enjoy," said Carson. "It's challenging, it's interesting and everyday is going to be different."

Carson is now attending a 10-week internship at the Bureau for Intelligence and Research in Washington, D.C., where he plans to continue developing his skill in the intelligence field, possibly parlaying it into a future career.

Carson downplays his accomplishments. "I don't see the things I've done as being really extraordinary," said Carson. "I think it's just been from a lot of hard work and perseverance."

Once a good student and average athlete, an enlistment in the Nebraska National Guard and deployment to Iraq, helped turned the student-athlete into a Soldier, a great student and an All-American athlete.

Carson took advantage of the mental and physical training the Army provided, and ran with it – literally.

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fortable," said Kaemmer. In winning the team race, the Oregon National Guard runners posted a combined time of 8:32:21, outdistancing Guard runners from Utah, which scored a combined time of 9:00:04 to take second place.

Leading the way for Oregon was Sgt. 1st Class Timothy Vandervlugt, La Grande, Ore., who finished fourth in the Guard male race with a time of 2:47:19. Also placing for the Oregon team were 1st Sgt. Seven Richmond, Albany, Ore., who finished the race in 2:49:02, and Capt. Sean Nixon, Sunriver, Ore., who finished race in 2:55:51.

The Guardsmen and Guardswomen all spoke of the hospitality of the people of Lincoln, Neb., and how much it meant to see civilians pour out of their homes to cheer and encourage the runners along the tortuous 26.2-mile route through the city on its streets and bike trails.

"It knocks you out of a bad zone if you are in one ... it helps you to refocus," said Lt. Col. Chris Toesnsing of the Delaware Air National Guard. "You realize all those folks along the course believe that you're going to finish it. That's an incentive to get it done."



Photo by Senior Master Sgt. Lee Straube

Mid-Race Shower: Tech. Sgt. Michael Bergquist, Washington Air National Guard, douses himself with water while passing a 2009 Lincoln/National Guard Marathon water point.

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ing number "2016." She would finish the rugged 26.2-mile marathon course with a time of 3:49:46 – tops among Guard women in the 20-24 age category.

Her husband said he couldn't be prouder of his wife. "She's a cancer survivor and strong competitor," said Bergquist.

As far as Bergquist's race went, it wasn't one of his strongest outings, he said, adding that he started battling a left calf injury around the eighth mile. "The injury caused me to almost drop out, but I knew my team was counting on me."

Bergquist would ultimately finish the marathon with a time of 2:50:39, eighth-best amongst the Guard male runners

while placing second in the National Guard's Male 35-39 age category.

He also helped propel the Washington National Guard Marathon Team to a fifth-place finish in the team championship hunt, finishing tops amongst the Washington National Guard runners.

Despite all that he's accomplished over the past year as a result of his uncompromising dedication and hard work, Bergquist said he's determined to remain humble.

"It's a huge honor" he said, referring to the "Athlete of the Year" award. Still, he added, he simply wishes to be known by his preferred title: "Guardman."

2009 'All Guard' team named after Lincoln marathon

By Sgt. Michael Coleman
Staff Writer

Fifty-seven of the nation's top Army and Air National Guard distance runners were named to the 2009-10 "All Guard Marathon Team" after completing the arduous Lincoln/National Guard Marathon, May 3.

The All Guard Marathon Team is comprised of the top 40 male finishers, the top 15 female finishers and the top two masters (50 and older) finishers. The All Guard Marathon Team is expected to compete in five to eight marathons across the United States during the upcoming running season. The selectees will alternate events that they attend.

"The members rank the list of events we are attending on which ones they can and want to attend," said Sgt. 1st Class Michael A. Hagen, National Guard Bureau Marathon Program coordinator.

Along with competing at the races, the members of the All Guard Marathon Team will also staff race expo booths designed to help raise interest in the National Guard and marathon running, said Hagen.

Selected this year were:

MEN: Nathan Flores, Texas; Robert Schnell, Arizona; James Bresette, Arkansas; Timothy Vandervlugt, Oregon; Seven Richmond, Oregon; Jeff Olive, Georgia; Barry Brill, New York; Michael Bergquist, Washington; Michael Streff, South Dakota; Jesse Arnstein, New Jersey; Whitney Miller, Indiana; Sean Nixon, Oregon; Christopher Odekirk, Utah; Ray Workman, Utah; William Raitter, Nevada; Trent Sinnett, Illinois; Walter Bird, New York; Clay Bird, Montana; Eric Peterson, Utah; Tyrell Heaton, Minnesota; Gregory Smith, Oregon; James Zwiefel, Alaska; Ed King, Oregon; Mike Zeigle, Wisconsin; Chase Duarte, Arizona; Russell Hoyer, New York; Aaron Davis, Idaho; David Meyer, Colorado; John Zimmermann, Virginia; George Graff, Utah; Brenton Davis, Pennsylvania; Donald Barnard, Indiana; Jesse Espinoza, New Mexico; Paul Laymon, South Carolina; Luke Mostoller, Arizona; Wiley Blevins, Delaware;

Michael White, Washington; James Proctor, Washington; Michael Embury, Ohio; Charlie Koepen, Indiana.

FEMALE: Varinka Barbini, Kentucky; DeAnne Trauba, Utah; Kristine Laughlin-Hall, Alaska; Nancie Margetti, Illinois; Michelle Kiluk, California; Mary Chipper, Virginia; Amanda Bergquist, Washington; Stacy Fagan, Oklahoma; Paulette Goodwin, Alaska; Michele McVenes, Minnesota; Annaliese Baumer, Vermont; Apolla Benito, Hawaii; Rachelle McKay, Illinois; Rosa Bartol, Washington; Devika Hull, Georgia.

MASTERS: David Baker, Colorado; James Baurer, Washington.