

SUNDAY SHOWCASE

INVICTUS GAMES, MAY 8-12, DISNEY WORLD'S ESPN WIDE WORLD OF SPORTS COMPLEX

'YOU JUST KEEP GOING'



STEPHEN M. DOWELL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Javier Rodriguez of St. Cloud passes during practice for the Orlando Magic Wheels wheelchair basketball team. He is expected to play 2 sports at the Invictus Games in May at Disney.

Navy man who lost leg still in the game

By **STEPHEN RUIZ**
Staff Writer

What Edna Sandin now calls the best decision she and her husband ever made began with her feeling faint.

As Javier Rodriguez prepared to be wheeled into surgery nearly three years ago in San Diego, last-minute doubts consumed Sandin. Her anxiety was as transparent as plastic wrap.

"I was thinking, 'Oh, my God. What are we doing? This is your leg,'" Sandin said. "He saw my face, and I was going to cry. I told him, 'Honey, I am going outside.' He almost told the doctor, 'Let's cancel the surgery,' but he said, 'No, no, no. It is going to be OK.'"

"That's a leg that he had for 30 years, and to not have it . . ."

Rodriguez, a retired chief petty officer in the U.S. Navy who lives in St. Cloud, lost use of his left leg long before it was amputated. A motorcycle accident in January 2011 severely damaged both legs.

"Once I woke up and I didn't have the leg, it was a normal thing," said Rodriguez, who is scheduled to compete in wheelchair basketball and wheelchair tennis at the Invictus Games from May 8-12 at Disney World. "I was ready to move forward. Every now and then, for the next couple of months, I would wake up, look at it and say, 'How did I get to this point?' But you get up and get going. You just keep going."

Rodriguez, 34, has competed in three Warrior Games for wounded, ill and injured U.S. service members. He was on the U.S. wheelchair basketball team that lost to the United Kingdom in the gold-medal game at the first Invictus Games in 2014 in London.

Founded by Prince Harry, the Invictus Games are the only international competition for wounded warriors. They were not staged last year.

"[Playing sports] is part of who he is," Vicky Gosling, co-CEO of the Invictus Games, said of Rodriguez. "There should be nothing to stop him. It is key that we are actually facilitating sports for the men and women who have given so much. It is making sure that we are looking after their needs the best way we possibly can."

Rodriguez's path to the Invictus Games began with a gruesome collision with a car on a highway in Hawaii, where he was stationed.

He was riding his 2008 Honda CBR1000RR motorcycle when it was struck. The impact threw the native of Bayamón, Puerto Rico, over his bike, causing him to roll on the pavement.



STEPHEN M. DOWELL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Invictus Games athlete Javier Rodriguez, who is retired from the Navy, is with his wife, Edna Sandin, and their children: Eddier, 9, and Aulani, 2.

He was in the path of oncoming traffic.

"All I could think about was, 'Watch for cars. Watch for cars,'" Rodriguez said. "As soon as I stopped, I looked up and saw the cars stopping. When I went to get myself off the road, I couldn't move my legs. Both legs were turned in ways that I never could imagine."

Rodriguez did not lose consciousness.

"I pushed myself off the street," he said. "People came to my aid and stuff, and that helped a lot. I remember calling people to pick up my wife. I got in the ambulance and got to the hospital."

"I remember getting out of the ambulance, and the first thing my wife said is, 'No more motorcycles.' I was like, 'Really? I might not make it out of this. I know I am not going to get on a bike again.'"

Rodriguez was placed in an induced coma for a week. When he awoke, Sandin said, the first thing that Rodriguez did was to call his captain and tell him he would be into work the next day.

Rodriguez was not going anywhere.

"To see him in intensive care was so hard, with all those machines," Sandin said.

Because his right leg was in better shape than the left, Rodriguez endured several surgeries to restore some function to it. Once that agonizing goal was achieved, he considered what to do with his left leg.

While the leg remained attached to his body, Rodriguez realized it likely was too far gone.

"My left leg did not have anything," he said. "I mean, there were

options. The probability of me using it as a useful leg was very, very low, so I decided not to use my upper-body muscles and skin to try to save it."

Doctors had discussed amputation with the couple, but they required a gentle push to reach that point of no return. The Pacific trials for the Warrior Games in late 2012 in Hawaii provided it.

Rodriguez never had been around adaptive sports, so what he witnessed that day was eye-opening. He saw people with prosthetics doing activities he could not. He saw them playing sports, having fun, competing, enjoying levels of mobility that used to be as simple for him as bouncing a basketball.

