



In the Service of Others: The John Pelham Story

In racquetball clubs around the country, bags and racquets are propped along back wall glass. Doubles partners meet on the backcourt to warm-up; on court enemies trade stories in the hallway and become off-court friends. The club pro is finishing up his junior clinic and the early crowd is already bending elbows watching the open players on Court 1. The stretchy pop of the ball can be faintly heard interjecting between the voices of camaraderie that fill the sweat-soaked air. Some came here to escape from the day's worries while others came just for a workout. The runners and the weightlifters stream through the front door, followed by the cycling class but the racquetball contingent takes longer to leave. Some came to talk, some came to play, and some came to do both. Racquetball players have a way of transforming even the most barren environments into a social hub.



ARMY SPECIALIST JOHN ALEXANDER PELHAM. PHOTO COURTESY OF WENDALL PELHAM.

The reality, for many of us, is that our worst day of racquetball is still a good day and that our racquetball community exists somewhere between friendship and family. John Pelham will never know these subtle truths again. On February 7, 2014 he wrote on his Facebook page, "I can't wait to play racquetball again." On February 12, just five days later, Army Specialist John Alexander Pelham passed away due to wounds he sustained from small-arms gunfire in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in the Kapisa Province of Afghanistan. He was 22 years old.

John's path to racquetball was not particularly unusual. His father, Wendall, had started to play in Lewis, Washington at the behest of his older brother who organized the racquetball program in his battalion. The brothers soon found a health club in the area and became regular players. The family later relocated south, to Beaverton, Oregon. While on break from college, John was invited by his father to play at the local LA Fitness. He quickly took to the game and within months became hooked. As he matured into manhood, John grew into a formidable physical presence. Known for his strength, John's favorite shot was the forehand down-the-line. "He could really, really crush the ball," Wendall said.

John loved racquetball for the physical challenge and mental dexterity each game demanded but he also loved the diversity of its individuals. "He loved talking to the other guys and would never turn down anyone who wanted to play," Wendall said. "He always had a desire to help the disenfranchised and that was true even in racquetball." John had his sights set on becoming an open player. "I was not surprised by this because everything he did in life, he wanted to do it at the highest level possible," Wendall recalled. At the USA Racquetball Northwest Regionals he sought and received advice from former serviceman and USAR Hall of Fame inductee Jimmy Lowe on how to balance racquetball training and a life in the armed forces.

Guns Blazing, Boots On

John, who initially struggled to find his traction early in high school decided to enroll in a National Guard program in Bend, Oregon. "In this period of time his life changed, he got high school done and was receiving every award possible," Wendall said. "Class president, valedictorian and he achieved drill sergeant." He excelled in many sports but was noted for his achievements and prowess on the baseball diamond. His physical and academic strengths were laid against the backdrop of his sense of morality, which is in part attributed to the religious backbone of his family. Bright, educated, popular and of a tender heart, the gates of life lay open before him, full of opportunities and promise. He had even met the love of his life, to whom he was engaged. "One day he came to us and said, 'I need to join the army'," Wendall explained. "'It's in my blood. It's in our families DNA,' he said, 'I want to become an intelligence analyst and hunt down bad guys'."

There was no compulsory reason for John to go to war, yet he felt drawn by a sense of duty and quickly began preparing for the exams needed for army intelligence. "At AIT (Advanced Individual Training) he was handpicked for a fast track program that would place him on two missions in Afghanistan," Wendall said. Although the family understood their son's desire as something noble and perhaps inevitable, they still experienced the very real and undeniable emotions associated with deployment.



JOHN PELHAM HUGS HIS FATHER WENDALL AT THANKSGIVING IN 2011. PHOTO COURTESY OF WENDALL PELHAM.

One need not look any further than 'the last hug' to gain perspective. The emotions surrounding the last hug between military persons and their loved ones contribute to making it one of the most pivotal moments in a family's history. As hard as it must be for that individual to leave his family and country, the loved ones of these personnel too must adjust to a life of constant uncertainty and anxiety. For example, there is a silent, lonely battle that each mother must wage and endure in her own way as her son or daughter is out in the field. A hug, a universal and tangible expression of love between two bodies takes on an unspoken fear for these families. For both parties, once the hug ends, the

battle begins.

The emotional cycle of deployment affects all communities, as these raw and powerful emotions know no discrimination. Wendall recalled his son's deployment, "I remember my wife turning to me, it really just hit her and she said, 'What are we doing? We are letting our son go to war.'" For the Pelhams, this would in fact be their last time they hugged their son, as tragic news, and not John, would return to their home.

