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Training to run

Double amputee prepares for triathlon

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Quinn Simons, 22, was dying on a mountain in Tibet. He had four frozen limbs and only a recurring vision of Deguello, a Spanish mustang, to keep him alive. He had no idea that his connection with this animal would save his life and restore his spirit.

Simons made it down the mountain alive, but the adventure cost him his fingers and his feet.

Today, Simons, now 32, is a thoroughbred trainer at Keeneland. And he hasn't lost his drive for adventure or his optimistic attitude. On Sunday, Simons will compete in a triathlon in Shelbyville.

Climbing came naturally to Simons, who grew up in the middle of the Rocky Mountains in New Mexico and

West Texas. Later, while he was attending Colorado College in Colorado Springs, the beautiful mountain scenery beckoned, and he became a climber.

Ten years ago, fresh out of college, Simons and friend Soren Peters set out to conquer the Himalayas. They chose Gurla Mandhata, a remote peak in Tibet. Their course was a route that had only two recorded ascents, and none by Americans. At 25,242 feet, the mountain was the third highest in Tibet.

"It was a dream trip in many ways," Simons said. "Maybe it's a Western thing. Today, a bunch of my old college buddies are Everest guides."

After a month of training on smaller mountains in Tibet to get in shape and to acclimate to the altitude, Simons, Peters and a guide set out for what was estimated to be a six-day climb on Gurla Mandhata.

Simons' father, Tom Simons, also an avid climber, had traveled to Tibet with them, but he decided at the last minute not to attempt the climb.

In traditional expeditionary climbing, dozens of porters, Sherpas and pack animals would be employed to carry hundreds of pounds of supplies from camp to camp. But Simons and his group were traveling in a radically different way -- Alpine style. They had no oxygen tanks, and they carried everything they needed on their backs. Unencumbered, they could make a quick ascent with minimal environmental impact.

But Alpine-style climbing carries a greater risk when things start to go wrong.

The mustang visits

During their ascent, violent weather struck, and their light two-man tent was inadequate to shelter the three of them. Their small stoves kept breaking down. On the fourth day of the climb, Simons began feeling weak and fatigued -- the first signs of edema, a dangerous buildup of fluid in the lungs and brain.

The weather steadily worsened. Within 100 feet of the summit, the group took a 3,000-foot tumble through snow and ice down the mountain. Lashed together with their picks and crampons, they sailed over a crevasse and landed in a heap on a narrow ledge.

Miraculously, no one was injured.

Trapped by storms, the group stretched their food by watering down soup and sharing Snickers bars.

Delusional and shivering at 20,000 feet, Simons had visions of Deguello, a mustang owned by a friend in New Mexico. He credits those mental images with giving him the strength to survive.



When the weather broke, they were able to begin the slow journey back down the mountain. By the time they reached base camp, their six-day trip had become 12.

One in the group suffered frostbite, but Simons' prognosis was by far the worst. He lost all of his fingers, and his feet had to be amputated above the ankle.

Meeting Deguello

Back home in New Mexico, there were two painful years of hospitals, surgeries and physical therapy. While still in a wheelchair, Simons ventured out to his friend's ranch to see Deguello.

Simons made fast friends with Deguello and was riding him even before he was fitted for his prostheses. Once he got his prosthetic feet, Simons realized he could ride and even train horses. He had found a path to a new career through Deguello.

He was unstoppable.

Building on a solid reputation as a trainer of mustangs in the Southwest, Simons began setting his sights on the thoroughbred racing world. Along the way, he met Johnny Jones, one of Kentucky's legendary horsemen and the former owner of Walmac Farm.

"I never treated him any different than anyone else, and he didn't ask," said Jones, who has been Simons' employer for a year and a half. "He can do anything anybody else can."

Mounting another challenge

A few months ago, Simons was at home, channel-surfing, and saw the Discovery Channel's coverage of the Ironman Triathlon in Kona, Hawaii. "There was a guy named David Rozelle," Simons said. "He was a captain in the Army who had lost his foot to an anti-tank mine in Iraq. His amputation was similar to mine, and here he was, biking, swimming and running with everyone else. It just blew me away. It was an inspiration. "Because of my prosthesis," Simons said, "it's necessary for me to be very health-conscious. I need to stay physically strong, and I need to regulate my weight very carefully. Training for a triathlon was starting to make sense to me."



On Sunday, Simons plans to run in the Max Performance Series, a USA Triathlon sanctioned event in Shelbyville. The components of the race are a 400-yard indoor pool swim, six miles of biking on rural roads, and a three-kilometer run through Clear Creek Park. Of the three events, he considers the swimming his biggest challenge, but he expects the running to be the most punishing.

"I never believed that I could run a marathon," Simons said. "It was totally out of my world of comprehension. Now I'm getting over the psychological hump that I would never be as athletic as I once was."

On any given evening after a day of horse training, Simons can be found cycling through the back roads around Keeneland with his training partner, Samuel

Clemmons. Simons also swims six days a week at a local gym. He swims primarily with his upper body, without any prosthesis.

"I'm a goal-oriented person," Simons said. "When I train horses, I expect maximum athletic performance. I think it's totally reasonable to expect the same from myself. I push the horses physically, the same way that I push myself."

He rides a standard road bicycle with minor modifications to the handlebars to help him brake. His running shoe is a homemade affair, fashioned by Simons' father, to fit on his state-of-the-art prosthetic foot.

"My dad is a pretty handy guy," Simons said. "It's kind of a low-budget solution, but it works well. It gives me the flex I need for running."

At home in the Bluegrass

In a small office in Training Barn C on Keeneland's back side, Simons takes a rare breather from a rigorous morning of training that began at 5 a.m. As shed row foreman, he's responsible for 20 stalls; half of them hold 2-year-olds and half 3-year-olds.

"I've been lucky since I came to Kentucky," Simons said, swallowing a couple of the Ibuprofen he relies on to manage the pain in his limbs. "I've been surrounded by knowledgeable people. I feel privileged to be embraced by the horse culture.

"Somehow I went from being an amputee training ranch horses in New Mexico, to training in an exclusive race barn in the horse capital of the world. I feel blessed. I'm very grateful."



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