



Athlete Profile (National)

Debra Jean Van Trump—Soccer Mom Turned Wheelchair Athlete

Debra Jean Van Trump, a 53-year-old veteran from Lake Park, Florida, served in the Air Force from 1973–1976. She wasn't always an athlete. In fact, she sat on the sidelines as a soccer mom before she was injured. While serving in the Vietnam War, Van Trump was wounded in combat and her life changed forever.

It wasn't until she attended the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic in 1996, that Van Trump discovered the opportunities available for disabled athletes like herself. At the Clinic, Van Trump tried skiing, and even rock climbing, for the first time. She has attended the winter sports event several times since, as well as the National Veterans Wheelchair Games. At the 2006 Games in Anchorage, she plans to compete in both air guns and swimming.

Before she discovered sports, Van Trump, who is a paraplegic, had spent many years trying to help other Vietnam veterans by providing grief counseling. The whole time she was helping others, however, Van Trump was neglecting herself.

"My life has changed 180 degrees in the opposite direction than the way it was," she says now. "I lived in day-to-day despair. I lived in a situation where I thought, 'this is all there is; there isn't anything else that I can do.' I volunteered to help other veterans, but the one thing that the Games have done for me is let me know that life is a very precious thing. It's something I want other people to know – that my life is much better compared to what it ever could have been. My life changed and I'm a better person."

Van Trump's favorite sports memory isn't of winning the gold, but instead when she saw terminally ill children skiing in Colorado. To see children so filled with joy helped her realize there are many reasons to be thankful.

"It doesn't matter about the medals," Van Trump says. "What matters is finishing, and doing your best. This year, I'm competing in honor of my father. He was a Korean War vet."

At the Wheelchair Games last year, Van Trump said, "How can I explain miracles? This is what the Games have done for me physically, mentally and spiritually. Instead of considering myself disabled, I now think of it as an inconvenience. I can deal with that and learn from it."