

## The Story of Phoenix Multisport: An Interview with Scott Strode

William L. White

As a fully developed culture of recovery emerges internationally, new recovery support institutions are flourishing: self-managed recovery homes, recovery schools, recovery industries, recovery ministries, recovery cafés, and other social networking media. Recovering people are also finding expressive outlets in music, arts, and sports. One of the brightest stars in this rising culture of recovery is Phoenix Multisport (PM)—a community of recovering people who share strenuous physical activity as a support for and expression of their addiction recovery process. In the following interview, Scott Strode, the founder of Phoenix Multisport, describes the birth and evolution of this vibrant community of recovering athletes.

**Bill White:** Scott, I have been a distant fan of the work (and play) of Phoenix Multisport for some time. Where does the story of Phoenix Multisport begin?

**Scott Strode:** The story of Phoenix Multisport begins with the beginning of my sobriety on April 8, 1997. When I first got sober, I felt very alone and isolated, and that feeling led me to reach out to find a new group of friends. All of my friends at that point were still living the life I had been living in my addiction, so I found myself connecting with guys at a local boxing gym in Boston. Many of these guys were sober themselves because they were training for upcoming fights or were struggling with addiction in their own lives. They essentially became my support system.

At the same time, I took an ice climbing lesson and fell in love with the sport of winter climbing and mountaineering. With the inherent transformative power in these two sports, I began to redefine myself in ways other than just my addiction. Having the courage to step into the ring for the first time or standing on top of my first winter summit, I began to develop a feeling that I can succeed and overcome adversity if I put my mind to it. This belief in myself translated into my recovery as well.

After 8 years of sobriety, the story of my life became that of a mountaineer, a boxer, and later, a triathlete. Through these personal transformations, my outlook had become hopeful for the future instead of the hopeless view I had during my drug use. So, I thought, “How can I give this to others,” and Phoenix was born.



Scott racing at Moab, Utah

**Bill White:** What have been some of the key milestones in the recent growth of Phoenix Multisport?

**Scott Strode:** Phoenix has been able to grow beyond Boulder, CO, where it was first founded, to inner-city Denver as well as Colorado Springs. We have also begun programs working specifically with active duty soldiers as well as combat veterans who may be struggling with substance abuse. Phoenix expanding in this fashion, as well as work outside the state of Colorado with several drug court programs, is a significant step to expanding Phoenix nationally, which has always been the goal.

We have also seen some significant support from the philanthropic community recently. This to me is an acknowledgement of the value of the Phoenix program, and I believe it symbolizes a shift in emphasis to recovery support services, thereby acknowledging the importance of staying sober rather than just getting sober.

**Bill White:** Could you describe the key elements of what you call the Phoenix Model?

**Scott Strode:** Key elements of the Phoenix Model are really quite simple, and I'm the proof that they work. I built PM from my own personal experience. When I got sober, I needed to find a new life, new friends, and new things to do that didn't revolve around drugs and alcohol. Sitting alone in my apartment wasn't going to protect me forever. At some point, I needed to get out and build a new life. So when I designed Phoenix, I wanted to share with others the things

that worked for me. I sought out friends whose lives didn't revolve around substances. I started climbing, running, boxing, and biking. I created for myself a sober active community. The sports I participated in offered opportunities to learn and with each success, my confidence grew. The people I surrounded myself with supported my sobriety at minimum or were sober themselves. I got the support I needed to stay sober. I met others who lived without substances, some by choice and some who were in recovery. I watched what they did and how they lived. Both through my relationships and sports, I discovered life on the other side of addiction could be fulfilling and fun. I didn't go to treatment. Instead, I found the things in my immediate surroundings that taught me how to live differently. I didn't just give up substances, avoid triggers, and risky situations; I had to build a whole new life.

Phoenix offers people a door to a new life with new friends, things to do, things to learn, things to be good at, support for the hard times, laughter, and fun. So, the key elements of the Phoenix Model simply are: sober, active, community. All the good that Phoenix fosters starts there.



**Nick, Phoenix Multisport Cyclist**

**Bill White:** Could you describe the range of activities provided through Phoenix Multisport?

**Scott Strode:** In Colorado, we offer between 35-40 activities per week; all are free to the participant, and individuals attending must have 48 hours of sobriety before attending. Some examples of the activities are triathlon training, mountain bike rides, yoga, runs, neighborhood walks, and social events. We have some events that are for individuals new to being active, such as socials and slide shows, and some events as extreme as ice climbing and mountaineering. We also do two extended trips a year. One to Moab, Utah, where we hike, trail run, camp, mountain bike, and do a number of other events as well as a sober New Years to Ouray, CO, where individuals can try their hand at ice climbing, skiing, snow showing, or just chilling in the hot springs to bring in a sober New Years. The hope is these big events will draw sober Phoenix team members from across the country as we expand nationally. With all Phoenix events, the true focus is around building a sober supportive community and positive coping mechanisms. The bike or a climbing harness is just the vehicle to help us get there.



