

CHAPTER 9

Olympic Path Marks Troops' Journeys to Fulfilled Dreams

By Fred W. Baker III, American Forces Press Services

May 11, 2010

The ceremony began much as any typical military procession does – with troops called to formation.

“I need a four-man front. Give me a four-man front,” yelled a platoon leader.

The troops joked and shifted, jostling about and adjusting spacing.

“Everybody in this row right here, shift back one,” the leader called out.

The commands for uniformity kept coming, customary of getting a platoon ready to look its best.

“If you’ve got a water bottle, get rid of it!”

“Zippers should be zipped up to the writing on the jackets.”

But for all of the commands sounded, one stood out and marked the uniqueness of both the occasion and the troops who made up the ranks. “If you’re in a wheelchair, move to the front.”

About 200 servicemembers marched down the center of the U.S. Olympic Training Center here yesterday before an enthusiastic crowd of local people, families and volunteers at the opening ceremony of the inaugural Warrior Games.

Hundreds of spectators waved flags, took pictures and cheered and clapped as the formation of troops passed by basking in what has become the gold standard of community support this new generation of veterans enjoys. Hailed as hometown heroes well beyond their capability to take up arms on the battlefield, they are a group of war-wounded veterans who redefine the term “standing on your own two feet.”

The ceremonial torch was delivered by a double-leg amputee who had plans to parachute in, an entrance that high winds prevented. In fact, the five troops selected to represent their services carrying the torch along the Olympic path had barely two pairs of real legs among them.

Army Sgt. Robert Price took the torch for the first few steps. His right leg was claimed by a bomb in Iraq in 2007. Price has eyes on making the 2012 U.S. Paralympic team, and he describes himself as a “prior” wounded warrior. He now spends his time in the Army helping others who are just beginning their recovery.

Price joked that he was about as nervous carrying the torch as he was on combat missions in Iraq. “It’s all eyes on you,” he said, and then he laughed.

It is not the physical limitations of these troops that define the games -- the omission of the word “wounded” in the title is not unintentional. It is the spirit of these warriors that leaders hope to capture. It is the fight that is left that drives them to compete. It is their dreams that keep them alive.

Navy Master Chief Petty Officer James Wilson was grateful for the dark Ray-Ban sunglasses he wore as he traveled down the path carrying the torch. The salty, 32-year veteran sailor said he was glad no one could see the tears streaming down his face.

Wilson has always been athletic, and like most children, he once dreamed of a sports career on the playing field. But real life led to a career in the Navy. He stayed connected by coaching sports and staying in shape until a 40-foot-fall from a ship in 2003 broke his neck and back, and eventually claimed his right leg.



Legendary former Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach lights the ceremonial torch at the inaugural Warrior Games at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., May 10, 2010. Staubach is a U.S. Naval Academy graduate and Vietnam veteran. Athletes from each of the services will compete in archery, cycling, basketball, shooting, swimming, track and field and volleyball during the week-long games. *DoD photo by Fred W. Baker III*

“I was speechless,” Wilson said of the moment he was asked to lead his team at the games. “That was a dream of mine since I was a child. I thought I’d never realize it.” This week, Wilson will stand against all odds on a sports field wearing a U.S. uniform and competing against troops half his age.

“I’m going to hold out just fine. It’s these guys I’m worried about,” he joked. Jokes are as abundant here as prosthetic limbs. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Israel Del Toro, who was burned over 80 percent of his body by a bomb blast in Afghanistan, is notorious for joking about his visible injuries.

“I didn’t want to get burned,” he deadpanned when asked what he was thinking as he carried the torch for the Air Force.

Del Toro, or “DT” as he is called, will compete in a host of events, taking on all comers. “I want to see how good I can do,” he said. “It doesn’t matter if I am first, second, third or last, as long as I finish.”

Del Toro noted that he and the other competitors here are part inspired, part inspiration. There is an odd, harsh reality among this group. A troop struggling with one amputation is encouraged by someone who has overcome the challenges of a double amputation. In turn, they are inspired by a triple amputee.

It is difficult to feel sorry for yourself in this crowd -- not because someone always has it worse, but because people who had been through worse have gone on to realize dreams they never thought possible.

Former Marine Lance Cpl. Chuck Sketch was told a year ago that he had about six months to live. His friends told him to find a nursing home where he could live out his last days. Sketch had joined the Marines 1991. He found out he had a brain tumor in 1993. In 1997, he lost his sight. In 1998, both of his legs were amputated because of blood clots.

“I thought my life was over. I didn’t think I would be able to do anything again,” Sketch said. But with the help of a determined father and some new chemotherapy introduced to the medical field, Sketch is still alive. And in the past year, he has skied, surfed and swum his way across the country participating in nearly every disabled veteran, Paralympic-sponsored, get-off-your-butt-and-do-it program he can sign up for.

“I never thought I would be here. Not in a million years,” he said.

Sketch is even working on his master’s degree at night school. His comrades chose the former Marine to carry the torch on their behalf.

“They like my sense of humor, and I have the biggest mouth,” he joked.

Sketch said troops here have to work much harder than able-bodied athletes to be where they are. A regular athlete starts training at Square One, he said. These troops, he noted, start at Square “Minus 500.”

“You’ve got to do so much just to get to the point where you can start training,” he said.

But don’t mistake Sketch’s remarks as a plea for sympathy. You won’t find any of that here. Sketch trained intensely, and now can perform the 1,500-meter freestyle swim faster than many of his two-legged counterparts. When asked how he likely will fare this week, Sketch’s solemn vow is characteristic of the never-say-uncle, intensely competitive nature of all the troops here. Bonded by the brotherhood of war, brought together by the shared pain of fighting for their very lives, only one thing separates them: the color of their uniforms.



