

TEAM PEGASUS, SQUAD22 AND BEING A TEAM

Beth Lamie – February 2019

In the summer of 2012, Mike and I made what was our annual trip to Guilford New Hampshire for the Timberman Triathlon festival. We had several athletes racing, including two guys who would be doing their first half ironman. Jonathan Levine would be traveling up from New Jersey and this would be the first time I was meeting him in person since I had begun coaching him at the beginning of the year. Jay Oberton had been training with Team Pegasus for almost a year, and both would be doing their first Ironman later that year.

Jimmy Bunnell qualified for 70.3 worlds – a goal we had been reaching for all year, but other than that I remember very little about how our athletes *performed*. What I do remember is how much fun we all had, especially during the pre-race training on the course and at the carbo-load breakfast. Team events are always a great bonding experience, and because 3 of our guys – Jonathan, Jay, and Chris Kullak - were expecting babies early the next year, it made the event and the bonding even more special.

After the race, Mike and I stopped at the Tilden Diner and just as we were finishing our lunch, we noticed Jay Oberton and his wife, Mandy, at a different table. We stopped by to congratulate them on our way out, and just as we were about to get into the car, Jay called out to us – he had one more thing.

Jay is a Lt. Colonel in the Army and he has been on 3 tours. I was honored to have him training with us, but he told me how special the race had been for him and how *he* was honored to be on the team. Then he handed me a small, flat box. I opened the box to find a military challenge coin. Traditionally, these coins were given to prove membership when challenged and to enhance morale. Challenge coins are typically presented by unit commanders to recognize the unit's exceptional accomplishments. Receiving this from Jay has been one of the great privileges of my life!



Seven years later, Jay is still a member of our team, and I've thought a lot about the challenge coin, and what it means to be a team in those intervening years.

One of the best things about Team Pegasus is the loyalty of our athletes. They may join the team to train for a particular race, but they stay on the team long after their original goals have been met. In the nearly 20 years that Team Pegasus has been in existence, we've had marriages, births, graduations, deployments and adoptions. We've also had divorce, illness, and, sadly even a death on the team. We are there for each other during all our adventures or mishaps - complete successes or near misses - the team really shines when a teammate is struggling or soaring in their personal life. When I think back on all my racing and training memories – whether it's my events or the events of my athletes – it's not the finish line I remember. It's the good times we had getting there.

Late last year, when Jay and I talked about what adventures he wanted to do in 2019, he told me that he



wanted to add something to his race roster. It wasn't another ultramarathon or Ironman that he wanted to add to the roster. Jay wanted to make his racing about something other than him – a popular idea that other athletes have done. In 2016, Dave DeSantis did 16 XTerra races while raising money for the Challenged Athletes Foundation. Dave's 16in2016 campaign then inspired pro triathlete Cait Snow to do 17 events in 2017 while raising money for More Than Sport.

Jay wanted to bring attention to the epidemic of veteran suicides. The VA National Suicide Data Report from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs compares

suicides among veterans and non-veterans, and has statistics on age and gender comparisons as well as methods of suicides.

The rates of suicide among both populations – veterans and non-veterans – increased every year from 2005 to 2016, but the rate of veteran suicide has always been significantly higher than the general population: 1.5 times higher rate of suicide for men, and 1.8 times higher for female veterans vs. the general population. On average, veterans commit suicide at a staggering rate of 22 per day, or one every 65 minutes. And while some veterans are pushing back at this statistic as one that makes all veterans seem 'fragile', the first step to fixing a problem is admitting that there is a problem.

Jay wondered about getting Team Pegasus involved and while I gave him an unqualified 'yes', I wasn't sure what we could do to help. We could raise money, but I don't know that we could raise enough money to make a dent in the problem, and I'm not sure *lack* of money has anything to do with it. But raise awareness? That we can do. So, I set out to learn what I could about veteran suicide, the theory of its causes and what's currently being done to prevent it. Jay named the project Squad22, and we have their logo on the team helmets to create awareness and show support.

RISK FACTORS AND WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDE

I've personally been affected by suicide – more than once. I used to think it was rare to know someone who took their own life, but I'm not sure if my experience is radically different than others, especially if you've lived long enough. The effects of suicide go beyond the person who acts to take his or her life: it can have a lasting effect on family, friends, and communities. One thing everyone asks when someone close to you commits suicide is, "Why did they do it?" What people are really asking is if there was some specific event that happened that sent the deceased over the edge. But the fact is, there's no single cause for suicide. Suicide most often occurs when stressors or health issues converge to create a feeling of isolation, hopelessness and despair. Survivors are often left thinking, "I wish I knew – I would have done something" or worse, "Did I know? Were there signs that I didn't pick up on?"