John was known for his expression, "Let's go out with our guns blazing and our boots on." To those who knew John, they knew he was impatient, but his impatience came from a place of urgency. A sense of needing to get the job done, an immediacy for action. It is clear that there were certain missions John needed to get done in his short life. "My son lived that motto, he died walking towards the enemy, not running away," the father stated calmly but sternly about his son. Wendall's resolve was sure but there was also a deep grief when talking about John. "I have had all manner of maladies, operations and pain. They all go away; not having your son does not. There is nothing worse in life."

Racquetball: Help for PTSD?

This story is not only about John but also about Wendall Pelham who, at 57, has entered into the unexpected second act of his life. While others around him begin to think about retirement he is embarking on a new journey. With the passing of his son, Wendall has become an activist and advocate for military families who have lost loved ones and also for veterans returning to civilian life. "After John's death there were only two options in my mind, curl up in the fetal position or spring into action. My son would have wanted the latter." Though sorrow must be an everyday contention for the Pelham family, you will never hear Wendall utter a hateful or partisan word. He instead chooses to spend his time talking to veterans groups and participating in memorial events. "I would have never guessed that I would be speaking in front of hundreds of people and be researching ways to help treat PTSD (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder)." Wendall has the ability to relate to many of these wounded warriors and their families. The armed services have taken note of his talents and are actively using his talents to help them.

The fact alone that more veterans have died from suicide than from combat in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2015 is enough for national outcry. Yet the number is probably higher as some states do not report these deaths as related to PTSD. Wendall pointed out that, "These are actually guys with extremely high abilities. Because they suffer from PTSD does not mean they are weak or deficient in some way." The misconception that veterans need to be taken care of and in turn are life-long victims is perhaps misplaced. Indeed it is true that many returning soldiers need access to better health care programs and more financial and emotional support. It is also true that the country owes a large debt to these returning heroes and that in itself should be enough to ensure that things such as suicide rates are dramatically decreased. "These guys are national treasures," Wendall said. "I really mean that, these are the potential leaders of tomorrow, these are the guys who, if rehabilitated correctly will be future community leaders." Wendall sees the relationship as one of mutual benefit, as a way of not only improving the lives of these soldiers but as essentially enriching to the American experience.

Wendall has spent a lot of time playing racquetball these past two years; he has even jumped from a B to Elite level player. When he talks about playing, it is clear that he loves the sport and that he finds great solace in the hours he can spend in the court. Racquetball has been a form of therapy.

“One day I was playing and I hit the ball very squarely and I heard that loud crack against the wall,” he said. “I immediately stopped and thought to myself, that sounds like the rounds from an M4 or M16 rifle.” An idea began to form in Wendall’s mind, one that would eventually transfix his imagination entirely.

Wendall went to a veteran’s clinic and talked with a therapist. He proposed a simple idea to the therapist. What if we could help veterans suffering from PTSD to re-associate that gunshot-like sound with the pleasure and contentment received while playing racquetball. “I wanted to see how sounds were a trigger for PTSD. When I found out about the strong correlation I thought if I could get service members to play ball with a therapist on duty we could simulate those paralyzing triggers. They would be surrounded by healthcare professionals and a group of fellow soldiers to tell them that ‘Hey. This is ok, you are safe.’”

The idea is straightforward and has the potential to greatly influence veterans for the better, but crucial research is still needed. Wendall hopes to partner with the Military Racquetball Federation (MRF) and take this therapy on the road, holding clinics across the country, exposing those who are most in need to the potential empowering benefits of racquetball. Wendall recognizes additional players would also help grow the sport of racquetball.

The concept of helping veterans through racquetball has intrigued IRT President, Jason Mannino. “I have many conversations about the benefits of racquetball, from stress release to cardiovascular, however I’ve never really thought about it helping with posttraumatic stress. Wouldn’t it be great to add it to the list of benefits? Even if the sport simply helps cope with the loss of a loved one, that is a great opportunity in itself.”

Wendall and his family started the [Live Like John Foundation](#) “to assist veterans in transition from military to civilian life and support our Gold Star Families. To let these men and women know that they are loved and greatly appreciated, that their lives are so valuable. They are national resources, national treasures.” In addition the foundation will also help in supporting military families who are struggling. Wendall urges all those who want to donate to this cause visit the website [livelikejohn.net](#).

At the moment, the most important thing a donation will do, is go towards hiring and working with an audiologist to help prove Wendall’s theory that racquetball can help in treating PTSD. Wendall firmly believes that he will be proved correct down to the nano-decimal.

