



SUMMER SPORTS CLINIC PHOTO TEAM

# Team Mercury Rising

All-woman Veteran team makes history at this year's National Summer Sports Clinic.

**“W**e have arrived!” belts out Air Force Veteran Kim Specht, who proudly plants Mercury’s guidon in the ground near their first venue.

“I have waited 12 years for this, to feel this camaraderie again and to feel OK, like I belong again,” says Specht.

Amidst the cheers, laughter and obvious pride, there is a lot more go-

ing on here than just sailing; these women Veterans realize they are about to be a part of something very special.

“We are making history, and that feels great,” says Air Force Veteran Jazmin Coll-Serrano. “We complement each other as we learn to be women again.”

Nine women representing different branches, backgrounds and

personal battles make up the first-ever all-woman National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic team. Though scarred emotionally and physically from their service, they are eager to show what they’re made of.

“We are role models—I want my daughters to remember this,” says Army Veteran Shanda Taylor-Boyd. “I am so glad that I am here.”

Their disabilities range from trau-

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matic brain injury to military sexual trauma and spinal cord injury. There is a former Marine with flat feet, and a former Army non-commissioned officer who was a first responder on Sept. 11. They were warriors first and women second until San Diego, where they used their combined will to recapture something they had lost along the way.

“This is life-changing,” says Specht. “This support for us, especially having an all-women’s team, it’s a whole new dimension, being able to represent such an underrepresented segment of the military.”

“Who wants the full America’s Cup experience?” yells the captain aboard the famous racing yacht *Stars and Stripes*. Several of the women

giggle like teenagers before they jump to their feet and start barking out their own orders to each other. There is some tacking and jibing to be done. It’s only the first day, but the team already begins to gel.

Team captain Specht grabs the wheel. She tells how she first learned of the Clinic just nine months ago, and how she knew immediately she had to be a part of it. She found Acting Director Tristan Heaton’s phone number on the VA Adaptive Sports website and called him right away. “I said, ‘We have to have an all-women’s team’ and he was like, ‘go for it, Kim.’”

Army Veteran Catina Evans jumped into the Clinic at full speed. “I was nervous, at first. I’ve never surfed ... I don’t swim,” she says. “But it all just clicked. I’m going to learn to swim now. It was a lot of hard work, but, you know, I did it. I did it. I’m scared of heights, too, but I’m going to rock climb and conquer that.”

Evans went from “the girl that never smiles to the girl that always smiles,” jokes a Clinic photographer who watched the women evolve over a week’s time.

Evans is quite the athlete, despite her own absolute certainty that she is not. She scurried to the top of the rock wall in 23 seconds. She was a real surf diva on the shores of La Jolla (and has the T-shirt to prove it), and she held her own biking more than 15 miles across Coronado Island.

In the beginning, Evans rarely spoke and stood off to one side. Her coach feared she might never come around, but after a week of sea air,

sunshine and sandy beaches, the 38-year-old seemed reborn. The transformation from nobody to somebody—in her own mind—was nothing short of amazing.

Taylor-Boyd is here for the second year in a row, but this time it’s different. She is engaged and fiercely independent. “I was so afraid last year. But this time, what a difference a year makes. Thank you for believing in me. The difference is knowing VA has faith in you,” says Taylor-Boyd.

VA Director of National Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events Chris Nowak says this is exactly what the Summer Sports Clinic and other VA adaptive sports programs are supposed to do: inspire Veterans to want more, to believe in themselves.

“We are constantly looking for ways to challenge Veterans during their rehabilitation,” says Nowak, “and sports are a great way to get them out of their shell and reengaged in their communities.”

Those sentiments ring true for Coll-Serrano, who credits her involvement with VA’s adaptive sports programs with literally giving her a new life. After slowly losing her vision to a rare virus, she has found a renewed purpose. She says adaptive sports are her life now, and she hopes to someday work with other disabled Veterans.

She and eight others leave the Clinic empowered by an experience that will bond them forever. It is far more than just a physical accomplishment.

Team Mercury leaves thriving and strong because of each other. They leave with a new focus on what’s possible, not what’s in the past. **VA**

*By Jordan Schupbach*



*Opposite: The women of Team Mercury aboard the famous racing yacht *Stars and Stripes*; left: Team captain Kim Specht, an Air Force Veteran.*