



Alaska Athlete Profile

Latseen Benson – Returns to Alaska for Wheelchair Games

Latseen Benson, a former resident of Chugiak, Alaska, plans to return to the state this summer to compete in the 26th National Veterans Wheelchair Games. Benson, a 26-year-old Army soldier assigned to the 101st Airborne as a machine-gunner, enlisted in the Army on November 1, 2001. Because of the attacks on the World Trade Center two months earlier, Benson was ready to defend his country. On November 13, 2005, he was struck by a roadside bomb in Iraq, which resulted in amputation of both of his legs.

Just seven months after being injured, Benson is just now beginning his involvement in wheelchair sports. He plays basketball once a week with fellow service members at Walter Reed Army Hospital, where he is still undergoing extensive medical care and rehabilitation for his injuries. In April 2006, he attended his first VA national rehabilitation special event, traveling to Snowmass, Colorado for the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. There, he tried skiing, rock climbing and scuba diving. Benson's wife, Jessica, is right behind him all the way. As a result of her husband's injuries and new involvement in wheelchair sports, Jessica also learned to ski, saying, "I have to keep up with Latseen!" The couple met while Benson was stationed at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, through Jessica's sister, whose husband also serves in the 101st Airborne.

Benson says that competing in wheelchair sports "...makes me feel better. I want to see if I can be competitive, even better than before I was injured. I have more focus now." Talking with fellow soldiers who are also competing, Benson has heard them say that wheelchair sports are opening more doors for them and giving them more of an appreciation for life. Benson hopes that will be the case for him as well, although he knows it is still early in his rehabilitation and adjustment process. According to Jessica, events like the Wheelchair Games help the soldiers as well as the families. She says, "It takes a load off of us just knowing they're going to be OK."

It will be important for Alaskans to come out and see the National Veterans Wheelchair Games while they are in Anchorage. "There are so many things people just don't know (about wheelchair sports)," Benson said, putting himself in the same category prior to his injury. There is a variety of adaptive equipment that he has learned about which enables disabled individuals to participate in the sports they have always enjoyed.

Latseen and Jessica Benson are continuing the spirit of "giving back." Both plan to participate in the early and later segments of the Soldier Ride, a nonprofit organization devoted to raising public awareness and support for the needs of the severely injured servicemen and women wounded in the current military conflicts around the world. Benson says, "We want to help the Band of Injured Brothers."

Latseen Benson's home state of Alaska stands ready to welcome home one of its own this July, a hero in the eyes of all fellow Americans.