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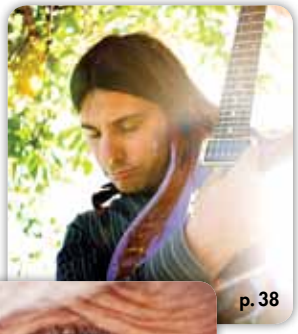

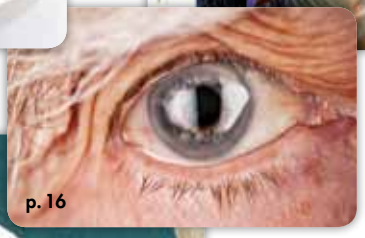

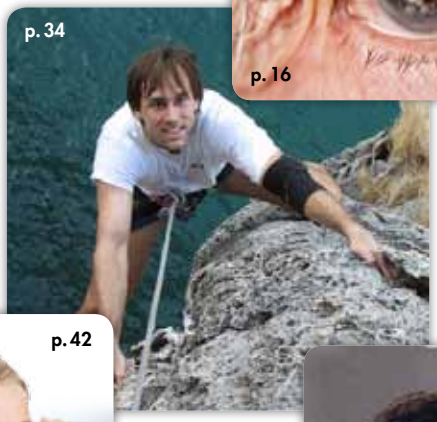

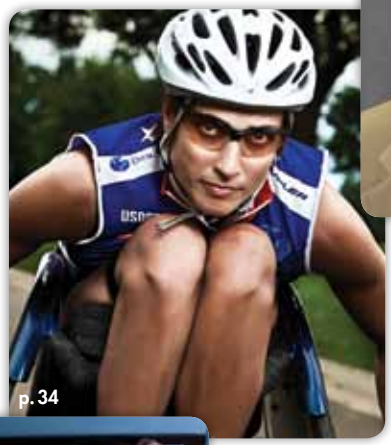

NO LIMITS

LOCAL ATHLETES SHATTER BARRIERS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES by Lisa Marshall

Imagine a day when a blind man can scale the world's highest mountain, a paraplegic woman can compete alongside able-bodied triathletes, and below-the-knee amputees can scale towering rock walls and ice falls most wouldn't dare.

No need to imagine. That day has already come, and the Colorado athletes responsible say they've only just begun.

"Things are definitely changing," says Denver resident Tricia Downing, 42, who in 2004 became the first paraplegic woman to cross the finish line in an Ironman-distance triathlon. "There are lots of people with disabilities standing up for themselves and saying 'I want to do this.' Pretty much any sport you can think of has been adapted."

Downing – a motivational speaker who runs adventure camps for women in wheelchairs – is among a host of local pioneers who have faced adversity by not only pushing their own limits, but also opening doors for others with physical challenges to do the same.

Since his legendary ascent of Mount Everest on May 25, 2001, Golden-resident Erik Weihenmayer – who is blind – has teamed up with Mark Wellman (the first paraplegic to climb the 3,000-foot rock face of El Capitan in Yosemite) to form No Barriers, a non-profit that seeks to connect people with disabilities to the technology and knowledge they need to lead active lives.

After losing his foot during an accident on a frigid rock face in Alaska, Boulder climber Malcolm Daly helped launch Paradox Sports, a nonprofit which hosts adaptive rock and ice climbing outings and reaches out to amputees in the days following their accidents to show them what's possible before self-doubt sets in.

All three concede they've had their dark days, but in discovering their passion and surrounding themselves with people who embolden them to pursue it, they've been able to climb out of them.

"You have to wrestle with what happened to you, say 'this is the way it is,' and then figure out the way to be the best you can possibly be with what you have," says Weihenmayer, 42. "Then, push those parameters as much as possible."

Photos By: Robert Black, Kitt Daly, Craig DeMartino, Mikey Schafer, Clyde Soles & Mark Woolcott

A LIFE CHANGE IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

Downing had just wrapped up a stellar racing bike season when, at the end of a ride up Lookout Mountain in Golden in September, 2000, she caught a split-second glimpse of her friend ahead swerving to avoid a turning car. She reached for her breaks, too late, and was catapulted onto the windshield and thrown to the ground. "I knew instantly that something was very wrong," she recalls. "It felt like my legs were floating."

Paralyzed from the chest down, she spent three weeks in intensive care before transferring to Craig Rehabilitation Hospital for three months. She was angry at the driver, resentful about the possibilities that had been stolen from her, and terrified of what life ahead might hold, once describing her life – in a letter – as "directionless, brokenhearted, and empty."

Her sport served as a catalyst to brighter days.

"From the beginning, I had recreational therapists in my room telling me, 'you were an athlete before, you will be an athlete again,'" she recalls. Craig staffers showed her how to use a hand-cycle and racing wheelchair and helped her apply for grants to buy her own. Friends rode alongside her for hours as she settled into her new equipment, and overcame her fear of the road. Five months after her accident, Downing competed in her first half-marathon. Soon thereafter, her first triathlon.

"I'm rolling around the deck of the swimming pool looking at all these tan and fit bodies and I knew what they were thinking," she recalls. "What is a gimp in a wheelchair doing at a triathlon?"

