

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (Local)

Russell Braun – Offering an Encouraging Word

When you watch the table tennis matches at the 29th National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Spokane, Washington, there will be no mistaking 70-year-old Russell Braun. It won't be what he wears that sets him apart from the other competitors, but how he plays. "The only way I can hit the ball is with my mouth open," Braun laughs when he speaks of his signature method of table tennis competition.

In 1992, Braun was involved in a serious motor vehicle accident that left him a quadriplegic. While he was receiving care at the VA Puget Sound Health Care System in Seattle, Braun discovered the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, held in Colorado each year. His first experience on the mono-ski, however, did not result in a favorable outcome. "I was on my second run down the hill and thought I was doing better than I was," he remembers. "I got a little cocky I guess. I did a spin, crash and burn." The minor tumble down the hill convinced Braun that he needed to be a little less daring in his athletic endeavors.



Braun turned his attention to the National Veterans Wheelchair Games at the suggestion of therapists, and in the summer of that year he attended his first National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Atlanta, Georgia. "The VA in Seattle got me involved in the Wheelchair Games," Braun recalls. "They said it was going to be a good thing for me, and it was."

This year, Braun will be making his eighth appearance at the Wheelchair Games when they are played on his home turf of Spokane in July. Although he is not claiming a home field advantage, he does have a sense of comfort and pride that may give him a slight edge.

After 20 years in the Air Force, Braun settled in the Spokane area and began working as a service technician for photocopier machines. These days, he volunteers at the local VA medical center in Spokane, taking mail to different departments and talking with patients, encouraging them to attend the 2009 National Veterans Wheelchair Games. For those unsure about what the Games can offer, Braun gives this advice. "The Games give the newly injured veterans the knowledge that they can do more than sit around the house. It gives them self confidence and incentive, and really opens up their lives a lot more. Whether they are a quadriplegic or paraplegic, I encourage them all to go."