

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

Orlando Perez – *Wheelchair Games are a Family Affair!*

As he prepared to compete in the track events at the 25th National Veterans Wheelchair Games in 2005, Orlando Perez was all business. Carefully pulling on his gloves after adjusting his athlete number on the back of his race chair, he was the picture of intensity and focus. But, when another athlete asked about the afternoon's schedule, Perez was off at once to retrieve the information. "That's what I'm here for," he said. "To compete as hard as I can and to help my brothers and sisters." That rare combination – intense internal focus and discipline and an almost compulsive interest in helping fellow competitors – contributed to the selection of Orlando Perez as the 2005 Spirit of the Games award winner.

For Perez, the most important thing in life is family, and for him, the Games are truly a family affair. The father of three, this 31-year-old Orlando, Fla. resident surrounds himself with family at the Games. Last year, his mother joined him from Puerto Rico, where Perez was raised. An uncle is also a Wheelchair Games competitor. Other family members were also on the scene to support and to cheer.

Family involvement is central to Perez's pursuit of athletic success. "When I compete, I think of my family," he said. "It just wouldn't be right for me not to try my hardest. I do it for my wife and kids, to show them that just because Dad is in a wheelchair doesn't mean he's any different than anyone else and can't do his best. Nobody knows when they might end up in a wheelchair, and I want my kids to know that life, and achievements, must go on."

Perez sets the same example for other athletes. "The vets are my family too," he said. "I try my hardest for them and want them to feel like I do, that a wheelchair athlete can be as well prepared and perform as competitively as an able-bodied athlete." Fellow competitors know first hand how intense he is, on the court or at the track.

While Perez enjoys both track and softball, basketball is his real passion. "I eat, drink and sleep basketball." He has played for Puerto Rico in National Wheelchair Basketball Association events and also competed in the Caribbean Wheelchair Games. "If I don't fall out of my chair at least once during a basketball game, I feel like I'm not trying my hardest," he laughed. "That's my trademark!"

A paraplegic, Perez was injured while serving in the Army at age 19. He started competing in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games at age 24 in 1999. "I got hooked on the competition and the people I met," he recalls. "Everyone wanted to help and made me feel welcome." He's competed in the annual Games every year since.

After winning a gold medal in 800-meter track last year, Perez raised both arms high in the air as he crossed the finish line to loudly yell out his signature "*woo-hoo!*" After a quick hug from his mother, he returned to the finish line to cheer for anyone still completing the race, urging them to do their best.

Perez plans to continue making his family proud of his achievements – in sports and in life. That includes members of this talented athlete's immediate, extended, athlete and veteran families. "*Woo-hoo!*"