CHAPTER 9

Marines Dominate in Early Competition at Warrior Games

By Army Sgt. 1st Class Michael J. Carden, American Forces Press Service
May 12, 2010

The Marine Corps team is on top after yesterday's first day of competition at the inaugural Warrior Games here, sweeping their opponents and finishing 4-0 in team play.

Team Marine ended the day 2-0 in sitting volleyball and 2-0 in wheelchair basketball at the U.S. Olympic Training Center.

The Marines' run started on the volleyball court with a victory over Team Army 2 in the opening match. Team Army 2 fought hard, but the Marines took the first two games of the best-of-three series fairly easy.

The second game, against Team Army 3, was a different story. The Marines barely pulled off the win in a 30-28 Game 3 nail-biter. After losing the first game, Team Army 3 took a quick 8-0 lead in the second game. But, the poised Marines patiently clawed their way back to tie the game at 20. The intensity in the bleachers picked up, as bellowing chants of "Let's go, Army!" and "Marine Corps! Marine Corps!" thundered back and forth across the court.

In the end, the pressure was just too much for the Army, and it was the Marine cheering section that rushed the floor to celebrate victory.

"This is great!" Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt. Marcus Wilson shouted.

"This is what we've been training for the last two weeks." Wilson gave credit to the Army team. The victory was much sweeter against a strong opponent, he said, and Team Army 3 was a tough squad.

"They were tough, and they did a great job with a lot of heart, but this is what we've been training for – this exact situation," Wilson said. "This type of scenario is something our coaches have been working on with us in practice, so we were ready."

The Marines also dominated competition the basketball court. With their high field goal percentage and quick guard play, the Marines showed why they are heavily favored to win the gold medal. The Marines routed the Air Force 68-13 in their first game, and followed up that win by beating Army 45-18 in a game that was a little closer than the score indicates.

The Air Force didn't have an answer for the speed of Retired Marine Corps Cpl. Travis Greene and Cpl. Raymond Hennagir. The two double-leg amputees zipped up and down the floor in tandem, while Air Force defenders could only watch.

The Army, however, made a strong showing again early on in the second game. But their hope of winning slowly began to fade with the loss of smooth-driving point guard Spc. Craig C. Smith to a leg cramp in the second half. The Marines took advantage of Smith's absence, cruising to victory behind a 20-2 run.

After getting through the first day of competition unscathed, the Marines are going into today's second day of competition optimistic about their chance to win the Chairman's Cup, the games' top award that will be presented to the service with the highest medal count.



Marine wheelchair basketball team coach Billy Demby, center, huddles with his players during a timeout May 11, 2010. The Marines routed the Air Force 68-13 in the preliminary round of wheelchair basketball at the inaugural Warrior Games. The games feature some 200 wounded warriors and disabled veterans in Paralympic-type competition. DoD photo by Army Sgt. 1st Class Michael J. Carden

“The first day of competition, we rock-and-rolled,” Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt. Luis Nino, the senior staff noncommissioned officer for the Marine Corps Wounded Warrior Regiment, said. “To turn around and see my Marines, my country’s Marines, do so well in competition is highly motivating.”

An avid sports fan, Nino said watching yesterday’s competition was more exciting than sitting in the stands at Yankee Stadium in October, where he watched his New York Yankees come from behind on a late-inning home run from Alex Rodriguez in a playoff game.

“Even that game didn’t compare to the last game we played against the Army in volleyball,” Nino said. “I’ve never screamed as loud as I did or got light-headed from cheering the way I did in that game.”

Although the athletes have proven to be highly competitive, the Warrior Games are about more than victory and medals. Most importantly, the games are about competitors rising to new challenges and gaining a sense of normalcy and renewed confidence.

So far, the Warrior Games have panned out to be better than the athletes and organizers ever could have imagined, said U.S. Paralympian and Army Gulf War veteran John Register.

“I don’t think the first day of competition could’ve gone any better,” said Register, who lost his left leg to a hurdling accident in 1994 while training for the 1996 Summer Olympics. “Even though we’re one team, one fight as a country, when you get the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps [and] Coast Guard in here, it’s a phenomenal experience to see the camaraderie and esprit de corps take over. We’re seeing that right now with our servicemembers.

“When you look around, you see no one harping on disabilities,” Register added. “It’s all about ability and getting into the spirit of the games.”



CHAPTER 9

Husband and Wife Coaching Duo Give Marines Extra Edge in Warrior Games

By Lance Cpl. Graham Benson

May 12, 2010

The All-Marine Warrior Games Team has made a wealth of coaching knowledge available to its athletes in preparation for and during the inaugural Warrior Games.

However, the Marines on the shooting team have an unusual pair of coaches at their disposal.

U.S. Marine Sgt. Mark Windmassenger and his wife Sgt. Emily Windmassinger are both accomplished marksmen on the Marine Corps' All-Marine shooting team in Quantico, Va. The duo have come to Colorado Springs, Colo., to coach wounded warriors from throughout the Corps in the inaugural Warrior Games being held May 10-14, at the U.S. Olympic Training Center and U.S. Air Force Academy here.

"I absolutely love training Marines," said Mark Windmassenger, a 25-year old Quakertown, Pa., native, "Training the wounded warriors is the most rewarding thing I have done since I've been on the shooting team. They are extremely motivated and are willing to train harder than most."

Emily, a 23-year from Loves Park Ill., agrees with her husband, "The feeling I get from watching these athletes overcome their struggles and disabilities and execute what I'm teaching them gives me more pleasure than improving my own skills."

