

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

Eugene Tatom – Sports Saved My Life!

Eugene Tatom, a 62-year-old Marine Corps veteran from Philadelphia, fought bravely for his country during the Vietnam War. He was stationed at Paris Island, Camp Pendleton, and Okinawa before being sent to the front lines of Vietnam. One evening, Tatom volunteered to take his group out on patrol. He was leading the group on their return, when his foot suddenly sank into the ground. Because there was no moonlight that night, Tatom did not realize he had just stepped on a land mine. The device exploded and tossed him some 20 yards from where he had stepped.



Despite an amputation, severe arthritis and neurological damage, Tatom will compete in July at the 2006 National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Anchorage, Alaska. It is his second year competing, having first heard about the event through his physical therapist at the VA medical center in Philadelphia. Last year, Tatom returned home with three silver medals, in table tennis and two swimming events. In Anchorage, he will compete in the basketball, swimming and softball competitions. He is joining more than 500 other veterans with disabilities at the annual national program.

Before his injury, Tatom had always been very active in sports, saying that he enjoyed fencing, rowing, track and field, football, swimming and several other sports. While he is a newcomer to the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, he has competed in a variety of wheelchair sports for the past 20 years. "I did it all – swimming, track, basketball and other events. When I was hurt in Vietnam, I was in great shape. Sports are what saved my life."

As an active member of the Philadelphia Magee 76ers wheelchair basketball team, Tatom's hopes are high for a gold medal, although he is quick to acknowledge the true spirit of these Games. "Win or lose, I love my brother and sister vets," he says. "I've really looked forward to the camaraderie at the Games, and also having the opportunity to see Alaska with my wife. When I was in the Marines, we never went on a honeymoon. Alaska is a place we may never get to go again and this will be fun for us."

Tatom looks forward to competing, seeing the area and "learning to have fun with all of the men and women who have served our nation," he says. "I should have started coming to the Games when they started!"