Survive, then thrive

“I do try to keep a good attitude about things.”
That Dan Jordan is president of the Fairbanks Optimists Club is only fitting. The fourth-year rifle coach at UAF doesn’t let anything get him down. “I do try to keep a good attitude about things,” Jordan said from his Patty Center office. “The club itself is just always upbeat and all about helping the youth and the shooting programs and things like that.”

Jordan does more than just attempt to stay positive — he tackles challenges with patience, determination and vigor. Considering that he is in a wheelchair in one of the harshest environments in the country, there is no shortage of challenges. He’s become an expert at wheeling around Fairbanks, even through the mud when the spring snow finally melts or through the slush during the first storms of the fall.

The 30-year-old also rides four-wheelers and snowmachines, and paddles canoes and kayaks, usually bringing his wheelchair along for safety. “I pull my chair up and strap it on the back and away I go,” Jordan said.

He has outfitted his wheelchair with heavy-duty mountain bike tires and inner tubes. For extra stability in rough, woodsy terrain, Jordan built a third wheel to attach in front of the others. “I do just about everything I want. I can’t think of anything that has ever stuck me,” said Jordan, an avid hunter and fisherman. “Sometimes it may take a little time to figure it out, but I always figure something out.”

Jordan, who is fixing up a house in Fairbanks he bought last year off Farmers Loop Road near the backside of Creamer’s Field, also loves to operate heavy machinery such as bulldozers, excavators, loaders and Bobcats. Those activities must be curtailed or eliminated, however, because they forced a surgery last December that kept him horizontal for six weeks. Jordan accepted that as a side effect of being paralyzed from the waist down. “I probably won’t be doing too much of that anymore,” Jordan said. “When you don’t have much muscle and fat around your bones, that punishment doesn’t go well.”

**Jordan has plenty of upper-body strength, but his strongest attribute is his mind**

Jordan’s outlook on life was put to its greatest test in May 1999 after he nearly died in a rock-climbing accident 40 miles north of Fairbanks. Two months earlier, the All-America rifle shooter from Colorado had helped the Nanooks win their first of six consecutive national championships.
Jordan spent three days clinging to life after the 60-foot fall. Less than three months later he was back in Fairbanks learning to live independently in a wheelchair. He went moose hunting that autumn and continued studies in natural resources management without missing a day of school.

**Jordan looks back upon the accident without negativity**

“I never had a depression phase, never think about it, have never doubted why it happened,” he said. “I never look at it as a negative thing. There are a lot of things that I’ve been able to do since I got hurt that I never would have done beforehand.”

Coaching a dynasty is one. After graduating from UAF in 2001, Jordan moved to Colorado Springs, Colo., to train for the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens, Greece, where he earned a silver medal. (After a four-year shooting hiatus, Jordan recently began training for the 2012 Paralympics.)

In 2005, Jordan was set to take a job at a shooting range in Minnesota, but changed his mind.

“I always dreamed about coming back to Fairbanks and living here,” Jordan said. “So I called them up the next day and said, ‘Sorry, I can’t do it.’”

He hadn’t yet lined up employment in Fairbanks when the UAF rifle job opened up after Glenn Dubis retired.

Jordan was hired and led the Nanooks to national championships in his first three years, including the 2007 title before a national record-setting crowd at the Patty Center. The streak was snapped last March.

“In a way, it’s good for the sport for other teams to win,” said Jordan. “I would love to win it every year, but I don’t know that it’s totally reasonable to expect that.”

**Jordan has affected more than just his student-athletes**

“Dan’s positive influence helps co-workers realize what’s important in life, set higher standards for themselves and set higher standards for their programs,” UAF athletic director Forrest Karr wrote in an e-mail. “Dan’s positive attitude helps make the university and the greater Fairbanks community better places to work and live.”

Nearly 10 years earlier, Amber Darland, also then a UAF rifle shooter, witnessed Jordan’s accident and rushed for help. They became best friends, but it took seven years before they were a committed couple. That occurred in 2006 after Darland moved into the vacant half of a duplex that Jordan had purchased.

“Pretty soon it was no longer a duplex. It was a house. We knocked down a wall,” Darland said. The couple was married in June in Fairbanks.

**Darland said Jordan is both honest and open-minded**

“The thing I admire most about him is his integrity. He’s always honest, whether it be in competition or just in his life. He’s never afraid to tell you what he thinks,” Darland said. “He’s also a very fair and objective person.”

Like everyone, Jordan has his bad days and times of frustration.

Jordan cites the one or two times each winter when he has trouble getting around in freezing temperatures or deep snow.

“This is stupid. I’m in a frickin’ wheelchair. Why do I live in Fairbanks, Alaska? I could live anywhere else,” Jordan said he asks himself. “That always kind of makes me laugh, but it doesn’t last for long. Maybe five minutes, then it wears off.”

All Jordan needs to do is think about Darland, UAF rifle and his beloved surroundings.

“I’ve got my dream job and my dream place to live with my dream woman,” he said.