

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

Gary Orlando – An Example for Everyone



Gary Orlando, 54, from Erie, Pennsylvania, is a combat-wounded U.S Army veteran of Vietnam. When he joined the Service, he was training in electronics but when he was sent to Vietnam, he became a helicopter door gunner for the Infantry. While serving in that role, Orlando was shot down and his neck was broken. A quadriplegic, he now receives continuing health care from the VA medical facilities in both Erie and Pittsburgh.

The extent of his injuries hasn't stopped Orlando from competing in sports. In July, he is joining more than 500 fellow veterans to compete in the 26th National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Anchorage, Alaska – his eighth straight year of competing at the event. "It makes me proud to look back on the events I've been to and know that I am a contributing member of society," Orlando says. "It's great to get the chance to show the world and ourselves, that we have abilities and not just disabilities."

In his years of competing, Orlando has returned home with a collection of winning medals, including a silver last year in the motorized wheelchair rally and a bronze in nine-ball. This year, he is signed up for the rally as well as the Power Chair 220, a track event, but is not certain how he'll fare. Competition is stiff at the Games, where the athletes compete against other veterans from across the country with similar levels of injury. "Medals are nice to win and I'm always happy to get one, but if I don't, I have a bunch at home that I can enjoy when I get back," he reasons. "It's the camaraderie of the Games that makes them so special for me. I really like meeting people, making new friends and visiting with old ones."

This past April, Orlando attended the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic in Snowmass, Colorado, where he tackled the Rocky Mountains using an adapted ski device – his first time on skis. "It was really a lot of fun and I will go back to ski again next year," he said

Orlando has enjoyed being around the younger and newly injured veterans at the Games the past few years. He has also visited newly injured troops at both Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Bethesda Naval Hospital. "I went up to Ward 57 while visiting my aunt who was ill at the time, and just introduced myself. I told them that I was their age when I was injured so many years ago, and I could relate to what they were going through. There weren't too many people giving support to us after we were first injured. I really enjoyed being able to share with them. "

For the past four years, Orlando has also spent time visiting local elementary and high schools with his chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America. "This is one way we can expose students at an early age so they can become familiar with our injuries and know what it means to be in a wheelchair. I get nice handmade thank-you cards that mean the world to me. I get them out when I'm feeling down and they really make my day better."