

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

Gary Pearson – Years of Competition Bring Good Luck!



Continued years of sports competition paid off for this 51-year-old Coast Guard veteran when he was chosen to receive the Spirit of the Games Award at the 2004 National Veterans Wheelchair Games in St. Louis, Mo.

Pearson was recommended for the honor not only for his knowledge of the rules, etiquette and command of his events, but also for his sincerity and fairness in sharing that knowledge with his fellow competitors. Pearson is genuinely interested in their competitions, even if he is not involved in the sport himself. The Spirit of the Games selection recognizes not only his level of skill, but also his perseverance and commitment to his fellow veterans.

“I’m competing in my favorite events – quad rugby, slalom and 9-ball,” Pearson said in 2004, when he won gold medals in each. Vigorous competition is not new to Pearson, however, whose first encounter with wheelchair competition was at National Wheelchair Athletic Association events where he won locally, regionally and then, nationally. Later, he became involved with Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) and began his relationship with the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

“I look forward to coming to the Games each year,” Pearson said. “I get to see old friends and meet new ones, and I’ve enjoyed the long lasting relationships that you make at the Games. It’s good for the whole body – physically and mentally.” Pearson, who receives health care services at the VA Puget Sound Healthcare System in Seattle, now serves as President of the Northwest PVA Chapter based in Burien, Wash. As the PVA chapter helping host the 26th National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Anchorage, Alaska, he has remained busy for many months, playing a key role in planning this year’s events.

A quadriplegic, Pearson was injured in an automobile accident when the driver of a vehicle went to sleep at the wheel. Reflecting on what it was like when he was newly injured in the 1970s, he said, “We were so limited back then. About the only opportunities for outings were to go to the mall or to a movie. It was difficult to find accommodations for wheelchairs. It’s great to see the progress that has been made.” He acknowledges that it hasn’t always been easy. “We’ve had to fight to become normal citizens again.” Past and present efforts to improve accessibility have paved the way for all Americans, but most particularly, Pearson believes, for those who have faced the ravages of combat.

“The Games’ athletes all have something in common, and being in a chair isn’t the most obvious factor – they all just love sports. Whether it is rugby, basketball, 9-ball or any other event, there is still that connection with sports. The other commonality is that whether you are newly injured or have been injured for decades, you’re not alone. You don’t stand out. It is a good way to get back into society and back into life.”

All things considered, continuing to compete did bring good things to Gary Pearson – but luck, it seems, played no role in his Spirit of the Games selection. That honor was richly deserved.