

IRAQ TOOK LEG, CHINA HAS HER HEART

MAKING U.S. TEAM 'WILL MAKE MY LIFE COMPLETE' | FORMER SOLDIER TRAINING FOR 2008 PARALYMPIC GAMES

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BY ANDREW HERRMANN Staff Reporter

Melissa Stockwell swims purposefully up the pool lane, her arms rhythmically reaching through the water. Her goal is in sight -- literally and figuratively.

Just beyond the end of her lane hangs an Olympic flag. In Stockwell's mind, she can also see herself swimming next summer in the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing, a competition for people with disabilities held just after the Olympics.



Melissa Stockwell lost her left leg while serving in Iraq and is now training to compete in the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing. (John H. White/Sun-Times)

For Stockwell, who lost her left leg in Iraq, getting up in the wintry, pre-dawn darkness, as she has on this day, is part of a 17-hour, 20 miles-a-week regimen at Northwestern University's Sports and Aquatic Center.

"I went over and represented my country in my uniform" as a soldier, says Stockwell. "To go and represent the U.S. in a different way -- and kind of proving to myself that I can still do it even though I don't have a leg -- would be huge."

It will also be difficult. Most of the sport's top competitors were born with a disability or have had years of training since their injury. Stockwell only lost her leg in 2003; she began serious swim training in 2005.

In April, Stockwell, a Lake View resident, will find out if she will make the team. But 2008 looks encouraging: Last week, she was invited to live at the U.S. Olympic training facility in Colorado Springs to prepare for the qualifying meet.

"It sounds like a cliché," she says, but making the team "will make my life complete."

Stockwell grew up comfortably, the daughter of a financial executive and a stay-at-home mom in suburban Minneapolis. But something about the Army always interested her.

"My parents always thought it was a phase I was going through. It wasn't a phase," Stockwell says. "I was the youngest daughter, their little girl. They weren't thrilled. But they knew this was what I wanted to do, and they eventually turned around. It was foreign to everybody."

After graduating from the University of Colorado in 2002 -- she wore her ROTC uniform under her graduation gown -- she joined the Army, specializing in transportation. By March 2004, she was in Iraq

helping direct truck convoys; a month later, as her Humvee rolled under a Baghdad viaduct, a bomb exploded, taking off her leg, reportedly making her the first American female soldier to lose a limb there.

"I'm pretty sure [the explosive] was remote-detonated, so someone was sitting there waiting for our vehicle to come by," she says. "Roadside bombs -- they're the way of this war. We all know they're out there."

She woke up in a hospital, with her husband, Dick, a fellow soldier, by her side. "I remember telling him, 'I think something happened to my leg.' And he said, 'It's gone.' "

Stockwell says she had "maybe an hour" of self pity, "where I was like, 'Why did this happen to me?' Or: 'Why did I get in that Humvee? What if we had doors?' But there comes a point where there's no point in 'what if.' I'm never going to get my leg back; it's not going to grow back.

"I was so happy I was alive. I just wanted to move on with life."

She retired from the Army about 12 months after the injury -- or, as she puts it, "one year, one week and one leg later." In all, she's had 15 operations.

Learning to walk again wasn't enough. She wanted to compete and began swimming, learning to use her arms and a butterfly kick to cut through the water. (And, no, she says with a laugh to a question she says is common: "I don't swim in circles.")

She practices with able-bodied swimmers, usually teenage competitors. Andy Grevers, her coach on the Northwestern club team, says Stockwell averages about 16 to 18 strokes per length; a non-disabled female collegiate swimmer needs about 13 or 14 strokes. Perhaps because of her military background "she's very coachable," says Grevers.

Stockwell isn't shy about her limb -- she prefers what she calls a "robot leg" with steel exposed to a model that looks like flesh. She wears shorts in the summertime. "People look," she says, "and that's fine."

They ask her about America's involvement in Iraq, too. Her response: "Time will tell whether the war was right or wrong. I lost my leg. I'd like to think it was worth it, but time will tell."

Meanwhile, on dark winter mornings, Stockwell carefully sets aside her prosthesis, dives into the pool and swims toward the bright lights of competing in China.

"There's really no reason to feel sorry for me," she says.