

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

Jim Milliken – Hooked on Competition

Jim Milliken, a 62-year-old Army veteran from South Bend, Indiana enjoys his free time. In fact, he plays a little golf, gardens and swims about three times each week at his local YMCA. But it's not all fun and games for Milliken — it is *preparation* for this year's National Veterans Wheelchair Games, taking place in Spokane, Washington in July.

"I have been competing in wheelchair sports for more than 31 years," he said. "After my injury, it was wheelchair sports that got me out and active again. It made a big difference in my rehabilitation and my life in general."

While serving in Vietnam, Milliken was on patrol when an explosion went off behind him. Along with Milliken, two fellow soldiers were also severely injured. Despite immediate surgery, doctors were unable to save his legs and Milliken came out of surgery a double amputee.

Winning is a goal for many wheelchair athletes competing in the Wheelchair Games, and Milliken has certainly enjoyed his own share of the fame. An accomplished athlete, in 1988 he was selected to be a part of the U.S. Paralympic swim team in Seoul, Korea.

"Winning doesn't mean that I always beat all my competitors," he said. "It sometimes just means that I beat my personal best swim times. If I beat the timing goals I set but someone else wins the race, then I'm still happy with myself." Milliken has a history of bringing home gold medals, though. For at least the past five years, he has placed first in each of his swim events, which are generally four each year.

"It's definitely the competition that got me hooked on the National Veterans Wheelchair Games," Milliken said, and he has made it to 14 National Veterans Wheelchair Games. In 2008, he attended another national veterans' sports event for the first time. "I did go to the National Veterans Golden Age Games in Indianapolis last year and enjoyed it quite a bit," he said. "That event seemed to be more about the camaraderie than the competition, but I'm sure I'll go again."

Milliken is part of a small, informal group called the River City Rollers who get together to play wheelchair basketball a few times each week. They also visit local schools to teach students about the importance of safety and help educate them about people with disabilities. "We talk to mostly students in grades one through six about wearing helmets and what can happen if you don't," Milliken said. Beyond the competition and camaraderie of the Wheelchair Games, Jim Milliken is there first for his fellow veterans, to help convey the benefits of participating in sports, "I think it's important to get the vets out and be active again." He should know – it's something he's done, after all, for more than 30 years.