Both Mark and Emily have been on active duty since 2005. In 2007 they met and married while they were both working in their original jobs as finance clerks before qualifying for the marksmanship team.

Shooting is one of their passions and they are ecstatic to be sharing it together.

"It's great that we're getting to do something that we both love so much and are so passionate about," said Mark. "I think the athletes are also getting a good deal out of it because she and I work so well as coaches together."

Their 20 total shooters will compete in both air rifle and air pistol shooting competitions during the Warrior Games. The games feature more than 200 wounded service members competing against each other in a variety of Olympic-style events while representing their respective services.



Mark and Emily Windmassenger, both U.S. Marine sergeants and members of the All-Marine marksmanship team, pose for a picture together at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., May 12. The couple is coaching both air rifle and air pistol shooting teams for the All-Marine Warrior Games Team. The inaugural games are offering more than 200 Wounded, Ill and Injured service members an opportunity to compete against each other while representing their respective services. The games are being held at the U.S. Olympic Training Center and U.S. Air Force Academy May 10-14.



CHAPTER 9

Marines Earn Gold, Silver in Warrior Games Archery

By Marine Corps Cpl. Scott Schmidt, Defense Media Activity – Marine Corps
May 13, 2010

When retired Marine Corps 1st Sgt. John Fuller was asked how he thought the inaugural Warrior Games archery competition would turn out, his answer was complicated, yet simple. And it was right.

Marines earned both gold and silver medals in the compound-bow competition at the U.S. Olympic Training Center here yesterday – just as Fuller, the Marine team's archery coach, predicted.

Cpl. Beau Parra of Wounded Warrior Detachment Hawaii narrowly missed a perfect mark, scoring 119 out of 120 possible points, closely followed by his fellow Marine, Staff Sgt. Matthew Benack, who shot 118. Army Sgt. Robert Price claimed the bronze medal.

Fuller said his prediction was based on observing his team members' individual strengths, as well as their nerves. The two Marines who captured top honors exemplified those strengths, he said.

“We were all sitting around and talking about shooting, and one of the guys asked me, ‘How do you think it will come out?’” Fuller said. “Well, I answered truthfully and honestly. I said, ‘I think we’re going to have Benack and Parra in the gold round, and I think Parra will win it.’”

Parra said the gold medal solidifies a renewed sense of worth, and means overcoming an injury can be just the beginning for the competitors here.

“No matter how bad your wounds are, and no matter how bad you’re hurt, we can still come out here and do this,” the Prescott, Ariz., native said. “We can still compete and be champions and be winners.” But winning the competition was no walk in the park, he acknowledged.

“The competition was close,” Parra said. “I looked down the line and tried not to let my nerves get to me, because everyone put their heart into the game. This win wasn’t just given away.”

Dozens of servicemembers went head to head, but in the end, the compound-bow competition came down to Marine against Marine. The shootout seemed more like a friendly practice round, as the two Marines encouraged each other and even offered pointers during the final rounds of competition. With a difference of only one point separating the two wounded warriors, the event kept both the audience and the competitors on their toes.

Although medals were on the line, Benack said, something more important was going on. All of the wounded warriors, he noted, share a common past and a common goal to recovery. The best part of the Warrior Games is the camaraderie among the services and the way the competitors help and encourage each other through whatever difficulties they face.

Parra said winning the gold medal gives him the confidence to move on and continue recovering.

“It gives you the mindset to take focus off of [post-traumatic stress disorder] and shift it to the game,” he said.

Marines also competed in the recurve-bow competition, but failed to place. The Army took all three medals, with the Marines finishing a close fourth. Sgt. Michael Lukow earned gold, Staff Sgt. Curtis Winston won silver, and their fellow soldier Sgt. Jeffery Anderson took the bronze medal.



Marine Corps Cpl. Beau Parra retrieves his game-winning shot from the target during the inaugural Warrior Games compound-bow archery competition May 12, 2010. Parra, a 28-year-old Prescott, Ariz., native won the gold medal. *U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Scott M. Schmidt*

CHAPTER 9

Inaugural Warrior Games Set to Wrap Up

By Fred W. Baker III, American Forces Press Service

May 14, 2010

The inaugural Warrior Games at the Olympic Training Center here will draw to a close this evening, leaving in their wake a few hundred happy, but very tired troops, family members and volunteers.

The week-long series of games drew enthusiastic crowds and reached the level of intensity in the gold medal matchups equal to that of the actual Paralympics, officials said.

“I walked in there and it was dripping with intensity. The game was unbelievable,” said Charlie Huebner, chief of Paralympics for the U.S. Olympic Committee. “The crowd, the emotion -- it was just phenomenal. Everything we wanted it to be.”

For the past week, about 200 servicemembers from across the Defense Department competed as individuals and in teams in Paralympic Olympic-style events such as shooting, swimming, archery, sitting volleyball, cycling, track, wheelchair basketball, discus, and shot put.

They also competed individually for the “Ultimate Champion” competition in a pentathlon format, and the service team’s rallied for a rotating Chairman’s Cup.

Those awards will be presented at the closing ceremony tonight.

The much-anticipated games were announced at the Pentagon only months ago by the Army and its partner, the U.S. Paralympics. The two organizations, along with other partners, quickly brought together the financial and logistical support requirements of bringing those troops to the U.S. Olympic Training Center here, along with many of their wounded warrior units’ cadre and medical staff. The services quickly recruited their athlete candidates.

Despite the somewhat rushed start, the games proved to be a hit with the athletes, families and volunteers. Already officials are making plans for next year’s games, and talking of bringing in international competitors.

“This exceeded my wildest expectations,” said Army Brig Gen. Gary H. Cheek, commanding general of the Army’s Warrior Transition Command. “I didn’t know that we’d have that kind of emotion and the size of the crowds that are here,” he added.