"I hadn't tried out any of the sports," Rodriguez said. "My [recreational] therapist said, 'You go. We sign you up for everything. You are going to do it. You will be fine.' I did pretty well in a lot of stuff."

Except basketball. Rodriguez could not play because his left leg "was kind of straight" and kept popping out of his wheelchair, presenting a hazard to himself and others. His mindset changed regarding the loss of his leg.

"I was like, '[Amputation's] was the right answer,'" he said.

The surgery was performed 2½ years after Rodriguez's accident, in July 2013. Since then, he has immersed himself in several sports. Besides basketball and tennis, Rodriguez has participated in track and field, sitting volleyball and hand cycling, among others.

Kirk Bauer, CEO of Disabled Sports USA, said maintaining an active lifestyle is part of the com-

mon core of wounded warriors. More than 60,000 people, not only wounded warriors but also youths and adults, compete in events sanctioned by Disabled Sports USA, a nonprofit based in Maryland.

"They are down, and they have lost their sense of self literally," said Bauer, a Vietnam War veteran who had part of his left leg amputated. "They don't know who they are anymore, and what they see [in adaptive sports] is something to get them to believe in themselves again."

During a recent three-on-three scrimmage for the Orlando Magic Wheels, Rodriguez showed his basketball skills. In one stretch, he sank a 12-foot shot, converted a short attempt for two more points, deftly passed inside the lane for an assist and caught the ball one-handed and immediately redirected it into the basket.

As players wheeled in and out of traffic — setting picks, searching for pockets of space — their wheelchairs became almost like bumper cars. The metal on metal allowed the good times to roll.

"We get up in the morning; we're disabled," said Jack Roudabush, coach of the Wheels. "Hanging out and being around a lot of other people with the same type of difficulties every day makes everything better."

"The sport gets pretty intense. We will be out there with the other teams, and we will try to beat each other up. At the end of the day, we're still all friends, and that's what is important."

Miguel Santiesteban, who was deployed with Rodriguez in Puerto Rico, works at the Navy Medicine Professional Development Center in Bethesda, Md. Santiesteban has been in the Navy for 26 years, so sources of inspiration are all around him.

He said Rodriguez is one of them.

"He didn't let the injuries stop him," Santiesteban said. "He kept pushing forward, very positive, and he is where he is today because of it."

As Rodriguez anticipates the arrival of the Invictus Games, he will be supported by his wife, son Eddier, 9, and daughter Aulani, 2, and so many others. He will join the roughly 500 other athletes expected to compete in 10 sports.

Swimmer Michael Roggio, a retired Navy petty officer 3rd class from New Smyrna Beach, is the only other Invictus Games athlete believed to have ties to Central Florida.

"I have an amazing family and friends, but that can push you only

INVICTUS GAMES

■ **What:** The only international competition for wounded, injured or ill active or retired military service members.

■ **When:** May 8-12

■ **Where:** Disney's ESPN Wide World of Sports

■ **Schedule: Sunday, May 8** — opening ceremonies. **Monday, May 9** — powerlifting, 8-11 a.m.; cycling, 8:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.; rowing, 1:30-4:30; archery, 7-10.

Tuesday, May 10 — track and field, 8 a.m.-1 p.m.; sitting volleyball semifinals, 2-4:30; sitting volleyball gold- and bronze-medal matches, 7-9:30.

Wednesday, May 11 — swimming, 8 a.m.-1 p.m.; wheelchair rugby semifinals, 2-4:30; wheelchair tennis semifinals, 4:30-6:30; wheelchair rugby gold- and bronze-medal matches, 7:30-11.

Thursday, May 12 — wheelchair tennis final, 8-10 a.m.; wheelchair basketball semifinals, 10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.; wheelchair basketball gold- and bronze-medal matches, 2-4; closing ceremonies

■ **Competing nations:** United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Netherlands, Jordan, Italy, Iraq, Germany, Georgia, France, Estonia, Denmark, Canada, Australia, Afghanistan

■ **Competitors:** More than 500 expected

■ **Tickets:** Single session — ages 10-59, \$18; children 3-9, military and seniors 60-over, \$13; children under 3, free.

Opening ceremonies — ages 10-59, \$65; children 3-9, military and seniors 60-over, \$45, children under 3, free

■ **Broadcast:** TV — coverage on ESPN2. Online — ESPN3.com. Livestream — WatchESPN app.

■ **Website:** invictusgames2016.org

so far," Rodriguez said. "You need outlets. You need stuff to do. It is not only mentally. You need something physically. I had the support I needed mentally, but if I wouldn't have those sports or anything, I really don't know."

Thankfully, Rodriguez does not have to find out.

All because of the best decision he and his wife ever made.

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