Jakob Kepka

Pedalling for War Amputees in Ukraine

Photo courtesy of West Park Healthcare Centre

To say that Jakob Kepka is a serious cyclist is far beyond an understatement. The above-knee amputee pedalled over 20,000 kilometres last year.

Kepka is a man of purpose, which speaks to those endless hours on his bike… all of them in preparation for his Hoperaising Expedition in Ukraine this summer. His 900-kilometre cross-border ride from Krakow to Kyiv serves his mission to raise awareness for war amputees in Ukraine. As he pedals through the war-torn terrain, Kepka aspires to be a beacon of hope for those with similar injuries to his own, showcasing the resilience and determination of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

Now living in London, Ontario, the veteran of the Canadian Army Reserves and the United States Marine Corps as an Infantry Rifleman, Kepka was raised on an Eastern Ontario farm not far off the St. Lawrence River between Brockville and Cornwall, Ontario.

Two years ago, at the beginning of Russia's war on Ukraine, Kepka was determined to go to Ukraine to help, but fearful that no humanitarian aid organization would accept an amputee volunteer. But it did, appreciating that his fortitude could contribute in some way to Ukraine's survival.

While there, he saw new amputees gazing at his "bionic" leg with wonder. He became determined to help give these Ukrainians every opportunity they deserve to receive the prosthetic devices they need. Upon his return to Canada, he sourced and donated over $100,000 of used prosthetic componentry, including some of his own. He shipped sixteen boxes of hardware to Ukrainian prosthetists to be repurposed through the U.S. prosthetic humanitarian aid organization Penta Prosthetics.

And now his ride, which also serves as a fundraising effort, with the goal of generating support for the rehabilitation of Ukrainian amputees, to ensure that they receive the necessary care and resources for their recovery.

Just weeks before he left for Ukraine to map out and implement the Hoperaising Expedition, Kepka sat down with Jeff Tiessen, *thrive magazine* publisher, to share his story and his mission.

thrive: ***Before we talk about your Ukrainian ride, tell us about your childhood.***

Kepka: I'm from Eastern Ontario, a small town south of Ottawa. Raised on a farm. My parents were first generation Canadians, post-war refugees. My father was a Polish military man from the Second World War. My mother was a war bride of German background. They emigrated in the late forties and made Canada their home. I was raised in a very European lifestyle. My father, being a Polish patriot, was very angry at the state of the world, that Poland didn't have a chance for democracy. At home, we spoke Polish.

He instilled a great love for Poland in me. But I never went to Poland until I was in my late fifties. As a young man, my father kept me from going because I was classed as a Polish citizen and would have been taken into the Communist Army. That's how my upbringing led me to what I've been doing for the last few years.

thrive: ***How far is it from Krakow, Poland, to Kyiv, Ukraine?***

Kepka: According to the route we're taking, about 900 kilometres.

thrive: ***Why Krakow to Kyiv, especially right now in war-time?***

Kepka: A year and a half ago, when I came back from Ukraine from doing volunteer work there, this idea sprouted in my head. I wanted to somehow inspire the growing number of Ukrainian amputees, and it'd be great to raise money for them. I know they're very short on prostheses and prosthetic technicians. I'm a cyclist. So I thought, "wow, a ride would be great. I'll show them that anything's still possible."

I want them to see that it's not your body that restricts you; it's your mental attitude. And if I can do it at my age – I'm 67 – anybody can do it. With my contacts from working over there and my Polish friends living in the Krakow area I said, "I'll cycle from Krakow to Kyiv" because it wouldn't have any effect if I didn't do it there. If I did it in Canada I'd be another somebody raising money for the Ukrainian war effort. Big deal. But if they see me doing it, if they see me cross the border and see that I'm willing to take risks that a war entails, and Ukrainian drivers entail, who I'm more afraid of than anything Russian, that would inspire them when I ride through towns and villages. There isn't a homestead in that country that hasn't been affected by the war.

thrive: ***How long do you expect the ride to take?***

Kepka: For me, here in Canada, with good road conditions and relative safety, about nine days. I'm a one-legged cyclist. I don't wear a prosthesis when I ride.

