



WHEN A YOUNG RORY COOPER (EE '85, Master's in EE '86) arrived at Cal Poly in a wheelchair, paralyzed from a cycling accident, his professors saw an engineering challenge.

Nearly a decade before the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Electrical Engineering Professor Saul Goldberg and his colleagues modified the lab benches and classroom materials for Cooper, allowing him to fully participate in the curriculum. The result: an accomplished scholar, award-winning athlete, author and lecturer with an international audience, and a professional career that has impacted thousands of wounded veterans.

Cooper has never forgotten it. "That was the best part of my education at Cal Poly – Professor Goldberg fully embraced the notion of 'adapting the environment' and working

# INNOVATE

**RORY COOPER** LOOKS FORWARD  
AND **SERVES A GENERATION**

BY SCOTT ROARK

(Photos courtesy of Rory Cooper)

accordingly,” he recalled.

Cooper was just 20 when he was hit by truck while cycling. The accident happened in Germany, where he was stationed in the U.S. Army.

His spinal cord was severely injured, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. “The most challenging part of the recovery process was adapting to a new perception of myself – it takes longer to adapt emotionally,” Cooper said. “The goal of my education at Cal Poly and athletics kept me going.”

Cooper started with wheelchair basketball at Cal Poly, then moved on to wheelchair racing, building the racing chairs himself in the labs of the College of Engineering and his parents’ automotive machine shop. State and national competitions followed.



# ADAPT OVERCOME

In 1987, Cooper set a world record in the 10,000-meter wheelchair racing event. A year later came the 1988 Paralympic Games in Seoul, Korea, where he won a bronze medal.

He has five gold medals from the 2010 National Veterans Wheelchair Games, winning medals each year since competing beginning 1983.

Cooper is still active with Paralympics. In 2008, he served as an adviser for the U.S. Paralympic Team. And you may have seen

and Manipulation,” both of which have been translated into Japanese and Chinese. Cooper latest work, “Care of the Combat Amputee,” was just released. He co-edited the volume with Col. Paul F. Pasquina of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Cooper also lectures throughout the world. He was named “Honorary Professor” at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Xi’an Jiaotong University. He has 10 patents awarded or pending.

In remarks to the U.S. House of Representatives last year, late

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him last year while you were eating breakfast; he was featured on a Cheerios cereal box in recognition for his achievements.

His professional career is just as impressive. He is the founding director and senior research career scientist of the Veteran’s Affairs (VA) Rehabilitation Research and Development Center of Excellence in Pittsburgh. Cooper splits these duties with being a distinguished professor at the University of Pittsburgh, focusing his research on physical medicine, rehabilitation engineering and orthopedics.

Cooper has published more than 225 peer-reviewed journal articles and two books, “Wheelchair Selection and Configuration,” and “Rehabilitation Engineering Applied to Mobility

Congressman John Murtha called Cooper “an inspiration.”

And Cooper’s journey started at Cal Poly: studying in the labs, organizing wheelchair racing events on campus, working on the Rose Float and the Human Powered Vehicle.

A San Luis Obispo native, Cooper misses his hometown and the university nestled against its mountains. He had a chance to visit recently, though, when he served as the guest of honor and speaker for the 2010 Electrical Engineering Department Banquet on May 14.

“It’s a spectacular learning environment; it really is a special place,” he said. “It supported me when I strove to be forward-thinking and move on with my life.” □