Officials hope that this year’s event will spawn year-round efforts at the wounded warrior units to train for the annual competition. It is an effort, they said, to encourage wounded servicemembers to use sports in their recovery programs.

“What we’re really looking for is that energy to go back to our units where these servicemembers are recovering and spread that fire. ... That’s really what this is all about,” Cheek said.

Cheek said next year’s event will include more sophisticated preparation, including qualifying competitions held at a regional level.

“There’s going to be a lot more focus and energy toward this final event,” he said. “Doing it 52 weeks of the year instead of one week a year is what we’re really after.”

Cheek said wounded servicemembers early on sometimes focus too much on their injuries and what they can’t do. These games helped them focus on what they can do, he said.



Marine Corps Warrior Games athlete Sgt. Michael Blair and Maj. Susan Stark, head coach for the Marine Corps team, celebrate their service’s gold medal victory in seated volleyball with Blair’s 4-year-old daughter, Bella, at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., May 13, 2010. U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Graham J. Benson

“They found within themselves things that they didn’t know were there, and that’s what this is all about,” he said. “In the end, it’s all about focusing on abilities, not disabilities -- what you can do, not what you can’t do.”

Both Cheek and Huebner said that the energy from being active in sports spills over into the rest of the troops’ lives, making them better spouses, parents and employees.

Huebner said not everyone dreams of becoming a Paralympic athlete, but he said that being active is a piece of the rehabilitation puzzle, and sports skills can help them better adapt when they return to their homes.

“We have dreams of winning medals at the games,” he said. “But it’s also the dreams of hitting that homerun in your backyard.”

Huebner said he sees the benefits of integrating physical activity into daily life.

“I see people that have higher self-esteem,” he said. “I see people that have lower secondary medical conditions, I see people who are pursuing education, pursuing employment, [and people who] are motivated.”



CHAPTER 9

Marines Earn Gold in Sitting Volleyball

By Marine Corps Cpl. Scott Schmidt, Defense Media Activity – Marine Corps
May 14, 2010

A rivalry that had been brewing since the start of the inaugural Warrior Games was decided here yesterday when the Marine Corps team topped the Army in sitting volleyball competition.

The Marines secured the gold medal in a best-of-three championship match, with the Army team emerging as silver medalists. “These Marines have been my most coachable athletes,” said Brent Petersen, one of the team’s coaches. “Not only have they fought for life, but they have fought to overcome the adversities that may have beaten lesser men.”

Army Sgt. Juan Alcivar, who competed against the Marines in the final game, gave credit to the victors. “I told them right off the bat, ‘We’ll see you in the finals,’” he said. “Well, we got there, but obviously we didn’t win the gold. I think the right team won. They came here knowing what they were doing, and it showed.”

The Marine and Army teams first met during the second preliminary match. The Marines won that first matchup, and the rivalry fueled the largest audience turnout of the games.

“The crowd really set the pace for the game,” said retired Sgt. Brad Walker of the Marine Corps team. “The atmosphere was so charged-full of energy, and we could just feed off of it during the game.”

As the two teams battled at the net, every point sparked a crowd eruption, which seemed to enhance the players’ competitive spirit. Marines dove, soldiers spiked, and both teams gave it their all, but in the end it was Gunnery Sgt. Marcus Wilson who scored the game-winning point to secure the 15-9 victory in the championship match’s decisive game.

The ball had barely bounced twice before a mass of red poured from the bleachers and descended upon the champions. The Marines did not soon forget their competitors, however.

“I really have to give it up for the soldiers,” Petersen said. “The Army team has improved so much since our first match. This game was not an easy win for us.”

The Marines arrived here two weeks early to acclimatize themselves to the altitude, and Petersen said it seemed to pay off. “I promised these guys that we’d train together, we’d win together, and if it so worked out [that way], we would lose together,” he said.

The Air Force took the sitting volleyball bronze medal, beating out another Army team.



Marine Corps PFC. Jese Schag spikes against the Army during the championship match of the inaugural Warrior Games sitting volleyball competition in Colorado Springs, Colo., May 13, 2010. The Marines won the gold medal, defeating the Army 15-9 in the championship-clinching game. *U.S. Marine Corps photo by Marine Corps Cpl. Scott Schmidt*



CHAPTER 9

Marines Roll Away With Wheelchair Basketball Gold

By Army Master Sgt. Doug Sample, Army News Service

May 14, 2010

Marine Corps athletes used teamwork and skill to win gold in the inaugural Warrior Games wheelchair basketball tournament here yesterday, but Lance Cpl. Justin Martin's performance could lead people to believe he could have won the game all by himself. Martin scored a game-high 14 points, including 10 in the first half, as the Corps rolled over Army 44-15 to finish the wheelchair basketball tournament undefeated giving its medal-crazed fans another moment to remember.

As the frenzied crowd stormed the floor at the final buzzer, the U.S. Olympic Training Center gymnasium floor was covered in red and gold.

Marine head coach Billy Demby, who watched his players receive their gold medals from Army Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey Jr., said the dominating win shows strength of his squad. "They are willing to do whatever it is to get to the next level," he said.

"It feels amazing, but we could not have done it without our fans and coaches, said PFC Jesse Schag, who had nine points in the gold medal game.

The Marine team shut down Army's offense, holding Spc. Chris Smith, Army's leading scorer, to just nine points for the night. Army Sgt. Michael Ortiz, who emerged as an offensive threat by scoring 12 on May 12 against Navy, went scoreless.

