

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

Amazing Attitude Leads Jacob Lietz to Victory



As a combat medic serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Army National Guard veteran Jacob Lietz used his training and skills to save other soldiers. He watched their lives change before his own eyes, completely unaware of the ironic twist of fate in store for him as well. In 2007, Lietz faced his own life changes. While driving to work in his home state of Montana, his vehicle slid on black ice and rolled, leaving Lietz with paralyzing injuries.

"I just had to stay strong," says Lietz, 29. "There are 10,000 things I used to be able to do, and there are still 9,000 left. I just don't dwell on the 1,000 I can't." It's that healthy attitude that keeps him moving forward. Just five months after his accident, Lietz competed in his first National Veterans

Wheelchair Games, winning four gold medals and one silver.

"I had a really good time at the Games," he says. "The camaraderie was unbelievable, like I never really left the service. My wife will be able to accompany me to the event this year. I like it when she's there to cheer me on." Although his wife, Keallie, was not able to be by his side during his National Veterans Wheelchair Games debut, she did go with him to the first ever National Veterans Summer Sports Clinic last September in California. The event was primarily aimed at newly injured veterans, many like Lietz, who served in Iraq.

At the 2008 National Veterans Wheelchair Games, he competed as a novice in weightlifting, track, slalom, nine-ball, and field events. He plans to mix things up this year by trying some different events. To prepare for the upcoming Wheelchair Games, being held in Spokane, Washington in July 2009, and to help strengthen his muscles and rebuild endurance, Lietz uses a handcycle as well as weights. He also finds video games helpful in restoring hand function and strength – plus, he says, they're fun to play with Keallie and his two stepdaughters.

"I took this past year for myself ... to learn my new body," says Lietz. The family is still adjusting to their new life. They enjoy spending time together and getting out of the house for shopping and dining, and he refuses to allow obstacles to get the best of him. Lietz jokes that the reason he performed so well on last year's wheelchair slalom course was because he'd had lots of practice maneuvering in his apartment and plowing through its thick carpet.

Lietz is not competing in the novice division this year, but he knows there is still plenty to learn. "The Games show you what you can do," he says. "I take in as much as I can and just keep going. There's still a lot I can do." This determined National Guard veteran is sure to prove that once again at the 2009 Wheelchair Games in Spokane.