

BY KENDRA NORDIN / STAFF WRITER

MILLIS, MASS.

Never mind that the rain is coming down in sheets and a nor'easter is whipping up wind in 20 m.p.h. gusts. Nico Marcolongo is undeterred. With a sturdy Marine stride and the bellowing enthusiasm of a motivational speaker, Mr. Marcolongo is here to "heal through football."

On the surface, a flag football tournament in a soggy Boston suburb may not seem remarkable. But Marcolongo has a proven knack for turning the ordinary into a powerful force for good, and having fun doing it.

Today is no exception. The Iraq war veteran's effusive leadership dissolves otherwise stoic

Marcolongo, who flew 3,000 miles to run around in the rain. He hopes to grow many more Buddy Bowls in communities around the country to support local military charities.

"The Buddy Bowls are a healing experience," says Marcolongo, who also mentors physically challenged vets through Operation Rebound, a Buddy Bowl charity. "It's a time to celebrate what is in ourselves and help others. It's a time for communities to come together, a chance for civilians to meet service men and women."

While there were only able-bodied participants at the Millis tournament, Buddy Bowl has succeeded in getting disabled vets off the sidelines and back into cleats – many of whom wouldn't have even considered tossing around a football without Marcolongo's encouragement

played twice to Iraq as a Marine intelligence officer, for two months in 2005 and for nine months a year later.

In early 2007, he came home from his second tour under a mental cloud he couldn't seem to shake. Suffering from debilitating depression and anxiety attacks, Marcolongo was diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and given an honorable discharge Feb. 15, 2008, after 14 years of service.

But PTSD didn't slow him down for long. Instead, he used it as a platform to reach out to even more military veterans suffering from the same "invisible wound."

"It took me seven months to get my uniform on and get back out in public," Marcolongo says. "I put an ad in the paper and started speaking in my uniform" about PTSD to encourage other vets to get help, he says.

His wife, Lisa, 6-year-old son, Rocco, and even the family dog, Tali, are part of his healing entourage. Together they appeared on a "Sesame Street" special about military families coping with change.

Lisa, who ran the tournament when Marcolongo was deployed in Iraq, once signed a Christmas card to Marcolongo "Buddy Bowl supporter for life," while they were still dating. A year later, in January 2002, Marcolongo proposed with a football-shaped diamond ring.

"Nico believes in everything he is doing," Lisa says. "If you need help finding help, he will help you. I call him 'information central.' He leaves his cellphone by his bed and takes calls at 2 a.m. from vets or active military who are having a crisis. If they ... just need someone to talk to, he is there."

As suicide rates in the armed forces climb, and more returning military are diagnosed with mental trauma, Marcolongo's own struggles have only deepened his connection with the challenged athletes who compete in the San Diego Buddy Bowl tournament with prosthetic limbs or in wheelchairs, 22 athletes to date.

"Nico is very involved in the community as a whole," says Lauren Hinton, the marketing director for Operation Rebound. "He has a huge impact on the groups he represents." The cheerleading from Marcolongo, along with the way Buddy Bowl re-creates the kind of team experience the participants had in the military, has a healing effect. "All those things add up to the next steps to make them whole again," Ms. Hinton says.

As part of his tireless efforts to raise interest in and support for Buddy Bowl, Marcolongo maintains an e-mail distribution list of about 4,000. Last fall one of those

missives ended up in the in-box of Chip Fagan, the organizer of the Millis flag football league. Inspired by what Buddy Bowl was doing, he picked up the phone and called Marcolongo.

"I said, 'We can't get a team out to San Diego,' so Nico said, 'What if we bring Buddy Bowl to you?'" Mr. Fagan recalls.

"I said, 'I do not have the time to do this.' And he said, 'Good! Let's set a date.'" ■

IRAQ VETERAN **NICO MARCOLONGO** HELPS HEAL THE VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE SCARS OF WAR THROUGH FLAG FOOTBALL.



MARY KNOX MERRILL/STAFF

Nico Marcolongo founded Buddy Bowl Inc., which has raised more than \$380,000 for military and law enforcement charities. He came to Millis, Mass., for a soggy fundraising game.

New Englanders into laughter as his team, the "Mongo Maniacs," gets progressively muddier.

This is Buddy Bowl (buddybowl.org), a football charity fundraiser that supports disabled military veterans and fire and police first responders.

"I'm following my passion of helping troops and their families recover from visible and invisible wounds," Marcolongo says. "We took our love of football and channeled it to support a worthy cause."

Buddy Bowl is a culmination of all of Marcolongo's pursuits: football, military, and community. His ability to weave together unrelated groups has turned what was a casual pickup game among friends into the all-volunteer, non-profit Buddy Bowl Inc. Since 1999, the annual tournament has raised more than \$380,000.

The Millis event was the first East Coast tournament – actually the first tournament outside San Diego. Missing it wasn't an option for

kickoff, a helicopter on a training run crashed off Point Loma, Calif., killing six marines on board. Four of them were from Marcolongo's unit.

"I decided that, when that happened, we were going to make this more than a football tournament," he says. The players passed a coffee can around, raising \$550 for the families of the fallen.

In 2003, Buddy Bowl became a nonprofit.

"We thought we could help more people that way," Marcolongo says. That same year, the Challenged Athletes Foundation asked if Buddy Bowl would support its program. Later, the CAF established Operation Rebound, which offers coaching and financial support to disabled military personnel and first responders who compete in road races and triathlons – and, of course, Buddy Bowl.

Then war intervened. Marcolongo was de-

and friendship.

"Nico is awesome," says Sam Cila, a retired New York National Guardsman who lost his left hand after sustaining injuries from an explosion in Baghdad in 2005. "After meeting Nico [in 2006] and him introducing me to some premier [physically challenged] military athletes ... I said, 'You know what? I want to do that.'" Mr. Cila has since competed in two Buddy Bowl tournaments and five half-Ironman triathlons. "I found a home with these guys," Cila says.

Buddy Bowl started as a beach game among a group of high school friends every Saturday after Thanksgiving in San Diego. Then, in 1999, 10 days before that year's

'We took our love of football and channeled it into a worthy cause.'

– Nico Marcolongo