

## 'The Unstoppable Limbless Waterman'

No arms, no legs, but the Hershey man has plenty of inspiring, unflappable confidence

by Kristin Baver, photographs courtesy of Craig Dietz

**F**OR THE SIX YEARS THAT CRAIG Dietz has been competitively swimming in triathlons and other water races, he's been a proud member of "Team Bob." Ask Dietz about the origin of the name (no one named Robert is usually on the team), and you're liable to receive a mischievous grin.

is on full display as his armless, legless form becomes fodder for self-deprecating jokes. He usually hears a few nervous laughs when he flops out of his wheelchair and flat onto his back. "Do I lie here and yell 'Help! I've fallen and I can't get up?'" he'll ask a crowd of schoolchildren before impressively somersaulting to flip

County city of St. Marys as the final addition in a family of six. Neither the genetic anomaly of being born without arms and legs nor being the baby of the Dietz clan made his parents soft on him, says Dietz, now 40.

His no-nonsense mother, Joyce, decided early on that "she was not going to spend the rest of her life taking care

His father's remedy was to rescue a tricycle destined for the trash heap and modify it with a special low seat so his son could zoom around with his friends. When Dietz became interested in hunting, his father used his mechanical skills again to fashion a seat out of an old stool and mount a stick to the trigger of the gun so Dietz could aim and fire on his own.

His parents' philosophy that their son wasn't any different ran so deep that it wasn't until he went to Pittsburgh—first to Duquesne University and then to the University of Pittsburgh for his law degree—that he truly understood how much he stood out.

"They never treated me differently," he says. "I am different, of course, but they didn't really let me realize that."

Attending college in the early '90s before handicapped-accessible ramps, doors and lifts required by the Americans with Disabilities Act became the norm, he had to navigate his wheelchair up steep hills on icy winter days and ride a rickety freight elevator to the dining hall's second-floor cafeteria.

Not one to ask for special assistance, he passed the handwritten bar exam the first time unaided. As if preparing for a race, he trained for the numbing hours of putting pencil to paper by gripping the implement between his shoulder and chin.



Craig Dietz's first open water challenge that he made for himself was the swimming leg of the Pittsburgh Triathlon. He went on to set a record swimming across the Chesapeake Bay. (top right) Today, Deitz works full time as a lawyer and part time as a motivational speaker.

"What do you call a guy with no arms and no legs competing in the ocean?" Dietz asks, leaning his body across the table. "Bob!"

When he takes the stage as a motivational speaker, this type of charming wit

himself upright again.

"I know what you're thinking," he deadpans. "Wow, he's pretty agile for a fat guy."

It's OK to laugh, he assures them, as long as he's in on the joke.

"I will always encourage people to laugh at themselves," he says.

### 'Look, Mom, No Hands!'

**DIETZ'S UNFLAPPABLE CONFIDENCE**, which he sometimes describes as pure stubbornness, started while growing up in the small Elk

of me," he explains, and this became the backbone of her son's lifelong independence.

When he passed his driver's test and received his first handicap-accessible van, his mother gave him a vanity plate proclaiming, "Look Mom No Hands!" which still hangs on his bumper.

When Dietz was about 4 years old, his father, Gary, an electrician, realized that his son's physical limitations were making it difficult for the boy to move around the neighborhood with the other children.

"Dad saw I was kind of stuck," Dietz says.



Dauphin County

## Swimming Salvation

**IN HIS YOUTH,** Dietz tried out prosthetic limbs but found he was most comfortable without any. Taking a page from his father's book, he relies instead on ingenuity and a few tools. A simple dressing stick and motorized wheelchair help him maneuver outside. Indoors, he's most comfortable pacing on his own power.

Dietz has always been athletic, bowling in leagues (he places the ball between his chin and shoulder stub and tosses it) and skiing the powdery Colorado slopes (he uses a piloted ski contraption specially designed for people with disabilities). But, it's his prowess as a swimmer that has earned him recognition in races and in front of an ESPN camera, dubbing him "the unstoppable limbless waterman."

He had been swimming sporadically since childhood, when he spent lazy summer days jumping from his uncle's boat and splashing around in a lake near the family homestead. In his youth, a lifeguard suggested that Dietz add a flipper to his right leg stump to help with propulsion, but for years he didn't have the confidence to pursue swimming for sport. Then, in 2008 when some co-workers were forming a Pittsburgh Triathlon team, Dietz asked why he was overlooked for the swimming leg of the race. The response was simple: "If you want to do it, do it."

Dietz quickly put together a team in which his role was to traverse the 1.2 miles of the Allegheny River. He has swum it every year since as part of Team Bob.

In 2011, Dietz made his first attempt at the 4.4-mile rough-water swim across the Chesapeake Bay. He had to be pulled out of the water when a lightning storm put the swim-



mers in peril, but he returned the next year and became the first quadruple amputee to complete the course in just under three hours.

His success in the water has taken Dietz to South Africa where he competed in the Midmar Mile, one of the world's largest open-water swims, and last year to San Francisco, where he swam in a grueling race at Alcatraz.

### Anything but Mundane

**PREPARING FOR THE** physically demanding swim competitions is like training for a marathon. He amps up his endurance by logging two-and-a-half-hour swims four days a week in the days leading up to the competition.

"You just build up your strength so you can sustain whatever you need to," he says.

Before a race, Dietz dons a wetsuit vest, in addition to his flipper, and slathers his exposed skin in Desitin ointment because the zinc-infused cream won't wash off in the water.

"I look like Casper, but I don't care," he says.

For up to two hours, Dietz's body can endure the physical demands of gliding through the water without refueling. For longer races, a boat stocked with sports gels, bananas and a flask rigged with energy cocktails accompanies him so he can refuel on the fly. For some races, an escort helps to keep him on track since swimming on his back limits his ability to see where he's headed.

When he's not in the water, the rest of Dietz's life is mundane, he promises, with all the usual banalities.

He works full-time as a lawyer with the Human Rights Campaign, enjoys a second career as a motivational speaker and lives in Hershey, Dauphin County, with his wife, Christy Appleby, and their rescue dog, a black mouth cur named Rocco. And, while his limbless body attracts stares, Dietz takes it all in stride. When well-meaning strangers thank him for his service, assuming he was injured in combat, or

offer to feed him when he orders food at fast-food restaurants, he shrugs it off, seeing no sense in getting angry.

"They don't see me," he says bluntly. They only see an incredible obstacle, not the sharp wit or the determined competitor that so aptly describe him.

"It doesn't have to define you," he says. And if he were given the opportunity to trade his whole life for one with four working limbs, he's sure he would turn down the chance. "I never really thought there was anything bad about my life."

That indomitable attitude is the crux of his motivational speeches and may one day find its way into print if he finds the time to pen his memoir. He already has two working titles.

"Look, Mom, no hands!" he says with a smirk. Or the alternate, "You won't get far on foot."

To learn more about Dietz, go to [craigdietzspeaks.com](http://craigdietzspeaks.com). ♣

—Kristin Baver writes from Bloomsburg