

THE WATER WARRIOR

After a series of injuries put his active military career on hold, U.S. Navy Hospital Corpsman 1st Class **Jamie Sclater '02** has found strength—and healing—in the pool.

BY KRISTIN SIMONETTI '05

FIVE.



THAT NUMBER carries special meaning for Jamie Sclater '02, for that's the number of medals he earned—two gold, two silver, one bronze—at the September 2014 Warrior Games in Colorado Springs, Colo.

But another number has significance to Sclater's dominance at the games, a competition for wounded, ill and injured U.S. servicemen and women. That number is four: the major surgeries he endured in the past two years and the reason he's qualified to compete as a Wounded Warrior.

Sclater's injuries began in 2012, when he spent months training to join a U.S. Navy Special Warfare Unit team. After a series of long muck runs, he experienced searing pains in his right leg. He recalls the continuous ache he felt as he attended Elon's 2012 Top 10 Under 10 Awards ceremony, during which he was honored for his Navy service. When he returned to duty, his pain worsened, and a routine screening by the Navy diagnosed the cause: a ruptured disc in his lower back due to wear and tear—he had pushed himself beyond what his body could handle. He underwent surgery that August, something that delayed his career plans but hardly deterred him. "I did everything I could—stretching, diet, hydration; getting in the gym and slinging weights," he recalls.

Workouts and physical therapy appointments wedged into a tight work schedule built Sclater up to the point where he began a light running regimen. One morning in October 2013, he woke up to start another day of training. "A soon as I got out of bed, I felt it," Sclater recalls. An unbearable pain radiating throughout his body. "I had a panic attack, but I was able to call for help. I had emergency surgery to repair another severely ruptured disc in my spine."

The initial injury affected Sclater's right leg; this one ravaged his left, leaving him with drop foot, a condition in which the tendons

of the lower leg can't keep the front of the foot upright on its own. He wears a brace to normalize his walking gait. Weight-bearing activities, required for sniper duties with the Special Operations Unit, were now out of the question. "It was so taxing on my mind," he says. "Even the process of getting up and going to work was too much." His doctor and his psychologist noticed his struggles and, in December 2013, pulled him from active duty. They gave him deceptively simple orders: Sclater's new full-time job would be to rehabilitate and get healthy.

That's when Michael Kleinert, the swimming coach at the Wounded Warrior Battalion-West Regiment at California's Camp Pendleton, remembers meeting him for the first time. "One of the lifeguards pointed out this guy who'd get in the pool after we left," Kleinert says. "The guy obviously could swim well, so I started talking to him." The partnership began with Kleinert giving Sclater a few training pointers. Soon afterward, Sclater joined Kleinert's team. "I was thinking, 'What can I do that will keep me in the physical shape I need to stay actively engaged in the military?'" Sclater recalls. "The answer was: the pool. So that's where I went."

Sclater swam in his childhood and even ranked in his Northern Virginia summer league as a teenager. Despite more than a decade out of the water, he has flourished under Kleinert's tutelage and the care of the Wounded Warrior Battalion's doctors and athletic trainers. He participated in the Marine Corps Warrior Trials with Kleinert's team in March 2014, performing well enough in the pool and on the shooting range to qualify for September's Warrior Games.

Then another setback. Sclater required more surgery to fuse two vertebrae in the area of his original 2012 injury—a particularly intense operation mere months before the Warrior Games. "I wasn't really sure how he

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was going to come out of that one," Kleinert acknowledges. "I don't think he was sure, either."

Yet Sclater came out blazing, winning gold medals in the 100-meter freestyle and 50-meter breaststroke events. He earned silver medals in the 50-meter freestyle and backstroke events. For good measure, he added a fifth medal: a bronze in shooting. Lost in Sclater's medal haul? His time in the 50-meter breaststroke was just a half-second shy of the American record in his classification. (Sclater participates in the International Paralympic Committee's SB9 category, which includes breaststroke swimmers with limited physical impairment, such as significant loss of joint function.)

