

LOCKLEED NEWS



! “You can’t...” “Watch me!”

The U.S. Air Force's Wounded Warrior (AFW2) Program is an adaptive sports program. This year it was held in Las Vegas. Brandon Sullivan competed in power lifting and bench press and the next day, he was in hand cycling and seated volleyball. Track events were the following Tuesday. His Objective: Qualify for the DoD Warrior Games.

What happened after that? Brandon’s back to his regular life – working, helping his wife Valeria run her business, raising three kids, and – yeah, more training. “Busy-ness is what happens,” he said.

Brandon grew up near Pierz, Minnesota, where he still lives with his family. He joined the Air Force in 2015 and landed in Colorado Springs, Colorado where he met Valeria. They married in 2016 just before Brandon was deployed overseas. Valeria was pregnant with their son, and she separated from the Air Force. After returning, Brandon took up tree trimming again to supplement the family’s income.

A Tragic Fall

“One Sunday in 2018, I was 50 feet up when the branch I was climbing on broke. My right leg took the brunt of it along with my wrist and my head. I was airlifted from Buena Vista Colorado where I was working to Colorado Springs. By the time I realized what was happening I had four blood transfusions, and I could still wiggle my toes. They had harvested a vein from my left leg for my right leg that was injured so they could do a limb salvage. After a couple of days in the hospital, they got my legs stabilized so I went into wrist surgery, but I couldn't remember my date of birth. My wife had been in Minnesota for my sister’s baby shower, so they





called her to identify me by my tattoos. She couldn't get a flight home, so my Dad and Mom drove her 16 hours with our four-month-old son to the hospital. They were all there and I was very confused and was having nightmares and hallucinations. Later, they discovered I had a brain bleed.

Finally, I got into surgery and acquired a whole lot of hardware in my wrist. The follow-up CAT scan showed a brain injury, so they took me off the blood thinners. As a result, my leg clotted off and they explained that going back onto the blood thinners might cause a stroke. I decided that losing my leg was the best of all the terrible solutions. The pain was crazy unreasonable, and I

couldn't take it anymore. They removed my leg below the knee. Afterward, the doctors said they didn't think there was enough of my leg left to successfully use a prosthetic because of my short stature. Their solution was to go back in and amputate above the knee."

Another Option

One of the doctors knew of a Dr. Alderete, a specialist at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio who said, "Don't touch him; send him down here!" The next evening, Brandon was on a C17 from Colorado, and had surgery the following day. Dr. Alderete operated on his right leg to save the knee.

"After 18 days, I left the hospital, the day before my birthday on April 13th. We stayed at Fisher House and began physical therapy and rehabilitation for my leg and wrist and got the prosthetics a couple of weeks later at the Center for the Intrepid (CFI). Other than my hard-headedness, that's the reason I'm capable of doing all this. They took care of me and every time a problem came up, someone was there to help. They made sure there was a path for me between departments and opened up space to get it taken care of right away. It is a great facility, there's no other place like it."



All told, they spent four months at Fisher House, then moved into base housing at Fort Sam Houston for 11 months. He was in physical therapy and being treated for the traumatic brain injury and his visual focus at the Brain Rehabilitation Center at Brook Army Medical Center. After that, Operation Home Front paid for an apartment for them to live in for three months before they returned to Minnesota.

Back to “Normal”

Brandon went back to tree work in 2020. He has a passion for tree trimming because it reminds him of being in the service, kind of a brotherhood. It's such a demanding job but the people that you work with know and understand the same demand that it takes, like being in the service. You all enjoy the suck! He always loved being outdoors along with the demanding labor part. He didn't get that in the Air Force because he was in the security forces which can be a monotonous everyday job because it is based on military police or communications. If there is any excitement, it's not really anything you want because it means something terrible happened.



“You can’t....” “I did!”

Just to recap the timeline: Brandon’s accident happened on March 25th and the leg amputation happened on March 30th, 2018. They told him he’d never be able to run or climb trees again. On Memorial day, he got his first prosthetic leg and then went to the cemetery to place flags on the tombstones. In September he ran the Army 10-Miler. In March 2019 he did the Bataan Memorial Death March in White Sands, New Mexico. He connected with AFW2 and medically retired from the military later that year.

Brandon said, “AFW2 showed me the way.” He



trained and made the team but dropped out when their second child arrived via an unexpected C-Section birth. He came back to this program in 2023 and got connected with a new coach, Scott Sutherlin, for the para powerlifting program. Sutherlin asked if he'd be willing to compete in Las Vegas in March 2024. He coaches three athletes on the USA Adaptive Power Lifting team and Brandon trained with him for 12 weeks leading up to the trials. He's also working with Coach Mary Hobbs who is a judge in para powerlifting and doing a lot of training from home with a regular weight bench that has been modified to make it an equal playing field for all the competitors.

March 2024 Update

Brandon got 10 medals in Las Vegas and qualified to compete in four events at the Warrior Games: Power Lifting, Track, Seated Volleyball and Hand Cycling. Brandon said, "This is my last year to be involved and let the other new up and coming people compete. I just feel like it's my time - I have three kids and I rely on my parents to watch them for two weeks or a month at a time. It's hard to keep asking them to do that."



April 2024

Texas Regional Games, San Antonio, TX (texasregionalgames.com)

Texas Regional Para Sport works with adaptive sports groups to provide sporting programs.

June 2024

Warrior Games (dodwarriorgames.com)

For the Warrior Games, Disney Orlando is closed to the public as they host the athletes and their families. Brandon is eligible for Paralympic sports like power lifting, seated volleyball and track potentially competing at the Paralympics in 2028.

October 2024



US Paralympic Team Trials, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Development and Training Camp to classify for the Paralympics (the website is not active yet).

“I never thought I would be in any competition. I was told, ‘You’ll never...’ In reality, I can’t train full time because it’s expensive and I need to work – I love to work – as a tree trimmer. But these organizations are worthy because they bring visibility to the events and to the people who compete and support us.”



You Can!

Brandon needs Para equipment at home so he can train properly on competition-style benches and other adaptive equipment. They are specialized with wider surfaces and built-in safety features. That would save him from a six-hour round trip to Coach Sutherlin’s gym. He also needs financial support for his family to join him in Orlando this Summer.

If you would like to support Brandon and be part of “I Can!”

Visit Brandon’s GoFundMe: gofund.me/c4a4f8fd