I pedal with one leg. I have a cycling pod attached to my seat post that I slip my stump into. But no one can tell me what the road to Lviv is like. And I do expect to be making detours. If I find out that there's an orphanage, or a medical facility where amputees are being rehabilitated, I'll go see them.

thrive: ***You referred to Ukrainian drivers, and how they can be quite dangerous. For us, we're not thinking about Ukrainian drivers in Ukraine right now. What about the war? What about that kind of danger?***

Kepka: When I was there two years ago, we were living in warehouses or schools. You'd hear the sirens. But in the Ukrainian village where I was working, there was nowhere to go. So, you just kept working. Regarding the Russians, I'm a fatalist. If it's my time to go, it's my time to go. Whether I'm in Ukraine or in Canada. If it's doing something worthwhile, then so it is. I'm not going to worry about it. I'll let my maker deal with it. I'm not afraid of the war itself. I will have a support vehicle, a camper, and my driver Stephen.

thrive: ***Are you getting any other support in Ukraine, from Ukraine?***

Kepka: I have three months there to prepare before the actual ride. We'll contact authorities in Ukraine to give them a heads up. And we're going to put the word out to any cycling clubs to join me between towns.

thrive: ***To fill in the blanks a bit. You referred to your humanitarian mission. How or why did you come to enlist for that work?***

Kepka: Yeah. I went over as a volunteer with an American organization that only took veterans, and they were in dire need of anyone that spoke either Russian, Polish or Ukrainian. I speak Polish, so I applied. I did not expect to be called up because I thought the chances of taking an above-knee amputee to a war zone were minimal. But I got a call from a retired U.S. Air Force Sergeant, and after the interview, she asked me when I could leave. I started as a translator at the border, and then worked with a Polish group transporting humanitarian aid into Lviv. Tractor trailers could take a week to cross the border… just parked along the highway.

Kepka in front of a patriotic liquid tank on the road between Nahachiv and Yavoriv, Ukraine.

Because there were several of us vets who had construction experience, we were asked to renovate and covert old offices in Nahachiv, a small village near Lviv, into a medical center. We lived in pretty rough conditions. It was a very poor village with no infrastructure. At first, we lived on worn out old cots in the school. They made us a shower in the old scullery, which worked great for the able-bodied guys. But me hopping around, pushing an old metal chair to get under the water was not the safest way to take a shower.

On the weekends we either went back to Poland to do our laundry or to Lviv, about 100 km down the highway. Lviv was a liberty town for the Ukrainian military. By liberty, I mean leave. You know, a week, or 48-hour passes. We'd see a lot of military personnel there. Several hospitals had been converted to military hospitals.

thrive: ***I'm presuming that's where you witnessed casualties of war, the amputees who inspired your ride?***

Kepka: Yes, new amputees still with bandages on, maybe on a day pass out of the hospital. Most were on crutches. There were upper and lower extremity amputees, and here I was walking around on my microprocessor knee. They stared at me. I remember one young man in particular. I think he was with his parents, and he was an AK [above-knee amputee] on crutches. We were in the main square of Lviv surrounded with restaurants and buskers and singing and all very patriotic… Ukrainian flags everywhere. And this young man stopped dead looking at me as I'm walking, and I did not have the courage to stop and talk to him. His head was down, a very dejected look, not paying attention to any of the activity in the square. But when he saw me, he looked up right away. I regret not stopping to talk to him. I could have found somebody bilingual there, and given him hope. That still bothers me.

Dinner with Kepka's Ukrainian hosts wearing traditional Ukrainian shirt.

And I went to the hospital there once to fix my socket. It was an army hospital and they were working out of a container, a room maybe ten by ten feet in size, where they were molding and making sockets. That was it. They didn't have facilities. I read that when the war started, Ukraine had 200 prosthetists and technicians in the whole country. They were now looking at over 20-some thousand new amputees. A lot of them bilateral amputees.

thrive: ***And so, this was the inspiration for the Hoperaising Expedition Ride?***

Kepka: Yes. The guilt for not talking to that young man ate at me. I want to show him and others that nothing's impossible. It took me three years to learn to ride one-legged, but I did it. It took the willingness.

I linked up with a Canadian prosthetic NGO and an American one that do work in Ukraine. But I didn't realize that setting up a ride in a foreign country, in a war zone, would be so complicated. I thought I would just get over there, jump on the bike, and go for a ride. When I got back to Canada I realized that I needed more help. I reached out to Penta Prosthetics in New York City, and they said, "we're on board." Then I found the Victoria Hand Project out of Victoria, B.C., which does 3D-printed upper extremity work. And they were on board, but couldn't commit financially, and asked me if I was going to give up? Regardless of what those organizations decided, I was doing this. I have Polish friends, and Stephen, a Brit, there who are all willing to make sure I'm okay at the end of the day. And if need be, I'll sleep in schools. I'll sleep in barns. I want people to see me ride.

