

Beyond the Finish Line Research insights from the Invictus Games longitudinal study

"I am now more willing to give things a go without the fear of failure when I am among veterans with similar experiences and injuries."

Brigid Baker, Team Australia 2018 Competitor

THE RESEARCH

Participation in sport for recovery through the Invictus Games has been shown to have a significant short- and long-term positive impact on the recovery journey of international wounded, injured or sick servicemen and women (WIS).

While the full results of the research project 'Beyond The Finish Line' will be released in 2022 and will incorporate findings from the upcoming, rescheduled Invictus Games The Hague 2020; early analysis of the results of the Invictus Games Sydney 2018 have so far indicated that competitors experienced greater post-traumatic growth than those who did not compete.

The Invictus Games is an international, multi-sport competition for service personnel and veterans with physical and psychological illnesses and injuries. The Games are overseen by the Invictus Games Foundation, which inspires, improves and influences the recovery and rehabilitation of those who serve their country.

As part of its goal to support the wellbeing of the international WIS community, the Invictus Games Foundation has been supporting research into the role of sport in recovery. This research is funded by Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT), a charitable Trust founded by a £35 million endowment awarded by the Big Lottery Fund (now the National Lottery Community Fund).

The research, led by Dr Celina Shirazipour, is exploring the long-term physical, psychological, and social impact of sport participation for recovery, and identifying best practices for sport programmes to support the wellbeing of the armed forces WIS community. The research spans the Invictus Games Sydney 2018, and the upcoming Invictus Games The Hague 2020, now taking place in May 2021.

With support from Forces in Mind Trust, the Invictus Games Foundation has been able to extend this research to take account of postponing the 2020 Games due to the current global situation in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. The final report with all results will be released in 2022.

These preliminary research insights are drawn from findings from the Sydney 2018 surveys conducted with competitors from the UK, Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada, as well as individuals who had applied to participate in the Games but were not selected (identified in the research as non-competitors).

All study participants were asked to complete surveys at six different time-points, with surveys starting three months before the Games and continuing through to one-year, post-Games. Questions focused on assessing competitors' psychosocial and physical health (e.g. emotions, quality of life, wellbeing, post-traumatic growth and physical health).



"I never thought I'd ever be in a position to help others because I was the one needing the help, yet the Invictus Games have aided my recovery in a way I could only ever dream of."

Michelle Turner, Team UK 2018 Competitor

INSIGHTS

Early findings have demonstrated a number of key insights into how sport can aid psychological and physical recovery:

- Competitors in the Invictus Games demonstrated significantly better psychosocial and physical health both in the short- and long-term compared to those who did not participate, suggesting that participation in competitive sport may have distinct benefits in recovery.
- Of particular note were findings related to post-traumatic growth. Similar to the concept of resilience, post-traumatic growth relates to the concept that individuals can experience positive change from traumatic or adverse events. While it does not deny that the adversity experienced can be highly distressing and life-altering, it suggests that, under certain circumstances, individuals can demonstrate positive improvements in psychosocial wellbeing.
- Competitors experienced greater post-traumatic growth than those who did not compete. This was demonstrated through a greater appreciation of life, a greater understanding of new possibilities that exist post-injury and illness, and a greater development of personal strength. These are potentially important findings that suggest the value of sport programming in supporting resilience and positive change in recovery.

The findings presented are encouraging regarding the important role that competitive sport can play in the recovery of military personnel.

In addition, our new research is adapting to consider the outbreak of Covid-19 and its impact on the WIS community. We have seen the pandemic as a perfect storm for our community; re-creating the anxiety and uncertainty about their future that they would have had following the abrupt end to their service, coupled with the removal of a tangible goal and team training opportunities in the postponement of the 2020 Games.

Our Sydney 2018 findings highlight the need for competitive sport and physical activity to support physical and psychological health during difficult times. As part of our additional funding from FiMT, we will be exploring the response to the pandemic and its impact for competitors.

Further analysis will explore the data across all participating nations and across both Sydney 2018 and The Hague 2020. This approach will allow us to gain more in-depth understanding of the impact of sport in recovery and understand how these positive changes are achieved in order to support optimal programme development.

The Invictus Games Foundation is extremely grateful to the members of the international WIS community who have given their time to respond to the survey. Their responses will help improve future provision of sports recovery programmes.



