

Gamers to the End

February 5, 2007

Rick Reilly

You up for a challenge?

I'm going to tell you about five young Americans at the peak of their athletic lives. Your job is to guess how all five lives came together in the past month.

One. As usual, Elizabeth Loncki is acting very unlady-like, just the way she likes it. It's 2001, she's 18 and she's challenging her dad to a push-up contest. He just did 50, but now Elizabeth is hitting 51.

He could've done 100, and she would've done 101. That's how she is. A 5'5" Energizer Bunny, she's the furnace that heats the volleyball team at Padua Academy in Wilmington, Del. She's the darling of the weight room wherever she works out, spotting guys twice her size.

She also reads to shut-ins and runs errands for seniors. And seems like twice a week, she'll get up early so she can get balloons for somebody at school. Just don't try calling her "sweet."

Two. Brian (Cap'n) Freeman is about to become one of the best in the world at something he never thought he'd even try—bobsledding.

A burly brakeman from the virtually snowless town of Temecula, Calif., Freeman digs in, grunts and pushes the U.S. to a bronze medal at the 2002 America's Cup in Lake Placid, N.Y. But Freeman isn't just the piston for his sled team, he's also the soul of it—willing to push for drivers other than his own, just to give them a chance to develop with a few more runs. "A total team guy," says Steven Holcomb, the current World Cup bobsled points leader. "I wouldn't be where I am today without Brian."

Three. If you'd been there when Shawn Falter was a toddler, with those massive braces on both legs, you wouldn't believe what you're seeing now, as the senior leads his 1998--99 Homer (N.Y.) High basketball team. No longer pigeon-toed, he's blocking shots, rebounding like a man on a caffeine drip, scoring when it's needed and setting up teammates the rest of the time.

That's nothing. You should see him on the football field, scoring TDs at tight end and trying to decapitate receivers at safety. And all while being skinnier than a one-iron.

"All heart," marvels Jeff Tabel, who was his hoops coach. "Born to lead."

Four. Luis Castillo isn't just a good wrestler, he's the captain of the 2003--04 team at Mattawan (Mich.) High. Wait! He's not just the captain, he's the winner of the team's leadership award.

And wrestling is only where it starts. He's a break-dancing, bungee-jumping, joke-telling machine in a crew cut. "The all-American kid," the grown-ups call him. And it makes you wonder: How many people know he was born in Mexico?

Five. It's 2000, and 17-year-old Jason Corbett takes his mark at the ancient Panathenaic Stadium in Athens. The timer is ready and—bang!—Corbett's off. Of course, there's no official time for his run because there's nobody in the stands and it's his buddy holding the watch.

He's not in a track meet, he's on a trip with some Casper, Wyo., high school classmates. But, hey, that's not going to stop Corbett from running or having a good time. Nothing stops Corbett. He swallows life whole—track, snowboarding, fly-fishing and hunting. The kid has all the warning signs of a thrillaholic and loves anything to do with the outdoors. Maybe that's why he ended up in the only place big enough for him: Alaska.

So what do these five athletes have in common? They were all killed in Iraq during a two-week period in January.

Air Force Senior Airman Loncki, 23, was killed by a car bomb near Al-Mahmudiyah.

Army Captain Freeman, 31, was killed by insurgents disguised as American soldiers in Karbala.

Army Private First Class Falter, 25, died as a result of that same ambush.

Marine Lance Corporal Castillo, 20, died from wounds suffered while on patrol in Al Anbar province.

Army Specialist Corbett, 23, died of injuries from small-arms fire suffered while on patrol in Karmah.

Five athletes. Five futures. All gone.

Five of 84 Americans killed from New Year's Day through Sunday. Five of 3,084 Americans killed since the war began.

Athletes love teams, and when they run out of sports teams they sometimes join bigger teams, ones with Humvees for huddles and tombstones for trophies and coaches they've never met sending them into a hell they never imagined.

And they throw their whole selves into it anyway, because they are brave and disciplined and will chew through concrete to win the game.

But what if the game can't be won?