We have a Ukrainian Canadian filmmaker who immigrated to Halifax a number of years ago as part of the team. She did a promotional video, on YouTube, and will film the ride. We've got the logistical support, if not financial support yet.

thrive: ***So, momentum is building but there still are a lot of miles to cover, figuratively and literally?***

Kepka: Stephen is the leading force, working with NGOs and promotions. I'm just the guy riding the bike. The most important aspect of this ride is the Ukrainian amputees, both civilian and military. Our hope is that the ride will generate fundraising interest during and after. We'll be filming me as I ride, and on

our stops, highlighting the lives and experiences of amputees in Ukraine.

thrive: ***Speaking of amputees, you were honourably discharged from the military for medical reasons, but 30 years later still had that injured knee. What brought you to the point to electively have it amputated?***

Kepka: I was in the military and had an injury that resulted in having my kneecap removed. I was infantry, and the military organization that I was in has the philosophy that if you can't be an infantryman, you can't be in our organization. I was forced to take a discharge, and came back home to Canada. That's when I took up cycling because I couldn't run anymore. It was too painful. I had multiple surgeries on my knee and then I couldn't even ride a bike anymore. My condition got so much worse.

"After the fourth failed knee revision I begged my surgeon to amputate, and he refused."

Over about 12 years I had six knee replacements; the last three were revisions in a 26-month period. There were always complications. I'd had enough, and I got my wish.

thrive: ***You've said that your amputation led to a vastly superior quality of life. I understand what you mean by that with respect to pain and function. But was there another aspect to that?***

Kepka: It made me more grateful and appreciative of what I have and what I'm capable of. My quality of life really deteriorated when I couldn't ride a bike. My psychological health deteriorated. I couldn't train as much. I was an endurance athlete so I was trying to figure out ways to keep it up.

I'd have a high immediately after a knee replacement, doing well in rehab, but as the months progressed my condition worsened. There were issues physically and mentally. My quality of life just got worse. After the fourth failed knee revision I begged my surgeon to amputate, and he refused.

For years I was living on opioids. I never abused them because they frightened me so much, but I believe that the extended use was causing psychological problems, including anger management issues. I joined the United States Marine Corps where they take angry young men and make them angrier. I couldn't do what I loved… anything adventurous. I went into a deep depression. So, when I had the amputation I felt so liberated, you know. My first question to the doctor after the amputation was, "Is the stump long enough for a prosthesis?"

thrive: ***Obviously it was, and that would have meant back to rehab again, right?***

Kepka: Yes. But different. I worked really hard to walk out of there well. And when I received the microprocessor knee, I worked hard to learn how to walk well with it. When you're in a rehab hospital, you're asked what your goals are as an amputee. Some

Kepka at the medical clinic construction site with Ukrainian electrician, Sergi.

say driving a car again or playing with my grandkids, things like that. Mine was to get on a bike again.

thrive: ***Goal achieved. Getting back on the bike, how long did that take you to learn?***

Kepka: I didn't like the idea of my prosthetic leg being tangled up in a bike. And my stump is relatively short. My prosthetist in Whitby made a pod attachment for me, but it took me three years of riding on the road, badly, until I got the hang of riding with one leg. Last year, I rode about 14,000 miles [23,000 kilometres].

On those days that I didn't want to ride, or on those days I wanted to stop pedaling, I reminded myself that the sore muscles and saddle sores I was experiencing was nothing compared to the sacrifices all Ukrainians have made for their lives and country.

thrive: ***That's a lot of time on the bike. When you're not training, what other things fill your other hours?***

Kepka: There aren't many hours left. Even in the winter, I've been preparing for this ride, five to six hours of cardio, sometimes more. Fortunately, I get to eat a lot and not gain weight after those workouts. I read. I'm also preparing for another physical challenge. I've been recruited for an amputee team to climb Pico de Orizaba, the highest mountain in Mexico, next year. I've always wanted to do mountaineering. I do rock climbing.

thrive: ***Any regrets for choosing to have an amputation?***

Kepka: No. I've had several surgeries post-amputation – stump revisions and osseointegration. I've had issues with phantom pain. I always end up in a rehab hospital and just continue on. I've always gone back to the same rehab hospital in Toronto, and they accept Jakob as Jakob. They tell me that I'm so inspirational, but I disagree. I'm not. Working hard is just who I am. It's who I have been since I went into the Marine Corps. They repurposed me, reprogrammed me. The Marine Corps exposed who I really was, and I latched onto that.

The real inspirations are the people whose lives have done a 180. I'm doing what I've done for almost 50 years. But when you come into rehab and you're frightened by your new situation and you decide to live the best life you can, that's inspirational because you're doing something that's scary and comes with anxiety. Common people doing uncommonly challenging things. That's inspiring to me. Physical limitations are also a doorway to express yourself in new and glorious ways.

Kepka, ice-climbing in Elora, Ont.

Learn more about Jakob Kepka and his Hoperaising Expedition on YouTube: search Hoperaising Expedition.

To Donate go to: https://donorbox.org/hoperaising-expedition-2

To hear Jakob's story as he tells it, check out his guest episode on *thrive magazine's* podcast *Life & Limb* at thrivemag.ca/podcasts/episodes.