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Fast forward

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is more active than ever
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Fast forward

After losing a leg, para-athlete Brett Sloan is more active than ever, and intends to stay that way

by Alicia B. Smith



Dr. Brett Sloan has a specially equipped leg that enables him to ride a bike during his tri-athlete events.

As a dermatologist, Dr. Brett Sloan uses a lot of sunscreen. After all, as a tri-athlete, he spends a lot of time outside training and participating in three-sport events that include biking, running and swimming.

In addition to the sunscreen, he packs his bike, running shoes and swim gear and takes along two spare legs – a blade for running and a prosthesis with a special ankle component for cycling.

Sloan was in a biking accident in 2001 while deployed to Greece with the U.S. Air Force.

“I didn’t lose the leg right away,” he said. “It took 20 surgeries, infections, it was a long, drawn-out process.”

The day came 10 years after the accident when the decision was made to amputate his right leg below the knee.

Three months after his surgery, and after extensive therapy, he was back on his mountain bike. He soon

added swimming and began to think that, since he was doing well in those sports, he should add one more, so he took up running, too.

He prefers swimming.

“You prefer what you are better at,” he said.

The decision to have surgery was not an easy one, but in hindsight, he wishes he had had it done much sooner.

“The leg was just dragging me down,” he said. “To not have it was liberating, in a way.”

Sloan struggled with balance and strength issues and had to adjust to not only feeling comfortable with a prosthetic limb, but learning how to drive with his left foot.

“Everything is just different,” he said.

While Sloan never considered himself an athlete, he grew up playing tennis and enjoyed swimming. He was also a member of the crew team at the University of Alabama.

Born in Germany as a member of

a military family, he graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy and the University of Alabama. He attended medical school at the Uniformed Services University in Bethesda, Md.

He spent 12 years in the Air Force as a flight surgeon and four years in the reserves. At one time, he was stationed in Italy and later deployed to Greece. He said he joined in part “to see the world,” and served from 1990 to 2006.

These days, Sloan serves as an assistant professor of dermatology at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine in Farmington and is the attending dermatologist at the Connecticut VA Healthcare System in Newington. He is also an assistant clinic professor of dermatology at Yale University School of Medicine.

“When a physician goes through a major medical condition, they become more empathetic. I never thought about what it was like to live with a disability. I was taking

care of people,” he said.

“It’s also motivated me to take care of myself. I know how fragile the body is. I’m stronger now than I was before.”

Last summer, Sloan did a few team relay events. Once he was the swimmer; another time he did the running. This past winter, the Wheeler YMCA in Plainville, where he is a member, hosted some indoor triathlons.

Although he admitted that swimming and biking can be boring, he is grateful that with his training, he can do something different every day, and that helps keep his interest.

“I can’t imagine going back to just swimming,” he said.

He recently ran the Iron Horse 5K in Simsbury, and this summer Sloan had a number of events planned, including the Summer Solstice Sprint, Aquaphor New York City

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SLOAN from 30

Triathlon, Niantic Bay Triathlon, Dave Parcells Madison Triathlon and Lobsterman Triathlon.

Dr. Doug Albreski, a podiatrist and surgeon at UConn Health Center, is a friend and colleague who has known Sloan for seven years.

He said that being extremely physically active after an

amputation – participating in triathlons, for example – “is definitely not the norm.”

“I think the key is that in the past, most of the people we’d see who would lose a leg had multiple comorbidities [medical conditions or disease processes]. But today, we’re seeing an increase in younger, healthy people who suffer secondary injuries as a result of accidents, unforeseen incidents or war,”

Albreski said.

“The Boston Marathon bombings are an example of that. There were quite a number of young people there who lost a limb [as a result of the attack], but who were otherwise healthy prior to that. I think the combination of medical technology and younger people being affected means you’re seeing more activity in people with prosthetics.”

He said in the past, with

amputations, “you’d see more people who’d spent their whole life smoking and had poor circulation. You’re not going to see those people running marathons.”

While several Boston Marathon victims said they definitely plan to run again, it’s not something that comes easily to most. Instead, it takes determination, dedication and grit.

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Brett Sloan trains on local roads and said West Simsbury is a favorite running spot of his. Photo by Lisa Brisson



When he is not running, riding or swimming, Dr. Sloan works as a dermatologist at UConn Health Center in Farmington and at the VA hospital in Newington.

active again after losing a leg, “there definitely is a learning curve,” Albreski said. “Brett would fall down all the time when he started trying to run with his prosthetic leg, but he kept at it. He was very active before he lost his leg so that definitely helped.”

Another contributing factor was Sloan’s can-do attitude. “Brett is a very upbeat person, both personally and professionally. He remained this way through the challenges of losing his leg and maintained it during rehabilitation,” Albreski said.

“We would discuss his rehabilitation and prosthesis both as a professional exchange and a personal one. Over the years, I learned more about his goals and saw how well he adapted to this challenge.”

Sloan credits much of his progress to the help and support he received from his therapists, all of whom helped him adjust to using

an artificial limb.

“They really taught me how to walk,” he said. “Now I don’t care. I wear shorts.”

He has three prosthetics: “an everyday one” he wears most of the time, and two specially made for his running and biking. He laughs about when he was first introduced to the “Cheetah,” or running blade. It took some getting used to.

During a triathlon, participants compete in running, biking and swimming events. While others peel off their wet suits, then get on their bikes or take off running, Sloan has the challenge of getting himself out of the water and having to affix one of his legs for the next event.

“I’m a pretty fast swimmer,” he said, admitting that it can be frustrating that he loses time adjusting his leg while other participants are immediately off to

the next event.

For para-triathlon events, he said, athletes are allowed to have a handler, someone to help them make the transition between the different prosthetic legs.

A divorced dad of three daughters, he has lived in town for the past six years and enjoys getting out on the roads in West Simsbury.

“I live in one of the best communities in the country,” he said, referring to the town’s efforts to support biking. He referenced the bicycle lanes and the drivers who accommodate cyclists by giving them plenty of room.

He wants other people with disabilities to know that if they are interested in being active, there is plenty of support available.

He recently attended a camp at the Challenged Athletes Foundation, established in 1997 to

provide financial aid and equipment for disabled athletes.

Organizations such as Achilles International, which offers support and training for disabled athletes, and the Wounded Warrior Project, which helps veterans, have sponsored Sloan for his events, along with Team Red, White & Blue, another organization that works with veterans by providing physical and social activities.

In a blog post on the latter team’s website, Sloan wrote that “physical and emotional rehabilitation through exercise has definitely worked in my favor, and the idea of utilizing communities to promote this mission to our veterans sounded like something I wanted to be a part of.”

Sloan has been preparing to participate in the West Point Triathlon as a member of Team Red, White & Blue in August. **SL**