

UVU magazine



A BEACON OF COURAGE

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PUBLISHER

Jeri L. Allphin '95

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Chris Taylor '97

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Melinda R. Colton

ART DIRECTOR

Matthew Dee Bamrough '98

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Kaitlyn Mahoney

ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR

Joshua Mack Storer '12

STAFF WRITERS

Kellene Ricks Adams

Layton Shumway

PHOTOGRAPHY

Jay Drowns

Nathaniel Ray Edwards '12

August Miller

ILLUSTRATION & DESIGN

Amanda J. Boshard '11

Sam Hadlock '14

Macy McClellan '17

Jennifer Pickering '15

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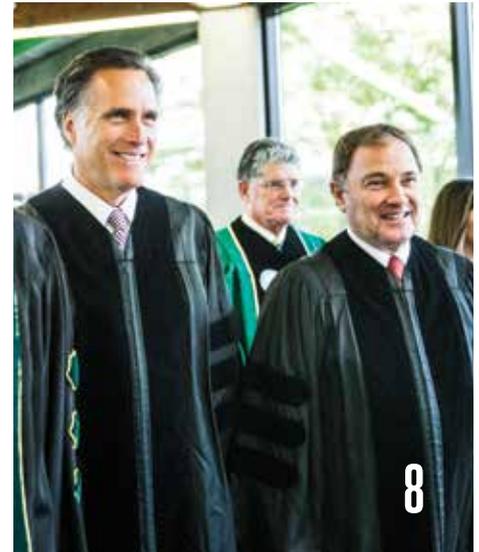
Amie Hunstman '09

uvumagazine@uvu.edu

FEEDBACK

uvumagazine@uvu.edu

801-863-8179



ON THE COVER: A BEACON OF COURAGE

Alum Porter Hancock shares his inspiring story.

Cover photo by Jay Drowns



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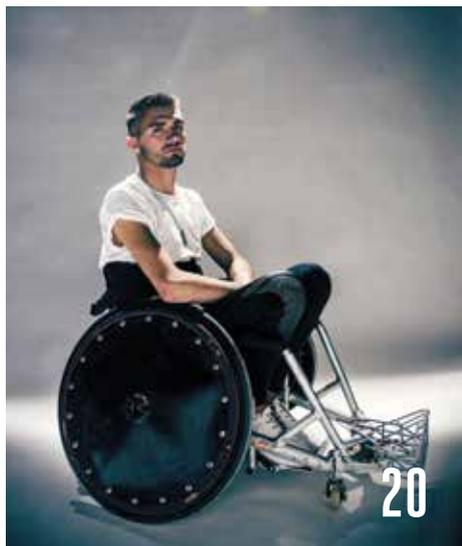
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A BEACON OF COURAGE

UVU alum Porter Hancock pushes through the challenges of his new life and finds motivation in wheelchair rugby

by Melinda R. Colton
photography by Jay Drowns

It happened in an instant.

Porter Hancock was starting his first high school football game at South Summit High in Kamas, Utah, in 2011. Tragedy struck in the third quarter when the 16-year-old linebacker and running back blocked a tackle and his head collided with another player's shoulder.

"I remember the tackle," Hancock says. "A warm sensation came over me. I felt no pain. I was calm. I drifted in and out of consciousness and didn't wake up until the next morning."

He dislocated his neck and underwent emergency surgery that night to repair his neck and remove two discs. Doctors told Hancock he was paralyzed from the chest down. But Hancock has always had a fighting spirit; it's what drives him. So instead of giving up, he put all his energy into looking forward.



Many wheelchair rugby players will wrap their hands before games, wear specialized gloves, and use a tacky substances to better control the ball and protect against blisters and hand injuries.

"My motto for life parallels that of wheelchair rugby, which is, 'smashing stereotypes, one wheelchair at a time.'"

MENTAL FORTITUDE

What followed was months of intense physical therapy. Hancock immersed himself in therapy, accomplishing everything asked of him, hoping it would change his outcome. It wasn't until a year later that doctors actually said the words: "you'll never walk again."

Once again, Hancock's determination superseded that crushing news. His new focus became rehab and improving the function in his arms. And when he wasn't working on his physical strength, he was getting serious about improving his mental strength.

"Being mentally strong isn't something you're born with," Hancock says. "It's something that's instilled in you at a young age, and you wake up every day to nourish and strengthen it."

It wasn't until his accident that Hancock discovered that he was capable of achieving, both in body and mind. "My physical strength has been taken and my mental strength tested, but it hasn't been broken. I've learned that mental strength far outweighs any physical strength you think you have. Mental fortitude propels you and picks you up when you are in a bad circumstance," he says. "It gives you the strength to know that this isn't the end and that there are other great things out there for you."

In April, Hancock earned his associate degree in communication at UVU's Wasatch Campus in Heber City. The campus was ideal for him because he lives in nearby Oakley and values the small campus environment. He knew everyone, and everyone knew him.

"Porter is one of the most respected and highly regarded students at this campus," says Mike Walker, assistant administrator at Wasatch Campus. "Students flock to his infectious personality and see him as a beacon of both hope and courage. He is an everyday person doing everyday things but in an uncommon and extraordinary way. His legacy here is one of inspiration."

A NEW PASSION

Knowing how much Hancock loves sports — and loves to excel — his physical therapist suggested he try wheelchair rugby.

"I went to my first practice at Copperview Recreation Center [in Midvale, Utah]," recalls Hancock. "There were guys flying all around, and I could barely push my wheelchair."

