

Home Run

Story and photo by Mark Rickert
Baltimore Battalion

Heavy Fitness Routine Keeps Recruiter in Shape to Play Semi-Pro Ball

It's a typical night out on the baseball field, and by the second hour, a dull ache creeps into his arms and lower back, and the weight of his fiber-glass bat feels like a 100-pound bar of lead. But there's no sign of fatigue as Sgt. Kenneth Turlington stands over the plate like a loaded spring, his bat cocked over one shoulder.

Following an underhanded pitch, he swings and smashes the ball with a gratifying crack! He's hit maybe a hundred of these tonight, and he'll go through another hundred before he's done. Tomorrow night, he'll start all over again.

It's an endless pursuit of perfection and a way of life for this recruiter, who also happens to play on the All Army Men's Softball team. Already he's gearing up for tryouts in August 2011.

This year marked Turlington's third season with the team — an accomplishment that aligns with a lifelong dream of playing for the pros. Turlington started playing baseball at age 5 and continued through his adolescent years. While in high school, East Carolina University offered him a baseball scholarship, but Turlington turned it down and instead joined the Army as a generator mechanic.

But some dreams refuse to die. Turlington couldn't keep away from the game for long. As soon as he arrived at his Advanced Individual Training at Fort Aberdeen Proving Ground he joined a softball team — just for kicks — and discovered he liked it, even if he didn't take it seriously at first.

"I didn't know if I wanted to play softball," said Turlington, who's been a recruiter in Annapolis, Md., since August 2009. "But when I got into it and realized how hard you can hit a slow-pitched softball, and how far you can hit it and how much fun it is, I started playing 24/7."

After jump school at Fort Benning, Ga., he arrived at his duty station in Fort Bragg, N.C., joined a local team and then set his sights on the All Army Men's Softball Team. But the All Army team is not something you just walk in and play. Tryouts are held at Fort Benning every year and last for three weeks. According to Turlington, nearly 200 Soldiers apply each year, but only 30 are invited to tryout. Of those 30 players, only 15 are offered starting positions, five get assigned to the bench, and the rest go home.

But not Turlington. Not only did he make the team, he became one of its star players.

"If you look on the All Army Men's Softball calendar of 2009, you'll see that his picture's in it," said the team's head coach Victor Collazo-Rivera, who is also a retired command sergeant major.

"Defensively, Turlington was a one-man wrecking crew. He killed a lot of rallies by the other teams. They just weren't ready for someone to come in and shut them down like he did."

Since then, Turlington has played three years on the All Army team, but his veteran status won't exclude him from next year's tryouts. Come August, he'll be expected to demonstrate his proficiency just like everyone else.

For this reason, he keeps a rigid fitness program that frames each workday and extends into the weekends. He hits the gym in the morning and after work. Later on, he goes to the ball field, where he varies his routine: Mondays and Wednesdays are for hitting hundreds of softballs with friends; Tuesday and Thursdays are for playing against other teams.

"I pretty much just play ball and work — 24/7," said Turlington. "That's pretty much all I do."

Balancing work and play isn't easy. But he resolves his dilemma by incorporating his love of sports into his work. As part of his routine, he visits high school gym classes and sports teams within his footprint to talk about All Army Sports — an aspect of the Armed Services that most people aren't even aware of. Dressed in his official All Army softball jersey, he instantly draws a great deal of interest. When students question him, he shows them his personal sports photos and medals.

According to Turlington, this demonstrates a person can hang on to his or her dreams while also serving as a Soldier.

"Lots of kids are under the impression that Soldiers are always at war, or overseas, or that they do nothing but work all time," said Turlington. "So I explain that the Army has lots more options out there than just doing the job."

But how does he find the energy to keep going? For him, it's just a matter of discipline. Admittedly, he's completely wiped out at the end of the day, but the gratifying ache in his muscles, and the feeling of having accomplished the day's goals makes it all worthwhile to him.

"It's just one of those things that I had to train my body to do," said Turlington. "But now I'm so used to working out before and after work that I feel worse if I don't go to the gym."

It's easy to see how this sort of enthusiasm resonates with others who know him, from the Soldiers in his station to the community where he lives. Ranking in the top 10 percent of his company, while nabbing a near-perfect score on all his PT tests, Turlington is a model of health and fitness.

"Turlington's enthused, positive, and motivated," said 1st Sgt. Nathan Thompson, Columbia Company, with the Baltimore Battalion. "He shows his fellow Soldiers that they can accomplish their fitness goals outside of office hours, and they can keep physically fit alongside accomplishing their mission."

Softball also helps Turlington accomplish the needs of the Army. Every time he plays a game, Turlington shows the infinite possibilities that the Army offers.

"Not only does he generate leads, but he generates interest in the Army," said Thompson. "The community sees him out there, and they're drawn to his personality. In turn, he draws their support. Every time Turlington plays ball, he reaches someone new."

Soldiers First, Outstanding Athletes Second

By Fonda Bock
Associate Editor

All Army Sports is always looking for Soldiers who are also outstanding athletes to compete on a collegiate or semi-pro level.

Soldier athletes represent the Army in a number of sports in Armed Forces Sports Championships, national and international competitions and in the World Military Games held every four years. Replicating the Olympics, military athletes from more than 130 nations compete in the World Games hosted by the Conseil International du Sport Militaire (CISM) around the theme of "Friendship Through Sport."

To qualify, applicants have to be outstanding athletes with a talent and skill equivalent to that of the college level and have approval from their commander.

Following the motto "Soldiers first — athletes second," All Army Sports directly supports Soldier readiness and well-being," said program director Darrell Manuel. "Since we are selecting Soldier athletes in the Army, their sport skill and physical conditioning must be at a collegiate level.

For example: to qualify for the Army Ten Miler, men have to finish the race in sub — 55.00 and women in sub — 65.00.

The current list of sports includes basketball, boxing, soccer, softball, volleyball, rugby, marathon, triathlon and taekwondo. To get the full list and more information, go to www.allarmysports.armymwr.com.

Applicants will be evaluated on their high school and college athletic history, endorsements, awards, letters of recommendation and championships in which they competed. Those selected will be sent to trial camp for tryouts.

This is not a change of military occupational speciality or a permanent change of station. It's a short term opportunity — one to three months depending on the sport and selection for higher competition. Soldier athletes have to be at an actual duty assignment in order to apply and will return to their duty station upon completion of the competition.

This opportunity allows Soldiers to enhance their physical readiness and pursue their desire to excel in sports, according to Manuel.

"This is good for morale and promotes pride in the unit and Army. Soldiers are competitive by nature and sports generates the drive to win, whether on the playing field or on the battlefield."

In some cases, Manuel said it's also been a stepping stone — particularly for women — to play sports on college teams. "This past year, we've got phone calls from four universities looking to recruit women players."

To apply go to www.allarmysports.armymwr.com and click on applications.

Sergeant Kenneth Turlington, Columbia, Md., Recruiting Company, poses in his All Army Men's Softball uniform at Fort Meade Dec 6.