Meanwhile, the Marines were hitting on all cylinders, running off 14 unanswered points and holding Army scoreless for 14 minutes. Smith finally put Army on the board with consecutive baskets that, for a brief moment, resuscitated the team's offense. A Smith free throw cut the margin to 14-5.

But as quickly Army's offense had come to life, the Marines applied the defensive pressure that shut down the soldiers' momentum.

The Marines would score on their first nine possessions of the second half to take a commanding 35-5 lead, while the Army's shots either bounced off the rim or fell short. Smith, who at times appeared frustrated, added four more points late into the second half, but by then the game, and the gold, was in the Marine Corps' hands.

Even with his team up by 30, Demby, a retired Army Vietnam veteran who is a double amputee, was pacing the sidelines and barking instructions. The Marines' coach said he was not happy with the lead, and called his team's play "atrocious."

"Their passing is off, they're not pushing, and it's probably because they are tired," he said of his players, many of whom had just finished winning the gold medal for sitting volleyball. "So I'm trying to push them even harder. We are winning, and I'm thankful for that, but it's time to push up."

Despite the fierce competition between the two services, there were handshakes and hugs all around after the game, with promises of "We'll meet again next year." As a show of solidarity, the two teams joined together at center court and began shouting, "USA! USA!" as if to say that this tournament is not about gold medals, but about country.

But don't tell that to Smith. "We only had three days to come together as a team, so to get second place was pretty good this year," he said. "But next year," Smith added. "We're getting the gold."



Retired Marine Corps Cpl. Travis Greene makes a play for the ball during the gold medal game for wheelchair basketball in the inaugural Warrior Games at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., May 13, 2010. The Marines won gold, defeating Army 44-15. DoD photo by Army Sgt. 1st Class Michael J. Carden

CHAPTER 9

Sumterite coaches ‘wounded warriors’ team to victory

By Corey Davis

May 21, 2010



The Marines sitting volleyball coach, celebrates his team’s advancement to the championship of the inaugural Warrior Games May 13. The Marines won the gold medal, defeating the Army 15-9 in the last game of a best-of-three series.

Coaching volleyball is nothing new for Brent Petersen.

But last week was a different coaching experience for him as he had the opportunity to be the head coach for the Marines sitting volleyball team at the U.S. military’s inaugural Warrior Games last week in Colorado.

The events were three days of Paralympic-style competition in nine sports. The Warrior Games included wounded, ill and injured soldiers from the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard, with the goal being to inspire recovery and promote new opportunities for growth and achievements through athletic competition.

The 35-year-old Petersen, who is a program manager at the Core Institute in Sumter, said he was humbled to be affiliated with the event. His father served in the Army Reserve.

and being a part of the first Warrior Games was even more special because there will never be a first again,” he said. “This was an absolutely amazing life-changing event to be part of. These guys that I was grateful to coach have chosen to overcome adversity and have also chosen to live life past injuries in an effort to get more out of their lives. These are incredible stories of hope and the human spirit. This is something I hope to be a part of again in the future.”

With the Marines’ team looking for a coach, Petersen had a friend in the Navy, Lt. Cmdr. Sam Tickle, who recommended Petersen to Maj. Susan Stark in the Marines. Petersen said he, Tickle and Stark all went to the University of South Carolina.

Petersen added that Tickle told Stark about his experience as a coach. According to Petersen, he was a coach and player on a club volleyball team that he started while at USC. Petersen added that he has coached for more than 15 years, ranging from middle to high school teams.

Petersen explained that one of the coaching methods he used on players over the years was sitting volleyball.

“I had done seated volleyball for standing volleyball players in the past just for a training method, and I didn’t know if anyone else had used that as a training procedure,” he said. “I thought it would help standing volleyball players have better ball control.” Petersen acknowledged that there were few players with organized volleyball experience on the Marines’ team. But he added that the Marines were open to learning the game.

“At first, I didn’t know what to expect with a lot of these people having gone through serious trauma, but I was very satisfied and pleased with how excited they were to play volleyball, considering the fact that they didn’t have a lot of playing experience,” he said. “The most important thing was that over the next two weeks that we came together as a team and did phenomenal. I think what helped us be successful was that we ran a specific offense in which our goal was to pass the ball to our setters to set up our offense, while other teams just knocked the ball around.”

The Marines’ success culminated in the Marines topping the Army team, 2-1, to win the gold medal in what Petersen described as an electric atmosphere.

“The final game was definitely exciting,” he said. “The stands were packed, and everyone was into the game. After the game, people came onto the floor in excitement. From the very first day, everyone saw the enthusiasm of how we played, and that raised the competition. The rest of the teams also got better.”

In the gold medal game, Petersen said a lasting memory was a 12-year-old girl, who is living with a prosthetic leg became an inspiration for the team.

“I think one of the most excited moments for me was in the gold medal bracket there was a little girl who had lost her leg due to an infection,” he said. “She came up to us following the first game and was so excited that we had won that first game. We got together and gave her a shirt, and the guys signed the shirt for her. Her leg had a Marine logo on it, so she had some type of Marine connection. She became our cheerleader and gave the team a little extra motivation. Her mom said this was the first time she ever saw other people with disabilities still stay active, and this will help her have a different outlook on life.”

Though Petersen said he helped his players learn how to play the game of volleyball, however, it was they who taught him more about life.

“Even though I taught them about volleyball, in actuality, they taught me more,” he said. “In this world, we have people always making excuses, but these guys have reasons to make excuses. However, they are motivated to get more out of their life, and that’s more valuable than hitting any volleyball.”



CHAPTER 9

Warrior Games Closing Marks New Beginning

By Sgt. 1st Class Michael J. Carden

May 15, 2010

The 2010 Warrior Games may have ended yesterday, but for the wounded warriors who competed here this week, their work is just beginning, officials hope.