Those in the Northwest racquetball community, many of whom knew John, wanted to help translate Wendall’s passion into a tournament. “A few local figures in Oregon racquetball such as Dave Azuma, Hank Marcus and Cody Matteucci said we should have a memorial event.” Last year the First Annual John Pelham Memorial racquetball

tournament drew 80 entrants and raised over \$6,000, all of which went directly to non-profit organizations. This year on March 26, the one-day tournament will return to the Multnomah Athletic Club for the [second annual tournament](#). Various non-racquetball military personnel, including John's captain and sergeant, will also attend the event. All proceeds will go to The Green Beret Foundation, Live Like John and MRF. There are hopes that the tournament will eventually become a full Tier 1 Pro Stop.

Wendall has interacted with many of the IRT's top players, telling them of John's story and love he had for the game. "There are wristbands, that say 'Live Like John' and an [Instagram page](#) associated with it, showing people wearing it around the world. Well some of the pros decided to wear it including Kane [Waselenchuk] and Daniel [De La Rosa]. I believe Kane played with it on during a tournament. They were all so receptive."

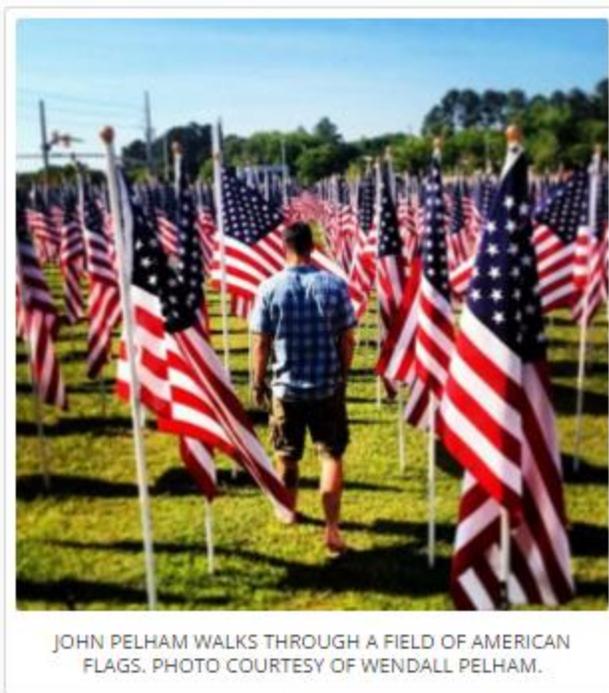
One player in particular that stood out in Wendall's mind was Alvaro Beltran. "I remember Alvaro coming up to me and telling me how grateful he was that my son had done the things he did," Wendall said. "Here is this guy not even from the same country, yet genuinely appreciative. That stuck with me."

Local Hero "Never Give Up"

John continues his life of service even after death, reinvigorating Wendall to carry on the battle here at home. "John's priorities and who he was as a person can be summed up like this," Wendall said before a short pause. "Stay true to god and nothing is more important than family and friends. If you are to embark on any adventure go with all your strength and never ever give up."

John is a known hero in his community. Over 1,800 people attended his funeral and the highways in the Portland metro area were shut down for his funeral motorcade procession. This was only the second time this had been done in Portland's history; the first was for a president.

As a community that extends far beyond the court, the men's professional International Racquetball Tour (IRT) recognizes the exciting prospect for veterans to benefit from the sport. It also acknowledges a much more implicit truth, that this is still a game. Win or lose we all get to go home to our families. This is something we hope we can do for the rest of our lives. But presented with the prospect of using the sport to literally save lives, we strongly urge our supporters to help make Wendall's dream a reality. In racquetball clubs across the country the game will continue to be played. The strong bonds of community will



JOHN PELHAM WALKS THROUGH A FIELD OF AMERICAN FLAGS. PHOTO COURTESY OF WENDALL PELHAM.

continue to be formed and a court will remain open, not empty, but filled with the memory of those who can no longer play.

By Tim Prigo

Tim Prigo is a lifelong racquetball enthusiast who competed in his first tournament at ten years old in Claremont, California, where he grew up. Since then, Tim has played in many IRT events, ranking among the top 40 at his best. He earned a B.A. in English Literature and Philosophy from Franklin Pierce University in 2009, where he spent many years abroad, traveling, and studying. In addition to regularly contributing stories and match recaps for the IRT, Tim is an aspiring poet and sports journalist. He also is the club pro at Lloyd Athletic in Portland, Oregon, where he now resides.