

**TESTIMONY OF JOHN REGISTER
MANAGER**

**PARALYMPIC ACADEMY AND MILITARY PROGRAMS
OF THE
UNITED STATES OLYMPIC COMMITTEE**

**BEFORE THE
HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

Wednesday, July 27th, 2005

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee. I am John Register, representing the United States Olympic Committee (the "USOC"), a privately-funded organization chartered by Congress through the Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act. Our principal function is to field for the United States the most competent representation to the Olympic, Pan American, and Paralympic Games, the latter being a competition for elite disabled athletes conducted at the same Olympic venues approximately two weeks following the Summer and Winter Olympic Games.

I am an Army veteran who served in Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm, and am also an athlete who was a member of the 1996 and 2000 U.S. Paralympic Teams. My position with the USOC is Manager of the Paralympic Academy and Military Programs, and my main purpose this afternoon is to discuss legislation that would create within the Department of Veterans Affairs an Office of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events, a proposal that the USOC enthusiastically endorses. Quite simply, such an office provides the potential for a highly-synergistic partnership between the USOC and the Department of Veterans Affairs that would enable us to expand significantly the work that the USOC, through its U.S. Paralympics division, has been performing to bring Paralympic sport to disabled American service men and women, many of whom have recently incurred injury in the Middle East.

During World War II it was discovered that sports and physical activity could play an important and unique role in the rehabilitation of military personnel with newly acquired disabilities. Young service members who had just returned from WWII and were undergoing rehabilitation were predictably drawn to sports and other team activities. The attraction of sports for the new set of veterans served as more than just a rehabilitation technique. In fact, sports served as a source of motivation as well as a path to a fuller life for young people in the aftermath of a disability. As would be expected, many of the veterans became exceptional athletes and sought opportunities for competition and excellence in the new world of competitive Paralympic sports.

For a time, competition in Paralympic sports was largely a veteran's activity. The elite competitors of Paralympic sport were primarily composed of veterans. Over time, the focus of Paralympic sports moved from veteran-centered to include civilian participants. While there remain important Paralympic sporting events hosted by veteran's organizations, the Paralympic Games has become the world's premier competition for athletes with disabilities, whether military or civilian.

With the onset of hostilities in Afghanistan and Iraq, a new generation of U.S. military personnel with disabilities has emerged. These newly-disabled men and women are young, ambitious, goal-oriented and in their physical prime. Sport, which played an integral role for returning veterans of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, has the capacity to assist military personnel with adjusting to life with a disability. The USOC and its Paralympic partners recognize the opportunity to play a key role in the lives of returning military personnel with newly acquired disabilities.

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The USOC has been conducting Paralympic sports programs and clinics at Walter Reed Army Medical Center since May of 2004 and at Brooke Army Medical Center (“BAMC”) since January 2005. In the fall of 2004, a number of U.S. Paralympic team members, while staging for the Paralympic Games in Athens, participated in sports demonstrations and clinics with disabled military personnel from Walter Reed. The USOC’s Paralympic partners also have been active in these efforts, especially Disabled Sports USA (DSUSA) at Walter Reed and Blaze Sports Clubs of America at BAMC. Additionally, the Paralympic partners have encouraged the participation of disabled military personnel in local, regional, and national competitions, where they have the opportunity to participate in sports clinics and observe elite athletes in action.

While sports clinics are a great way to introduce veterans to Paralympic sport, a more comprehensive program is needed to ensure that they realize the full benefits of sports participation. While the resources of the USOC and our various partners are limited, unfortunately, the pool of disabled military with newly-acquired disabilities is growing. The proposed Office of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events would have authorization to bring expanded reach and resources to serve these veterans. The USOC would welcome the opportunity to work with this office to further develop the programs, services, and events for the nation’s disabled veterans.

The USOC and the Department of Veterans Affairs are developing a Memorandum of Understanding that will strengthen and expand upon existing sports programs for disabled veterans. It will expand the services to disabled veterans nationwide, and specifically in the vicinity of VA Medical Centers and veterans’ centers, through accessing the resources and efforts of local and community-based Paralympic organizations. The creation of this new Office of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs would bring national planning, coordination and support to these expanded efforts.

Let me be clear about why the United States Olympic Committee is so interested in veterans’ sports programs and what we are trying to achieve. As noted earlier, the primary mission that Congress gave us in our charter, the Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act, is to field teams for the Olympic, Paralympic, and Pan American Games. It says nothing about conducting programs for veterans, whether they be able-bodied or disabled. However, as an organization that is accountable to Congress and, therefore, the American people, we have a responsibility to have relevance beyond the narrow scope of merely assembling a relative handful of athletes every two years and carrying them to their respective Olympic and Paralympic competitions. We believe that we have a larger responsibility to bring our talents and those of our principal assets – our Olympic and Paralympic athletes – to bear on issues that affect all levels of society. Assisting disabled veterans to lead full, active, and meaningful lives by introducing them to sport is an area where we have talent and resources, and where we can make a meaningful contribution. Further, looking at all sport, both able-bodied and disabled, from a self-interest point of view, our primary mission of fielding teams for the various competitions will be better served when the pool of potential athletes is expanded. Quite

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simply, the more men and women that enter the participation pyramid at the base, the greater opportunity there is for more elite, Olympic and Paralympic-caliber athletes to develop and rise to the top.

The programs conducted at Walter Reed, BAMC, and other locations throughout the country have been encouraging, and have demonstrated the value of sport in the rehabilitation of disabled service men and women, but we know that so much more is needed. The partnership between the USOC and the Department of Veterans Affairs being formed through the Memorandum of Understanding will be greatly enhanced by the creation of this new Office of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs, and I am confident that these efforts will result in high-quality sports programs and services for the disabled veterans who so greatly deserve the best efforts of us all.