“You’ve just completed a rigorous test of your physical and mental skills, your strength and endurance,” chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Navy Adm. Mike Mullen told the athletes in a video message aired during the closing ceremony here last night. “But now is no time to rest. I’d like you to take what you’ve done here, what you’ve learned here and continue to serve as role models for others striving to find the independence they need.”

The competition formally ended last night at the U.S. Air Force Academy in a ceremony honoring the nearly 200 wounded warriors and disabled veterans who represented their services in the inaugural Warrior Games.

The troops competed in a week-long series of Paralympic-type events at the U.S. Olympic Training Center and academy. They were challenged as individuals and in teams in shooting, swimming, archery, sitting volleyball, cycling, wheelchair basketball and track and field events.

Each athlete was selected by their service to compete because of the progress they’ve made using adaptive sports as a method of rehabilitation. Their willingness to participate in the games and ability to overcome adversity can inspire others to do the same, Mullen said.

“You’ve demonstrated how physical fitness can help heal the mind, body and soul,” the admiral added. “That’s a message worth sharing, and yours is a story worth telling.”

Mullen lauded the troops for their accomplishments, but reminded them that other wounded warriors need their help.

That means helping wounded troops understand how to properly heal themselves and find closure in their injuries, Air Force Gen. Victor E. Renuart Jr., commander of U.S. Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command, told the troops. Renuart, who has led the commands for three years from their headquarters at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo., is retiring from the position next week.

Overcoming adversity is more than simply healing physical wounds. It involves accepting new challenges and taking risks, pushing the limits of your disabilities, Renuart said.

“Healing is an interesting situation that a person goes through,” the general said. “Certainly, healing is about recovering from an injury or recovering from an illness, but healing is also about finding how much you can push yourself.

“There was a lot of healing going on this week, and a little bit of fun, too,” he added.

Renuart recalled some of the action he watched during the week. The competitions were hard fought and filled with all the spirit and aggressiveness officials had hoped for in the games, he said.

Troops taunted each other throughout the week, trading insults and trash talk about whose service is better and how bad the other team was going to get beat. However, sportsmanship was never a concern. The games were all in good fun.

“Certainly, there were teams out there fighting for their colors, but I notice in every circumstance, when the competition ended, there were arms around each other,” Renuart said. “It was about how we competed as a team.”

Renuart presented the Chairman’s Cup to the Marine Corps team on behalf of Mullen. The honor is bestowed on the team with the most points at the end of the week based of medal count. The Marines won gold in both sitting volleyball and wheelchair basketball.

Retired Marine Lance Cpl. Chuck Sketch accepted the award for his team. The Marines elected him as their captain before the competition.

Sketch lost his sight in August 1997 from a brain tumor, and then had to be amputated from the waist down in January 1998 due to complications from the same tumor.

He competed in swimming events during the competition, and had the time of his life, he said.

“Winning the Chairman’s Cup is great,” Sketch said. “I cannot wait until next year.”

However, Sketch admitted that there is one thing he hopes will be different by next year’s games. “More wounded warriors should take part,” he explained.

“I wish all of the wounded warriors were here,” Sketch said. “They missed out on the best time, and I wish they were here to experience this. As more and more people find out about it, hopefully there will be far more people next year.”

The games’ top individual honor – the Ultimate Champion award -- went to Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Daniel Hathorn, a naval special warfare boat operator who was hit by a truck driven by a local national during an overseas deployment last year. He nudged out Army Pfc. Robert Nuss by a single point.

Hathorn won gold in the 50-meter freestyle and the 1,500-meter track. He also won a bronze as part of the Navy’s 200-meter relay swim. It was an experience he said he won’t soon forget.

“This is incredible,” Hathorn said of his award. “There are so many great athletes in this room who’ve performed on a number of different levels, and to be holding this is an honor.”

Hathorn reflected on the past year since his injury. It’s almost unbelievable, he said, to be performing in such a way after suffering several broken bones on the left side of his body. He also had two collapsed lungs. He doesn’t have the use of his left arm and hand, either, he said.

Adaptive sports deserve all the credit for his recovery, he added.

“Rehab was very tough,” Hathorn explained. “I have to say, though, that the Warrior Games is the culmination of my recovery. Coming this far is phenomenal. To have these medals and to compete with the Navy and for Naval Special Warfare is awesome.”

Army Sgt. Cayle Foidel, a forward observer who permanently injured his leg in a training accident in January, shares Sketch and Hathorn’s enthusiasm. He won three gold medals, all in swimming. When he returns to Fort Lewis, Wash., next week, he’s going to do just what Mullen asked – share his positive experiences with other wounded warriors, he said.

“After these games, I’m going back to [Fort] Lewis and try to get other people to do this,” Foidel said. “I’m going to go there with my three gold medals, and say, ‘If I can do it, you can do it.’”

The games are a joint venture of the Defense Department, the U.S. Olympic Committee and the USO to promote resilience and the healing power of sports. Last night’s closing ceremony featured country music recording artists John Rich and Cowboy Troy. Officials hope to make the games an annual event and possibly expand participation and future venues.



CHAPTER 9

MILITARY: Wounded warriors ‘return to life’

By Christina Lopez

July 16, 2010

The term “wounded warrior” usually calls to mind the image of a service member who is injured on the battlefield in overseas combat.

But some are hurt stateside. And the struggle to find some semblance of normal life is the same.

One such service member was able to regain his fighting spirit and determination through the Warrior Games, a national competition in which wounded warriors from all five branches of the military vie in Olympic sports.

Sgt. Ricardo Bengochea medaled at the inaugural event in May at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Bengochea, 29, came through three deployments to the Iraq war unscathed, only to be felled by an injury in April 2009 at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego.