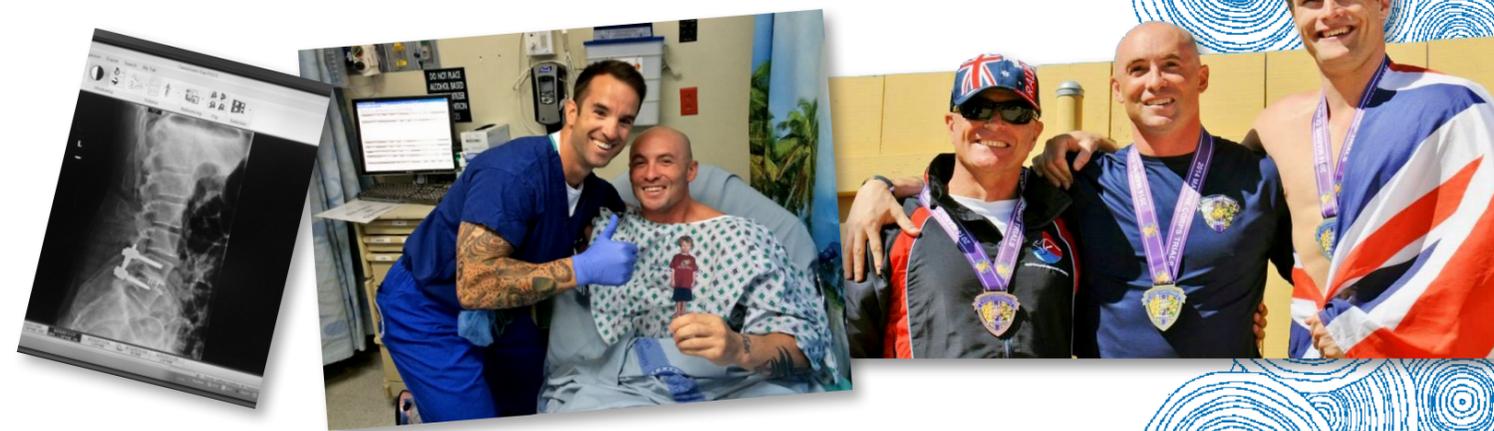
Despite facing another surgery right after the Warrior Games to repair discs in his neck and nerve damage to his right arm, Sclater jumped right back in the water to train for a U.S. Masters meet in San Diego on Nov. 23. Sclater competed as the only Paralympic athlete in his age group, but that detail didn't matter. He took the top spot in three events: the 50-, 100- and 200-meter breaststroke.

"I never thought of him as a swimmer, but after seeing him in the pool, it seemed completely natural to him," says Dan Evans '04, a Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity brother of Sclater's who attended the meet. "Jamie has served his country and his school proudly as a warrior and an athlete. I look forward to seeing what he does next."

What's next might be a pretty big deal: Sclater's Warrior Games finishes may qualify him for the Can-Am Paralympic World Championship Trials in Toronto in March. It's a challenge he can't wait to train for. "I don't want to give up because, who knows? That surgery in October might be the last surgery I ever need," he says. "If I keep pushing forward, maybe this is an opportunity to go back to do something normal again."

"Normal" for him may be a relative term. A Warrior Games-like showing in the Can-Am meet opens the door to July's Paralympic World Swimming Championships in Scotland. That, in turn, may lead to a spot on Team USA's roster for the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. For now, though, Sclater's focus is on the near term and the new-found purpose swimming has brought to his life.

"When I walk out onto that pool deck, I hope I'm representing everyone I'm connected to—the Navy, the Marine Corps, the guys I've served with, Elon University, my Lambda Chi Alpha brothers and my family—in the best way that I can," he says. ♣



{ Bottom left: Jamie Sclater '02 swimming to a gold medal in the 100-meter freestyle at the Warrior Games in September. Top: left: An X-ray of his lumbar spine after the 2014 Marine Corps Trials; posing with Lambda Chi Alpha's Flat Finn and friend Jay Clancy during a hospital visit; with the top finishers at the trials. }

