

# The Phoenix

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*On the Road to Adventure*



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# The Phoenix

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# On Top of the World

## Collegiate athlete's valuable gifts from a memorable year

By Collin Jarvis

I was on top of the world; literally - I was at the summit of the highest peak in Arizona looking over the high desert of Flagstaff from a vantage point of 13,993 feet above sea level. I had run up Mt. Humphreys with a fellow UC Berkeley cross country teammate that morning partly for the view and partly because I could. He turned to me shortly after we'd reached the summit and pointed north. "Those storm clouds are rolling in fast. You can see them lighting up. We don't want to be out here when they come through."

He was right. It's extremely dangerous to be exposed during a lightning storm - we would essentially be human lightning rods. I took a deep breath of the thin mountain air before nodding in agreement to run back down the rocky trail we'd come up just minutes before. Even though my head was throbbing from a lack of oxygen, I felt oddly calm and relaxed. There was a sense of serenity on top of the mountain that paralleled the calm feeling within. But much like that day in the mountains, there was a storm approaching in my life.

### Memorable Year

I was 21 years old and dedicated to making my final year at Cal memorable, a time I could look back on for the rest of my life with no regrets. That summer would indeed mark the beginning of a memorable year - the most physically painful, psychologically taxing, and paradigm shifting year that I'd ever face.

By the time I was in Flagstaff, I had already been experiencing blood in my stool on and off for months. I had written it off as hemorrhoids, but after my inner hypochondriac led me to WebMD, I set up an appointment with a gastroenterologist to ensure I didn't have cancer. I received a sigmoidoscopy, which is a less thorough version of the colonoscopy, and it revealed the culprit of my symptoms as Ulcerative Colitis.

I was told to switch to a low-residue diet, given some medication and sent on my way. Having never heard of Ulcerative Colitis, I turned to the internet for a second stint of online research to learn more about the disease. I was relieved to find that my symptoms were

very mild; nowhere near as bad as the horror stories I'd found online. Pain? That wasn't happening. I was still running - and running a lot! I thought I'd be able to knock this thing out no problem. It was little more than an excuse to not eat kale salad. In reality, it was just the calm before the storm.

### Infamous Symptoms

Less than two weeks after being diagnosed, the more infamous symptoms of UC began to surface. I remember waking up one night around 1 a.m. and running to the bathroom with some *serious* urgency. The next morning I had a similar experience less than a mile into a run - that sense of sudden and overwhelming urgency - but this time there was no bathroom nearby. I stopped and told the group I was with to continue on their way, that I would catch them in a few minutes. I didn't. Instead, I walked the clenched straight-legged walk that Crohn's and Colitis patients know all too well back to our cabin and burst into the bathroom with milliseconds to spare. I remember sitting on the cold porcelain toilet, staring at the tacky wall paper thinking, "This is not good. I might really be in trouble here."

Each day felt progressively worse, and my visits to the toilet became more frequent. The hardest part was being rendered virtually incapable of running. As an elite athlete, my relationship with running is paradoxical. Competing and training at a high level with exceedingly higher expectations is a huge source of stress. However, running is my ultimate stress relief - an outlet to unwind, relax and let go. My personal therapy sessions were being eliminated and I was left to dwell on the fact that my deteriorating health was the cause. During the six months between September 2013 and March 2014, I lost twenty pounds. I was severely anemic, depressed and on a cocktail of enough prescription drugs and painkillers to sedate a Kodiak grizzly bear.

By early March of 2014, I was considering surgery as an option when I wrote, "...My favorite professor here at Cal told our class that, 'Only challenge produces opportunity for greatness.' I believe that until this diagnosis,

*World*





Left: Winning the individual title in the 3000m Steeple Chase in the 2012 Pac 12 Championships. Center: Taking the lead to the finish at the 2015 Dual Meet at Stanford University. Bottom: Earlier in the steeple chase race at left.

I had never truly been challenged. Much of what I consider to have been challenges in my life were somewhat artificial, in that I made them out to seem much bigger than they actually were so that I had obstacles to climb. I needed to fabricate challenge in my life to push myself, but that didn't prepare me for when a real one came along. Now, I am presented with a real obstacle, one that so far has beaten me into submission. But I realize that I need to seize this opportunity and recognize its potential greatness"



was causing problems and daily changes didn't bother me at first. As my runs got longer however, I realized it was going to be a problem if I was going to get serious again.