“I was training to be a drill sergeant at the time,” Bengochea said. “I fell off of a rope and landed 35 feet (below) on the ground (standing) straight up.”

A CAT scan revealed multiple areas where the force of the impact shoved cartilage from his left leg up into his pelvis.

Doctors also found liposarcoma, which is a high-grade tumor combined with a low-grade cancer in his left leg and hip.

“When they removed the tumor, I had no feeling in my left leg,” Bengochea said. “I have muscle memory but no muscle control.”

After months of rehabilitation, Bengochea was able to walk with the aid of a brace. He was one of 48 Marine participants at the Warrior Games.

“Another Marine I had deployed with trained with our team in Colorado and helped me learn awkward ways of throwing,” Bengochea said.

In the span of 2 1/2 months, Bengochea, who is right-handed, learned to throw the discus stepping off with his right foot instead of his left.

“I had to learn the discus throwing all over again in a way without using full mobility of my left leg, because a normal (right-handed) discus thrower will use his left leg as the lead leg when you’re throwing,” he said.

Bengochea won medals as a member of the Marines volleyball team and as a single competitor in the discus throw. “The camaraderie during the games was great,” he said. “I competed with people I served with, and it was a huge motivational booster.”

With only seven months to plan the games, Charlie Huebner, chief of the U.S. Paralympic Organization, based in Colorado, which spearheaded the event, said it was stressful but a gratifying success.

“We had 187 competitors, opening and closing ceremonies and competitions in seven different sports,” Huebner said. “It’s much like the Olympic Games.”

Air Force Staff Sgt. Jonathon Murray of Oceanside, who is not injured, volunteered as an archery coach.

“I feel most of these people have done and gone farther than I have, maybe farther than I would have,” he said. “But I’ve never been put in those situations. Some of these people have come close to dying. The best I can do is help give back to them with the little bit of knowledge I have and try to make their life that much easier ---- to show them they did something and tell them we still care about what they’re doing.”

Leading up to the games, athletes were allotted a specific number of weeks to train at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, CO.

“Just to be on that pedestal at the Olympic Training Center and be trained like a Paralympian was the best thing I could have done, aside from my wife and I having our two children,” Bengochea said. “It put me in a whole new mental state of attitude where I realized, ‘Wow, there are other things that are possible other than Marine Corps, Marine Corps, Marine Corps.’”

Huebner said he measures the success of the games by how well they help injured service members readjust to life. “The history of the U.S. Paralympics is to provide physical activity during the rehab process, and for those in the U.S., for injured service members,” Huebner said. “We call it ‘returning to life’ by doing something as normal as playing basketball with friends.”

“It gives another meaning to the term ‘rehabilitation,’” Bengochea said.



CHAPTER 9

Lakeside couple's grandson competes in Warrior Games

Jessica Switzer, Air Force Staff Sgt., Special to the Independent

June 18, 2010

The grandson of a Lakeside couple competed with nearly 200 other injured service members in the inaugural Warrior Games at the U.S. Olympic Training Center, Colorado Springs, Colo.

Marine Corps Sgt. Michael Blair, grandson of Joseph Leland and Loyola Gardner of Lakeside is an infantryman stationed with the Wounded Warrior Battalion - East, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C.

The games were an introduction to official Paralympic sports for the athletes as well as building camaraderie and raising general awareness of Paralympic sports. There were seven main event categories participants could compete in: track and field, swimming, bicycling, archery, shooting, sitting volleyball and wheelchair basketball.

"I'm competing in the hand-cycle, wheelchair basketball as a forward guard," said Blair, a 1993 graduate of San Marcos High School, San Marcos, Texas. "I'm taking home the gold tonight!" Blair won the gold medal in the hand-cycle and in wheelchair basketball. He also competed on the Marine Corps team in the discus.

All of the athletes competing in the games have been wounded or injured in one way or another. Some carry outward physical reminders of their experiences, missing limbs, scars, or paralysis. Some carry their scars on the inside, in the form of Traumatic Brain Injuries, strokes or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. All of the athletes competed against others who were similarly disabled.

"I was invited to participate by the Wounded Warrior Regiment, my command," said Blair. "I wanted to test my abilities as a hand-cyclist, be a part of the Marine Corps team and compete in basketball like I did in high school."

While participants competed in a number of individual events, they were also a member of a service unique team made up of prior or currently serving athletes and coaches.

"My favorite part of being here is the camaraderie of all the warriors from all branches of service," says Blair, who has been in the Marines since 2002. "We all share a kindred spirit and even with our rivalries and differences it is a highly spirited and friendly competition."



CHAPTER 9

Marine Athlete Receives Ultimate Champion Award

By Aquita Brown, Public Affairs Assistant, Wounded Warrior Regiment
July 8, 2010

All-Marine Warrior Games athletes, coaches and staff proudly watched teammate Staff Sgt. Scott Martin (USMC, ret.) receive the award for Ultimate Champion June 30. Staff Sgt. Martin placed first in the Ultimate Champion event at the Warrior Games, which took place May 10 -14, 2010 at the US Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The Warrior Games showcased wounded, ill and injured service members from all branches – Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and Coast Guard.

The Ultimate Champion competition consisted of five events: 50 meter freestyle swim, 10 meter air rifle shooting, 100 meter run, 1500 meter run, and shotput. All participants competed in their respective disability category. Separate points were assigned to each athlete based on how they finished in their respective category finals. The Ultimate Champion was the individual at the end of the competition who earned the most points in five events.