We spoke to three wounded, injured and sick (WIS) servicemen and women about their experiences of using competitive sport to support their recovery and rehabilitation 'Beyond the Finish Line'.

MICHELLE TURNER

Former RAF sergeant Michelle Turner, served for 21 years and first competed at the Toronto Games in 2017. She went on to become Team UK's vice-captain for the Invictus Games in Sydney participating in swimming, indoor rowing and powerlifting.

Michelle has a heart condition that developed while on deployment. A nasty bug left her with postural tachycardia syndrome (PoTS), which means that her heart rate fires up randomly, causing her to regularly collapse without warning.

On one occasion her four-year-old daughter saved her life by dialling 999 when she collapsed at home. Through fear of falling and injuring herself in public she had confined herself to her home.

From her hospital bed after 50 collapses, her husband encouraged her to apply to join Team UK. The training camps enabled her to reconnect with her military family and find a new sport in swimming. Taking on the vice-captaincy role in Sydney meant she could help others.

Michelle's competitive journey with the Games helped her to achieve her goal of making her daughter proud: "I have a little girl who saved my life by dialling 999, and I want to be a role model for her – not of a mum who stays at home and is scared – but of somebody who never gives up".

She has since supported other WIS as they embark on their Games journey and she continues to serve by volunteering with the Invictus Games Foundation in activities beyond the Games.

BRIGID BAKER

Brigid Baker enlisted in 2002 as a General Army Reserve Combat Med-Assist. She went full-time in 2005 and was commissioned into the Australian Intelligence Corps in 2006.

Brigid participated in many national and international exercises and deployed to Afghanistan several times before being medically discharged with PTSD in 2017.

Brigid is still going through the injury recognition process; she also suffers from severe anxiety, major depressive disorder, hearing loss, degenerative disc disorder and a number of other physical disabilities.

At the Games in Sydney she took part in powerlifting, shot put and discus. Following the Games, Brigid continued with throwing and joined the local Masters Athletics Club, competing in state and national competitions. In 2019 she won the Australian 30-39 year old women's shot put. She has taken up indoor rowing, swimming and wheelchair rugby league and is part of the first Australian Capital Territory Wheelchair Rugby League programme.

Having these opportunities has reinvigorated her: "I have had great difficulty since being discharged and finding a place to belong again. This experience has given me the courage to get out there again and find enjoyment in things once more.

"It is an unspoken understanding that the focus is not on the medals or places, but rather the support, friendship and guidance you can share amongst one another. I credit the program with giving me a purpose again."



MARTIN HAILSTONE

Martin Hailstone joined the Army in 1984, serving with The Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire for 13 years before transferring to the Small Arms School Corps and completing a further 13 years' service.

In 2008 as a Warrant Officer Class One he was posted to Oman as a training advisor and it was during this assignment he suffered life-threatening injuries in an accident which ultimately ended his military career.

Martin sustained several fractured vertebrae in his neck and back, spinal cord injury, traumatic brain injury along with several other fractures and injuries.

Following a prolonged period of rehabilitation at Hedley Court he was inevitably medically discharged from the Army in 2010.

It took Martin several further years of rehabilitation and recovery to come to terms with his injuries and the effects they would hold over his further physical and mental progression. Part of his recovery process involved competing in the London Marathon 2018 for the Invictus Games Foundation.

"This event gave me the aim and purpose to progress my physical recovery, as well boosting my confidence and self-belief once more."

Martin went on to complete several ultra-marathons including the Marathon des Sables.

In 2019 Martin competed in the Team UK Trials held at Sheffield. Unfortunately he wasn't selected for the team which came as a great disappointment and left him once again questioning his physical ability as well as delivering a huge blow to his self-confidence and self-belief.

Later that year Martin represented the Invictus Games Foundation at the Algarve Challenge 2019 which allowed him to re-focus on a new goal and once again challenge himself both physically and mentally in his preparation for the event.

"The challenge gave me the opportunity to work under pressure within a small military team. This helped me to further restore some of my lost self-esteem and re-establish my former confidence and self-belief."

The Invictus Games Foundation, research team and Forces in Mind Trust would like to thank everyone for sharing their experiences to help us inspire, influence and improve the recovery and rehabilitation journey for the WIS community.

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