Hancock participated sporadically, playing a dozen or so times his first season. "I still needed help getting in and out of my chair, so my buddies would go with me. Before long I recognized what a great workout rugby was and knew I needed to take advantage of it."

About a year and half ago he realized he had found a new interest — and a new motivation.

Today, Hancock can be found at the rec center just about every Friday and Saturday night, working on perfecting his new-found passion.

Now that he takes rugby more seriously, Hancock combines his love for the outdoors with his conditioning, pushing his wheelchair on the back roads and hills of Oakley.



Wheelchair rugby players will use specially designed and engineered sports chairs that help with speed, and to navigate the pace of the game. Hancock's chair is equipped with a bumper/picker to help in his defensive role.

"There are some very desolate roads near my home. When it's just me and the empty roads it feels freeing. It used to be with every stride I took, but now it's with every push I make. There's just something about pushing your physical limits. I started with a mile and now push seven to eight miles a day," he says. "I'm finding myself when I'm out there. I've fallen in love with pushing my boundaries and being all that I can be."

"My focus right now is to be the best at what I want to do, both physically and mentally."

When he's not pushing himself up and down hills, Hancock does weight training at home. "As a quadriplegic I can't let myself go. I lost 50 pounds the first month after my accident. Now that I'm working out and pushing myself, I've put 20 pounds back on."

With each rugby practice and game, Hancock feels stronger and more confident in his abilities. "Rugby gives me focus, drive, and glory, and shows me what I'm made of. It shows me how much heart I have."

It wasn't long before Hancock was able to parlay his passion into a competitive opportunity. Professional wheelchair rugby isn't new to Utah. In fact, Utah has won a national championship but doesn't currently have a team due to the lack of players and interest. Two Utah players and Hancock were fortunate to be invited by the coaches of the Sierra Storm Quadrugby Team, based in Reno, Nev., to train and compete with them. "Thanks to my teammates, I

A person in a wheelchair is shown from the back, with their arms outstretched horizontally. They are positioned in the lower half of the frame, silhouetted against a bright, low sun that creates a large lens flare and illuminates the scene from behind. The background is a clear, bright sky. The overall mood is one of triumph and resilience.

"I've learned that mental strength far outweighs any physical strength you think you have."

Hancock is considered quadriplegic. He is paralyzed from the chest down. He has limited muscles in his back, no abdominal muscles, and no control of his fingers. With help from his doctors he has gained strength and mobility to allow him to play wheelchair rugby.

just happened to be at the right place at the right time,” he says.

Wheelchair rugby players are assessed into seven classifications — between 0.5 to 3.5 points. The lower level points indicate less functional mobility and the higher points indicate greater functional mobility. Hancock plays at a 1.0 and plays as a defender.

The Sierra Storm competed this spring at Division-II nationals in Kentucky and finished third, giving Hancock, one of the youngest competitors, the exposure he needs to move his dream forward.

“I think I can be good at this. I know it will require an incredible amount of effort,” he says, adding his ultimate goal is to compete in the U.S. Paralympic Games. “I believe I’m the kind of player the U.S. team needs.”

Hancock spent the summer conditioning and will start more intense training this fall in preparation for a new rugby season. He eventually hopes to transfer to the University of Arizona and participate on its NCAA Division-I wheelchair rugby team while pursuing a bachelor’s degree in communication. “My focus right now is to be the best at what I want to do, both physically and mentally.”

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Hancock is a planner and is always thinking about his next move. In June he completed the Utah Valley half marathon in Provo. “Training for it kept me motivated while I worked out. It kept me pushing myself.”

In addition to pushing himself physically and mentally, Hancock uses his experiences to help inspire others toward greatness: he often shares his story with young people and fellow students who need motivation to move past their circumstances. He exemplifies his message of determination and perseverance on a daily basis.

But that’s not to say it has been an easy process.

Learning to adjust to his injury has led him to realize how generous people are — with their time, their money, and their kindness — and how much he has depended on that generosity. His friends, his community, and complete strangers have encouraged and supported his journey.

“My friends are more like brothers to me,” Hancock observes. “The nurses referred to my hospital room as a ‘revolving door’ because people came in and out of my room all day long.”

Now four years later, his friends and family are still there to support and encourage him. Hancock’s mother and three sisters have been a tremendous support. “My mom is strong on the outside, but she knew the things I love most were taken away from me,” he says. “This has been harder for her than for me.”

For now, Hancock continues to train and perfect the sport he has grown to love — six days a week, complete with weight training, pushing up and down the hills of the Wasatch Back, and performing agility drills for quickness. “There are a lot of other sports for wheelchairs that are less physical, but I wanted to play the most physical and most demanding one. It’s just who I am.”

Rules of the Game

Wheelchair rugby has been around since the '70s. The game is played indoors on a hardwood court and combines the sports of basketball, ice hockey, and handball. Originally called “murderball,” it is a contact sport, and physical contact between wheelchairs is an integral part of the game. A volleyball must be bounced or passed between teammates at least once every 10 seconds during play. The sport is played in four eight-minute, stop-time quarters with goal lines marked by cones and a lined-off key area. All players are classified based on their abilities from 0.5 to 3.5 points. Four players from each team are allowed on the court at a time, and the classification value between all four players cannot exceed 8.0 points. The object of the game is to score a goal by crossing the goal line with possession of the ball while the opposing team is defending that goal.

— SOURCE: USQRA WHEELCHAIR RUGBY, USQRA.ORG