Risk factors increase the probability a suicidal crisis will occur. **Warning signs** indicate a suicidal crisis has already begun.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, some of the risk factors for suicide include:

- Substance abuse disorder
- Having guns in the house
- Impulsive or aggressive tendencies

- Family history of suicide
- Chronic/terminal illness
- Depression and other mental health disorders
- Adult or childhood exposure to violence or victimization

However

- 10% of Americans have a drug-use disorder at some point in their lives¹.
- Three-in-ten American adults say they currently own a gun, and another 11% say they don't personally own a gun but live with someone who does².
- Incurable and ongoing, chronic diseases affect approximately **133 million Americans**, representing more than **40%** of the total population of this country. These rates are projected to grow to an estimated 157 million, with 81 million having multiple conditions³.

So, as you can see, these *risk factors* apply to literally millions of people, but even among people with multiple risk factors, most do not attempt suicide. I thought it might be more useful to see who *doesn't* commit suicide, even when multiple risk factors are present.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors are personal or environmental characteristics that help protect people from suicide.

Major protective factors from suicide include:

- [Effective behavioral health care](#)
- [Life skills](#) (including problem solving skills and coping skills, ability to adapt to change)
- Cultural, religious, or personal beliefs that discourage suicide
- [Connectedness](#) to individuals, family, community, and social institutions
- Self-esteem and a [sense of purpose](#) or meaning in life

I wanted to focus on the last two – connectedness and sense of purpose – as these two seem to be the ones that we can do something about right now, and the absence of these two protective factors are the ones cited most often when talking about veteran suicide.

CONNECTEDNESS, SELF ESTEEM AND A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Sometimes it feels like our culture has reached a saturation point in its focus on the pursuit of happiness: Thousands of books, blogs, and websites promise a pathway to Nirvana. Some techniques are empirically validated like exercise, mindfulness, and gratitude. But more and more research is starting to delineate between happiness in terms of pleasure versus happiness in terms of a sense of purpose and meaning.

Pleasure sometimes focuses on hedonic experiences that are positive in the moment, but might ultimately make us feel worse: impulsive spending, irresponsible sexual interactions, unhealthy food choices, or substance abuse. But studies show that long-term happiness comes from a sense of purpose that increases our *sense of connectedness to deeper values*.



Sense of purpose doesn't have to involve the cure of cancer or establishing world peace. Having others who depend on you – children, co-workers, even teammates – provides a sense of purpose, even if it doesn't feel that way in the moment. People may sometimes feel underappreciated (see [gratitude](#)), but responsibilities do feel to us like reasons for living.

Soldiers, whether deployed or stateside, almost always have a larger sense of purpose. They are tasked with keeping us safe and saving our democracy. They are treated with respect, and are judged by how they act and what they represent, not by what they have.

Logic would tell us that it's the traumas experienced during war that lead to the high suicide levels of veterans. They are shooting at people, they are killing people, they are getting shot at, seeing their friends get killed. It's incredibly traumatic. But in addition to all the destruction and loss of life, war also inspires ancient human virtues of courage, loyalty and self-sacrifice that can be utterly intoxicating to the people who experience them.

Author and war correspondent Sebastian Junger has studied war, soldiers and veterans extensively and theorizes that many of today's veterans owe their distress *less to traumatic experiences during their deployments and more to the inevitable sense of alienation and feelings of being unnecessary that they experience on return.*

Soldiers, says Junger, experience a sort of tribal closeness in their unit. They eat together, sleep together, do tasks and missions together. They trust each other with their lives. And while the soldiers might not get along with everyone in their unit, they don't focus on petty differences because their lives depend on macro-focus. This unit cohesion is a buffer for stress and the psychological horrors of war.

It's important to note that of today's soldiers, only one in 10 veterans will experience actual combat. However, about half of our military has filed for PTSD compensation from the government. We've all heard the tragic statistic that in this country 22 vets a day, on average, take their own lives. But, there's no statistical connection between combat and suicide. That's not to say that the trauma of war is not linked to acute PTSD, but even if you do experience combat, you are no more likely to take your own life than if you weren't.

Could it be, then, that what determines the rate of depression, long-term PTSD and suicide isn't what happened to the soldiers during war, but the kind of society they came back to? Studies show that those who experience trauma in their lives, but are part of a cohesive, tribal society, recover quickly. Maybe what suicidal veterans experience isn't reaction to trauma, but the profound readjustment from platoon life to an alienating, modern society. Maybe the problem isn't them, the vets; maybe the problem is us. "Modern society has perfected the art of making people not feel necessary," Junger writes.

This alienation and lack of connectedness is exactly what experts cite as a common thread among all those who attempt or commit suicide. In fact, anthropologists trace the beginnings of this isolation to the 1950s – a time that many think of as an ideal time in American society. Social historians pinpoint the postwar economic boom as the end of the nuclear family. Families came to be defined by a single breadwinner, and in unprecedented numbers they raised children in suburban isolation. However, in the sequestered suburbs, alcoholism, spousal abuse and abuse of children were far more widespread than anyone imagined.