### Try Anything

One afternoon after a particularly hot run, I was complaining to my



### Only One Option

I went into the hospital three days later with unusually bad pain and was told that surgery was my only option. There was no longer a decision to be made, I was to have an ostomy.

Less than two weeks after surgery I was walking pain-free; a luxury that I hadn't had for months. I had a pretty big scare when my spleen and pancreas became infected with E. Coli, but thankfully some serious antibiotics via a PICC line were able to clear the infection. The real challenge was learning to live with an ostomy. I was self-conscious about having it and of course there is a part of me that wishes it wasn't there. But the storm that had ravaged my life was finally clearing up and I recognized that having an ostomy also meant getting my life back. Once I could accept my ileostomy as a part of who I was, the steps forward became literal – it was time to start running again.

The surgery had forced me to withdraw from school during my final semester, meaning I still needed to complete my degree. It also meant I could return to compete one last season wearing the Cal logo on my chest. I trudged through four months of what I considered abysmally slow running, armed with an iPod, and a running backpack to carry ostomy supplies. I was so happy to be running again. The fact that my sweat

mom about the issues with my pouch. She showed me a website for Stealth Belt. "Do you want to try one of these?" she asked. "Sure. I'll try anything at this point," I replied in a tone that was almost certainly melodramatic. Little did I know how much of an impact that moment would have on my life.

Once I received my Stealth Belt, I no longer felt I needed to carry extra supplies. I was sold. I bought another one to rotate and they quickly became as normal to me as wearing underwear. Weeks went by and I could feel my strength and confidence returning. I was able to run further and confidently do what I wanted and go where I pleased. Eventually, it inspired me to go backpacking, which seemed like a farfetched idea not long before. I went to New Zealand for a month, spending my days hiking up mountains and my nights sleeping in tree hammocks. I was there to prove to myself that I could go anywhere and do anything that I could have done before having an ostomy, and thanks to the Stealth Belt my mom bought me, it was proving to be true.

After New Zealand, I returned to school and completed my degree with my best academic semester ever - straight A's. I was also able to compete for Berkeley, my season highlight being when I helped clinch the team title in the annual dual meet against rival Stanford by winning the steeplechase as a surprise entry. It's not often that a race can bring the runner, the teammates, and the coaching staff to tears, but this one did and it's undoubtedly my most treasured running moment.

### Applying Talents

Since graduating, I've resolved to use my talents to help inspire others who must wear an ostomy bag to return to leading healthy and fulfilling lives, as well as raise awareness amongst the general population so that one day we might find a cure. With the help of a fellow ostomate who also used the Stealth Belt to allow him to train for and complete an Ironman after his surgery from colon cancer, as well as his friend who is a former Stanford steeplechase runner, I started a company called Hurdle Barriers.

The Hurdle Barriers mission statement is "To improve the lives and wellbeing of patients who've dealt with serious medical conditions by facilitating a transition back to an active lifestyle." The first initiative of Hurdle

Barriers was to partner with Stealth Belt, the product that inspired me to fulfill the Hurdle Barriers' mission statement for myself. As Vice President of marketing and operations at Stealth Belt, I am also an active ambassador for the product as an elite distance runner. In April of 2017, I will be debuting as a marathoner in the elite field of the Boston Marathon with the Stealth Belt logo adorned to my jersey and the product wrapped around my waist. My dream is to become an Olympian and to grow the company so that Stealth Belt can help others to transition back to the active lifestyles they find fulfilling.

### Golden Opportunity

Three years ago, I stood on top of the world and watched dark clouds approach. I felt the calm that preceded the thunder and ventured down into the valley to endure the storm. I wanted a memorable year, one I could look back on with no regrets. Needless to say, I got what I asked for but not what I'd envisioned. I've been given a chance to aspire to new heights, to appreciate all that I have, to care deeply for others, and to be a conduit for inspiration. Three years have passed and so has the storm. I have an ostomy and while I am the same person able to do the same things, I am completely different and capable of so much more. ☁️

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