At the end of the games, Staff Sgt. Martin had successfully earned the most points by placing first in the 100 meter run, second in the 1500 meter run, third in the 50 meter freestyle, and 10th in their rifle. Staff Sgt Martin, who was very proud to receive this honor said, “I wanted to compete in the Warrior Games to represent the Marine Corps and myself and prove to myself that my injuries cannot slow me down from accomplishing my goals, I also think that it was a great learning experience.”

The Warrior Games were designed to elevate abilities through athletic competition for WII service members by providing a focal event to empower the incorporation of athletics into Military Service Wounded Warrior Programs. The Warrior Games will be an annual event to celebrate the achievement and abilities of WII service members, while building camaraderie and raising awareness for adaptive sports.



Vienna, Va.- Colonel Jay Krail, Executive Officer, Wounded Warrior Regiment presents Staff Sgt. Scott Martin, All-Marine Warrior Games Athlete with the Ultimate Champion award. *Photo by LCpl. David Howard*

CHAPTER 9

Blind Marine Swimmer Sees the Positives in Life

By Petty Officer Second Class William Shelby

May 14, 2010

Each one of these athletes I've had the pleasure to meet and interview have all been beyond amazing.

I don't want to minimize what these men and women have been through, and overcome, but when you meet someone like retired Marine Lance Cpl. Chuck Sketch, you realize that you truly are speaking to one of a kind.

Sketch is a medically retired U.S. Marine who lost his sight in August 1997 from a brain tumor, and then had to be amputated from the waist down in January of 1998 due to complications from the same tumor.

This week Sketch is here in Colorado Springs, Colo. to compete in the inaugural Warrior Games with team "Semper Fi". If that's not enough to impress you, how about the fact that he competes as a swimmer. Yes, you just read that.

Not only is Sketch competing in swimming this week, he also had the honor of carrying the torch for the Marines during the opening ceremonies.

"It was an absolute adrenaline rush from the moment we got here," he said. "It's such an honor."

During my short time with Sketch I felt as if I got to know him pretty well. He spoke of religion, talked about his future, and even told me several jokes about his disabilities.

If you closed your eyes while speaking with him, you would never imagine someone with such extreme disabilities. What stood out the most though was his amazing sense of humor, his faith, and his outlook on life.

Sketch said that for the first two years or so after his amputation, he never left the house, but then he found his faith in Christianity, and then things began to fall in place.

"I started getting involved in sports and it gave me something to strive for," Sketch said.

Sketch then said he wished all of the people with disabilities would get involved with sports because, "it's the greatest thing to start your life again."

He doesn't let his disabilities get in the way of doing whatever it is that he wants to do either. In fact, he speaks of his disabilities as if they are just another bump in the road.

Above everything I learned from these amazing people this week, Sketch taught me to only see the positive things. In many ways, he has better vision than anyone I've ever met.

For example, Sketch said, "I don't get tired when the sun goes down, because I can't see it."

In the future, Sketch said he hopes to be able to try out for the Paralympics in London in 2012, and then in Sochi in 2014.

"Hopefully I can continue to play sports, because that's what has kept driving me for all these years."



Marine Lance Cpl. Chuck Sketch is pushed by Gunnery Sgt. Marcus Wilson at the opening ceremonies of the Warrior Games in Colorado Springs, Colo., May 10, 2010. By Petty Officer Second Class William Selby

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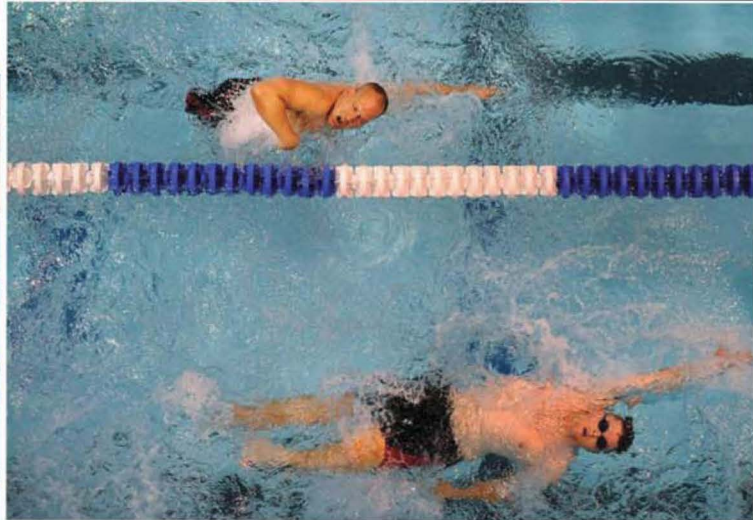
Rocky Mountain Body and Paint

Mark and Susan Hicks

Marines Helping Marines









WOUNDED WARRIOR REGIMENT

The Wounded Warrior Regiment (WWR) stood up in April 2007 and immediately began to assume responsibilities for non-medical Wounded Warrior care. The mission of the WWR is to provide and facilitate assistance to WII Marines, Sailors attached to or indirect support of Marine units, and their family members, throughout the phases of recovery. The Regiment Headquarters element, located in Quantico, Virginia, coordinates the operations of two Wounded Warrior Battalions located at Camp Pendleton, California, and Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. The Regimental Headquarters provides unity of command and unity of effort through a single commander who provides guidance, direction, and oversight to the Marine Corps WII non-medical care process and ensures continuous improvements to care management and the seamless transition of recovering Marines.

For assistance, information, and referral services, contact the Sergeant Merlin German Wounded Warrior Call Center at 1-877-487-6299 or go to: www.woundedwarriorregiment.org. The Call Center is available 24/7 to ensure Marines, Marine veterans, and their families are supported throughout the phases of recovery at all geographic locations.

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UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS WOUNDED WARRIOR REGIMENT