Social historians also theorize that although the sole bread-winner felt a sense of purpose, this period in history marks a time of being defined by what you have rather than by your character, as well as a period of social isolation that has escalated to the point that today, an individual could go through their entire adult life rarely interacting with others. But we are social animals, deeply in need of the companionship that modern society does not provide, and we are starting to realize that chat rooms, social media and virtual training platforms are no replacement for meaningful human interaction.

As some have said, social media is to friendship as junk food is to nutrition. It may fill you up, but you aren't getting what you really need. Others have suggested calling it *anti-social* media, because it tries, and fails, to replace actual human contact. By the way, did you know that there is a way to set your Facebook feed to automatically 'like' posts from your friends, and you can set Strava to give 'auto-kudos'???? Is friendship supposed to be efficient?

So how do we ensure that we take our mental and emotional health as seriously as we do our physical health? And how do we help others, including veterans who have literally volunteered to do whatever we ask of them to keep us safe?

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It turns out, that by helping others we help ourselves. One of the most fundamental human needs is the need to belong. Noted psychologist, [Abraham Maslow](#), identified love and belonging as one of the five basic needs. Being connected is good for our health. It has a positive effect on everything from blood pressure to sleep, and those of us with the strongest social bonds live longer. But not every relationship has equal power—it's the *quality of a bond* that matters most. A good friendship, close family members and romantic partners are quality relationships that should be nurtured. A Facebook 'like', not so much.

Frequency of interaction matters. The proof is in our hormones. When we laugh, tell stories or play together, it triggers a cascade of endorphins that give us a mild high. We feel relaxed and contented and rewarded by the people we're with. Studies have even shown that laughing increases our pain threshold. This biological response to social activities reinforces and rewards our desire for connection.



Friendship is powerful in part because it's the antidote to loneliness, which can be deadly.

Loneliness leads to increased mortality, depression, aggression and stress, as well as social withdrawal, poorer sleep and elevated blood pressure. As more and more people in our society live and even work alone, isolation can be a factor. If you haven't seen a friend or teammate in a while, reach out - call, email, write a letter. Avoid the temptation to check social media to see if they've posted anything. It can take time to foster real connections, but the rewards are huge – for both parties! Remember the lonely among us, and don't get so caught up in your own troubles that you forget to reach out to friends. And if you are one of the lonely, accept our offers to join us.

A CALL TO ACTION

Chances are you are already being a good parent, friend, son or daughter. But being on a team can provide unique benefits that we don't often get a chance to experience as adults in a competitive

society. A team is, by definition, a group of people who share common interests and values, and who encourage you to go after your goals and pursue your dreams.

Interacting with your team can be **motivating**. No one likes getting up at 4:30 am in the winter to jump into the pool and do laps. But, on Thursday mornings when you just want to roll over and sleep some more, you get out of bed and show up to swim because you have a team of people who will be there to train with you. And at your race later that summer, you are glad you did!

Training with others can provide **the impetus to improve**. You don't have to try to out-do your teammates, but they will encourage you to out-do yourself! Training with a team can also help you to not take yourself so seriously. When you have a good day, we'll celebrate, but when you are having a bad day (personally or in training), your teammates will lift you up and remind you that they have been there – and you've seen it! You don't get that by reading someone's Strava feed with only the good workouts! When you are training as a group, even the epic fails become fun!

Athletes on Team Pegasus have become **lifelong friends**. The same goes for the Masters Swim Team.



The things you experience together on a team build a bond that extends beyond training. Cherish these special friendships and work to keep them strong.

These people get you. They understand you. Even if you don't see eye to eye on everything, these are friends that will be there for you.

You never know what's going to happen when our group gets together, but after more than a dozen years training with various members of Team Pegasus, I have more funny memories than I could even imagine. Or, as science would say, "Getting together with a group of like-minded teammates provides a sense of happiness and well-being".

DON'T JUST BE ON A TEAM, BE A GOOD TEAM MEMBER

Know that we value you and really want you around. Show up to workouts as often as you can. If it's a situation where no one can start without you, be on time. If you cannot make it sometimes, that's fine. Life happens. But understand that you matter. We really do miss each and every one of you if we don't see you for a while. We are counting on you to be there. We want to train with you, to push you, and have you push us! It's the diversity of the group that makes it all work.

Reach out to others. If you know someone who is going through a tough time and you think they might enjoy running, or cycling or swimming – invite them to join us. Is there a soldier or veteran in your life who might be missing the camaraderie of being on a team? Please ask them to join us. They don't have to know anyone – we'll take care of that! Some say that "misery loves company". I prefer to say, "the more the merrier".

Thank you for reading. Please think about this as you interact with others. You understand what it means to have someone's back, and there's not enough of that in this world. Most of all, thank you for being a part of Team Pegasus!

REFERENCES

¹ National Institute of Health, November 18, 2015

² Pew Research Center, June 22, 2017

³ National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2013) Summary Health Statistics for the U.S. Population: National Health Interview Survey, 2012.

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