By the time she finished the swim (via backstroke), the only spectators left were friends there to help move her to the transition zone, onto her hand-cycle. As she pedaled away, there were no other bikes in sight. "I wasn't used to being in last place. I started feeling awful about myself…but I just decided to ride my own race."

In fact, Downing was not last (she passed seven able-bodied competitors.) To date, she has competed in 100 races, including the 2004 Redman Triathlon in Oklahoma City where, with a time of 18 hours, 3 minutes, she became the first paraplegic woman to complete an Ironman distance (2.4 mile swim, 112-mile bike, 26.2 mile run). In her first seven years of triathlon, she never raced against another woman in a chair. But that's changing, she says. "When I show up at a race, people don't look at me like I'm crazy anymore."

She recently started rowing and has already competed with the U.S. Rowing Team at the World Championships in Slovenia. But her greatest pride comes each summer, when she hosts a three-day camp in Empire, enabling 20 women in wheelchairs to horseback ride, climb, ride a zip line, and defy self-imposed limits. "Some people just can't get past the initial challenges and see what possibilities are on the other side," Downing says. "I want to show them what's possible. Life doesn't have to be over." ▶

BLIND AMBITION

Having grown up with a degenerative eye disorder called retinoschisis, Weihenmayer could see well enough as a child to ride his bike and play in the woods near his Connecticut home. But the summer before his freshman year in high school, his vision slipped away for good.

"It's devastating," recalls Weihenmayer, now 42. "You're helpless and angry and embarrassed. You're like a raccoon that has been cornered – lashing out at the people who want to help you. It was a very hard time."

While attending a camp for the visually impaired he went rock climbing, and found in it a sport that he could not only do, but do well. "There wasn't a ball flying through the air that was going to crack me in the face. And the rock was sort of two dimensional: I could problem solve my way up, using my hands and my feet as eyes."

In the coming years, Weihenmayer would hone his mountaineering skills and craft systems to enable him to navigate most any sport. While hiking, he uses long trekking poles and has his partner wear a bell and warn him of drop-offs ahead. On glaciers, he listens for the crunch of boots on snow. When paragliding and kayaking he wears a radio, and lets his friends' voices be his guide.

Since Everest, he has outdone himself many times: In August, 2008, he became one of fewer than 100 climbers to ascend the highest mountains on each of the seven continents. And for last summer's grueling ABC reality show Expedition Impossible (in which his team placed second against 11 able-bodied opponents) he leapt from waterfalls, sprinted through crowded cities, and galloped across the Moroccan desert on a horse.

"Advances in technology have helped, and people's mindsets toward people with disabilities have changed, but when you can actually show people what's possible, that's a big game changer," says Weihenmayer.

That's the point of No Barriers. Through online and coaching, and sponsorship for equipment and expeditions, the organization has helped quadriplegics learn to sail, amputees learn to kayak, and a group of wounded soldiers ascend 20,075-foot Lobuche East in the Nepal Himalaya. This summer, more than 600 people showed up at the No Barriers Summit in Winter Park. Among them was Kyle Maynard, who was born without arms or legs, but wants to climb Mount Kilimanjaro.

"I asked him, 'How are you going to do that?' and he said, 'I don't know yet but I want to come with you on your hike tomorrow,'" recalls Weihenmayer. "He wrapped tape and bath towels around his stumps and crabbed his way to the summit (12,000 feet). Now we have connected him with a group of people who will help him: This guy will definitely climb Kilimanjaro. That's inspiring."

"ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY HAVE HELPED, AND PEOPLE'S MINDSETS TOWARD PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES HAVE CHANGED, BUT WHEN YOU CAN ACTUALLY SHOW PEOPLE WHAT'S POSSIBLE, THAT'S A BIG GAME CHANGER."

OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT

Daly says similar stories are what kept him from despair as he sat freezing, anchored to an ice ledge 2,500 feet above ground in May of 1999. He'd been climbing Thunder Mountain, a remote crag in the Alaskan wilderness, when he got hit by falling ice, lost his grip, and tumbled 200 feet. His partner chipped out a "coffin-sized" ledge for Daly and went for help.

His feet mangled and bleeding, with bones exposed, Daly would spend the next 48 hours injured and alone.

"I took care of a lot of business up there," recalls Daly, former owner of Boulder-based climbing gear company Trango U.S.A. "As someone who had been in this community for a long time, I already had great images in my mind of amputees (like climber Hugh Herr) that not only got along, but were at the pinnacle of their sports. I thought a lot about them up there. I gave up on my feet and I was OK with it."

Thirteen years later, Daly – who lost his right leg below the knee – has custom carbon-fiber prosthetics for every sport he does, (ice climbing, rock climbing, cycling, yoga, and fishing). And his nonprofit, Paradox Sports is often the first to reach out to a new amputee in the days after an accident, offering guidance on how they can someday return to their sport, and their life.

"Our ultimate goal is to help people do the things they did before, with the people they did them with, when they want to do them."

He does, and he's never looked back.

"You have to embrace what happened," he says. "You can't spend your life saying '*Woulda. Coulda. Shoulda.*' In some ways, I feel like am the luckiest guy in the world." ■

"OUR ULTIMATE GOAL IS TO HELP PEOPLE DO THE THINGS THEY DID BEFORE, WITH THE PEOPLE THEY DID THEM WITH, WHEN THEY WANT TO DO THEM."