

Saluting a hometown hero

By DENNIS BUDEN

Like millions of Americans, I watched the Olympics over the past two weeks and rooted for the good ole' U-S-of-A. I'll turn on the TV tonight and, almost assuredly, search momentarily for another volleyball match, swimming event or track competition before coming to Earth and realizing it's all over. Yes, Olympics withdrawal at its best.

The American team did well, as usual, and it was all very exciting. Michael Phelps swimming for record gold. Misty May-Treanor hamming for the camera. Little Gabby Douglas fearlessly flipping and skipping her way to glory.

When America's new sweetheart, Missy Franklin, won her fourth gold medal, an equally moved friend said to me, "Well, I guess America has a new hero."

I've been thinking about that comment and America's seemingly endless quest for heroes. Even in today's wired world where no athlete or movie star can escape the 24/7 news cycle, and every closet skeleton is seemingly exposed (care for another toke, Mr. Phelps?), so many of us still seek heroes to admire, idolize and root for. They lift our spirits and break our hearts – all at once.

It further got me thinking about what a real hero truly is – and where they can be found. The truth is we often need look no further than our own home town.

Manny Jimenez is a hero. He



Manny Jimenez

doesn't swim the 400 meters or toss a javelin. He isn't on the cover of Sports Illustrated and doesn't have endorsement deals. The New Britain native and retired Marine corporal lives a quiet life, thinking about going to college and what he'll do with the rest of his life (he is going to be a physical therapist) after losing his left arm, hearing in his left ear and partial sight in his left eye when a homemade IED exploded on patrol in Afghanistan in 2010.

I spent some time with Manny in his new, barrier-free Glastonbury home last week. The home is beautiful, built by hundreds of Glastonbury volunteers and Purple Heart Homes, which builds and rehabilitates homes for disabled vets at no cost to the vet. It's a great story, one that's gotten its share of publicity, but Manny's new abode and new life do not change the fact that he is now a one-armed man.

But speaking with Manny, you'd never know he was "disabled." Says Manny, "It's all about your ability, not your disability; what you can do, not what you can't do."

Manny loves his country and took

his injury in stride – well, as much as such a thing can be. A cross-country runner and wrestler at New Britain High School, class of 2007, Manny today runs marathons, competes in triathlons and speaks to school kids about service and overcoming adversity. He supports veterans charities ("that is what I know") and in the coming weeks (despite a hamstring injury), will take part in the final stages of the Tour of Duty cross-country bike ride commemorating 9/11 and those who serve our country.

Manny will ride with pride in this event, happy to simply be alive and do what he can to help and inspire others. "There are lots of guys like me, and sometimes they just come home after their service and that's it," says Manny. "For me there's more out there and I want to help anybody I can. My message is, how much you put into life is how much you get out of it."

Now there's a true hero — right here in our own back yard. And he doesn't even wear Olympic gold.

Dennis Buden is a New Britain native, freelance writer and public relations consultant. Manny Jimenez will be honored at the Golden Kielbasa Veterans Open, presented by Farmington Bank, Sept. 21, which raises funds for the Hardware City Chapter of the Disabled American Veterans and Purple Heart Homes. For tickets, sponsor and registration details, visit www.goldenkielbasa.org or call 860-558-0514.)