

## SEALs looking for ultra-athletes

### Navy hires mentors to help recruiting effort

**By Steve Liewer**  
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With sweat soaking his tattered tank top, Petty Officer 1st Class David Goggins hit the finish-line tape high on the slopes of Mount Whitney. He took fifth place Tuesday in a 30-hour foot race from the floor of Death Valley.

For Goggins, a Navy SEAL based in Coronado, running a 135-mile ultra-marathon in 120-degree heat across a desert and three mountain ranges is more than an adventure.

It's a job.

"One hundred and thirty-five miles – that's a lot of time to meet people," said Goggins, a SEAL recruiter.

He will compete in more races during the months to come. His work is part of the military's new efforts to boost significantly the ranks of special-operations forces, including the SEALs, by attracting high-endurance athletes.

The Navy Special Warfare Command figures that ultra-athletes have the physical and mental toughness to get through SEAL training's legendary Hell Week and thrive in the secretive, intensely demanding world of special ops.

"Most people would think, 'Oh my God, I couldn't run 100 miles.' I didn't even think about it because I'd been through Hell Week," said Goggins, who also ran this week's ultra-marathon to raise scholarship money for the children of fallen SEALs.

Besides using recruiters, the SEAL outreach campaign involves print and TV advertising. Recruits who complete training can receive bonuses of up to \$40,000.

This year, SEAL recruiters like Goggins are fanning out to 60 triathlons, extreme-sports events and college swimming and wrestling camps. That's compared with five such visits last year. They keep in touch with would-be SEALs, offering personal-training tips and answering questions about the military.



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Candidates for the Navy SEAL program traversed the cargo net part of the SEAL obstacle course at the Naval Amphibious Base in Coronado this week.

“Our mission is to reach athletic young men, to let them know what SEALs do,” said Cmdr. Duncan Smith, who heads the SEAL recruitment office in Coronado. “We need to find people who are already living an athletic lifestyle.”

Special-operations forces seek elite fighters to take up missions often found nowhere else in the military.

Traditional military units – each with up to thousands of members – typically rely on bulky equipment and stress a highly regimented chain of command. In contrast, special-operations forces operate in self-reliant groups of 16 or fewer men who thrive on speed, stealth and teamwork. They frequently serve behind enemy lines.

Teams of SEALs and the Army's Delta Force have been heavily involved in the effort to catch Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders. Because of their critical – though largely hidden – role in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has mandated a 15 percent boost in the number of special forces by 2010. The SEALs have a higher quota – an increase of about 20 percent within the same time. Rumsfeld, famously impatient with the bureaucracy of the traditional armed forces, has made the U.S. Special Operations Command the covert spear point of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Tampa, Fla.-based command oversees special-operation forces from all four armed services.

For the SEALs, dramatically raising their public profile after decades of shadowy work can be a challenge.

“Our traditional culture has been one where we don't really want to talk or divulge much of what we do,” Smith said. “The war on terror has changed that.”

SEALs didn't do any formal recruiting until last year, said Lt. Cmdr. Tony Almon, Special Warfare/Special Operations program manager for the Navy Recruiting Command. Historically, most of their new members joined through word of mouth within the tightknit network of active-duty and retired SEALs. About half of those recruits came from the Navy and the other half from the civilian world.

Now, Smith said, the SEALs must quickly expand their 2,450-man force. Rumsfeld's quota means the SEALs need to graduate 250 to 300 SEALs annually, figuring for retirements and other departures. Last year, they had 192 new members.

About 80 percent of the candidates don't graduate from the brutal Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training camp, which is held four to five times a year on the beach at Coronado. Many of them wash out during the 120-hour Hell Week gantlet of running, swimming, push-ups and obstacle courses with almost no rest time.

SEAL commanders insist they aren't easing up on the training standards even as they try to enlarge their ranks. They're seeking to mentor incoming recruits so they're in better shape before starting the training.



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Recruits received instructions before the obstacle course. The SEALs must increase ranks by about 20 percent by 2010.



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A candidate struggled through the Burma Bridge section of the course. About 80 percent of recruits wash out during SEAL training.

In the past few months, the Navy has hired such mentors for recruiting districts nationwide. These men scour their territory for SEAL recruits, then prep them for the grueling training ahead.

“Now you can actually talk to SEALs,” said Goggins, who is working with 26 recruits he met while in Massachusetts this spring for the Boston Marathon. “You can prepare yourself a lot better.”

Even to qualify for the training camp, a recruit must finish a series of physical tests, including swimming at least 500 yards in 12½ minutes using the breast stroke or sidestroke; completing 50 sit-ups in two minutes; doing 42 push-ups in two minutes; and running 1½ miles in 11½ minutes while wearing boots and long pants.

Realistically, Goggins said, a candidate should be prepared to do a lot more than that.

Kevin and Shane, both SEAL candidates now training at Coronado, said they would have been grateful for mentors when the Navy was recruiting them. (According to Navy policy, the media can identify SEAL candidates only by their first names.)

Shane, 27, of Salt Lake City, heard about the SEALs from a cousin who served on the force. He had kept in shape, but nothing prepared him for the physical and mental abuse inflicted during the training camp.

“I was extremely intimidated,” he said. “I was shaking in my boots. You hear things, but you don’t know.”

What can't be predicted from a weightlifting test or a time trial is whether an ultra-athlete possesses the mental strength to jump on and off a pier into the frigid Pacific Ocean for hours on end while an instructor screams at him to quit, to survive without food in a jungle infested with enemy fighters, or to kill foes in combat.

“I saw blazing fast runners who couldn't take it mentally,” Shane said.

Kevin, 24, of Norfolk, Va., agreed with that observation.

“This place exposes your weaknesses really quick,” he said.

By targeting endurance athletes, though, SEAL commanders know they are recruiting young men who have tested some of their physical and mental limits. A person who has run two days through the desert in midsummer probably has the kind of grit the SEALs need, said Lt. Taylor Clark, a spokesman for the Navy Special Warfare Command.

“You don't have to be a star athlete, but you have to have the desire,” Clark said.



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The SEALs gained 192 new members last year but will need to graduate 250 to 300 SEALs annually to meet recruitment quotas for special forces that have been established by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.¶

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