**Alex Handgliding**

**Bill White:** What level of staff and volunteers support these activities?

**Scott Strode:** Currently, we have 12 staff, one of which is a full-time volunteer, and a large group of volunteers that are instrumental in helping Phoenix programs reach more individuals living sober. We also have an apprentice instructor program, so our team members can learn the skills to either work for Phoenix as we expand nationally or find work in the different disciplines we instruct; for example, as a strength training coach or a cycling coach.

**Bill White:** How is Phoenix Multisport funded?

**Scott Strode:** Phoenix Multisport is supported by individual donors and foundation grants, as well as by donations from our own team members (although this is not required of team members). We also do some fee for service work with drug and alcohol treatment centers where we bring the Phoenix sober active community to them as well as some programs we offer to drug courts, such as sober camping trips and sober days out climbing.

**Bill White:** You have a special fund that provides grants to support activities of your members. How does this fund work?

**Scott Strode:** There is a formal application process for the Bob McCluskey Fund where team members can apply to live their sober dreams in the outdoors or in their outdoor pursuits. They must explain why they must further the mission of Phoenix and how it would carry the message of Phoenix



Multisport out into the world. There must be a financial need as well for individuals to receive this grant. For example, one of our team members, Nick Nisbitt, applied for a grant to receive a bicycle that would allow him to compete in Race Across America in the Summer of 2012. Nick is on disability because of damages suffered from a heroin overdose. The year that Nick received this bike, he qualified for Race Across America and has since served as an ambassador to Phoenix, wearing our uniform during all of his training rides.

**Bill White:** I'm intrigued that you have people involved in the criminal justice system providing their community service hours through Phoenix Multisport. What has been your experience with this?

**Scott Strode:** When individuals are doing their community service with Phoenix, we have made an effort to connect with those truly interested in living sober. Many have stayed on as team members and continue to be part of Phoenix programs. The hope is that by coming to a Phoenix event and helping us with something like bike maintenance, they may make a new group of friends and potentially find other reasons to stay sober aside from a court-mandated requirement.

**Bill White:** Given your experience with Phoenix Multisport, how do you now see the role of social and athletic networking in addiction recovery?

**Scott Strode:** I believe it is crucial. I don't think everyone should go out and try to become an Ironman tri-athlete or climb Mt. Everest, but I think a new

group of sober supportive friends is key, and the belief that you can succeed that comes through individual sports done shoulder to shoulder with friends can be a recipe for success.



**Phoenix Multisport Cyclists**

**Bill White:** Phoenix Multisport strikes me as a community of people who once identified themselves as addicts who today define themselves as athletes. Is that an accurate description of what happens to people through extended involvement with PM?

**Scott Strode:** To a certain degree, yes, but Phoenix is also much more. For

example, if you came to a mountain bike race where Phoenix athletes were participating, you would also see a large group of Phoenix Team members there to support the racers. In Phoenix, there is equal emphasis put on the racer and the friend who shows up to support their sober teammate. There is a new self-image created, but I believe it reaches far beyond the sober athletics into true community.

**Bill White:** Phoenix Multisport strikes me as a very creative solution to the isolation that can permeate early recovery when those past drug-focused relationships are severed. How have you seen this process work within PM?

**Scott Strode:** I have seen many Phoenix team members be able to replace contacts in their cell phone that they used to drink and drug with, with new names of friends that are always up for a weekend hike or a day out skiing. They also share with each other knowledge of these sports that they have learned from Phoenix or learned themselves, thereby empowering each other to take on new passions for the outdoors.

**Bill White:** Some individuals entering recovery also bring history of high risk-taking behavior. Does PM provide a way to challenge such risk-taking in a healthier direction?

**Scott Strode:** Yes, I believe we do. I think for those with risk-taking behavior, Phoenix's strong focus on safety in rock and ice climbing helps its team members find a positive outlet for thrill seeking behavior in a much safer environment than they may have been in before. We don't just take people climbing or

mountain biking. We teach them to be climbers and mountain bikers.

**Bill White:** Do you feel that the activities of PM are influencing local community attitudes toward addiction and recovery? I am struck by what a unique way this is to put a face and voice on recovery.

**Scott Strode:** Yes, Phoenix is certainly changing the stigma around addiction. Our team members are open about their involvement in Phoenix and go so far as to race in Phoenix Multisport uniforms. I think seeing a group of fun loving tri-athletes at an event, all in the Phoenix uniform laughing and having fun sends a message that recovery can be wonderful, thereby making it easier for individuals struggling to choose that life.

**Bill White:** What do you see as the future of Phoenix Multisport?

**Scott Strode:** My hope is that we can continue to grow in Colorado as well as expand nationally. We receive emails regularly from men and women in other communities asking how they can bring Phoenix to their town. My hope is we find the donors and philanthropists to help us do this, so we can help other addicts rise from the ashes of their addiction.

**Bill White:** Scott, thank you for sharing the story of Phoenix Multisport.

For additional information on Phoenix Multisport, see <http://www.phoenixmultisport.org/>