They no longer stood out from the crowd, they were the crowd

The 24th annual National Veterans Wheelchair Games, cosponsored by the Paralyzed Veterans Association (PVA), took place in St. Louis, Missouri, from June 15 to 19, 2004. In 1981, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) held its first Wheelchair Games at the Richmond VA Medical Center in Virginia, where 74 veterans from 14 states participated in various athletic events. The impetus for these games started after World War II (WWII) when disabled veterans began to play wheelchair basketball as inpatients in VA Hospitals. This year, 518 military veteran athletes from 44 states, Puerto Rico, and Great Britain competed in the world’s largest wheelchair competition.

The Wheelchair Games are a uniquely VA/PVA experience focused on veterans overcoming physical challenges caused by spinal cord injury, neurological diseases involving the central nervous system, or lower-limb amputation. Most sports events are designed to test the normal performance limits of wheelchair-bound individuals and teams. Athletes concentrate on beating their demons by doing their personal best, rather than by defeating others. Events include track and field, archery, air gun shooting, bowling, and swimming. We believe that able-bodied professional athletes could not compete with the most accomplished disabled athletes from the Games in events such as wheelchair slalom or wheelchair basketball. These athletes have the advantage of superior physical development of isolated muscle groups that many able-bodied athletes do not have.

Since 1981, more than 10,300 veterans have participated in the Games. Several veterans were athletes prior to injury, and the Games gave them the opportunity to compete again. For many veterans, the 2004 Games were their first exposure to sports. A 54-year-old novice wounded in Vietnam competed in five events, winning five medals—all gold. A 71-year-old Korean War combat veteran competed in 21 games, and an 80-year-old WWII combat veteran competed in 10 games, winning medals for all his events this year. These athletes proved that anything done preinjury can be performed a different way and that success is possible at all levels.

The Games are also a reunion of veterans and their families. Spouses and children share in the glory as loved ones push competitors to exceed their limits. The loudest cheers were for athletes who completed events that should have surpassed their abilities. The day after Flag Day, St. Louis was populated by an abundance of “wheelies.” Hundreds of enthusiastic veterans gathered outside the hotels and competition venues discussing last year’s victories and this year’s possibilities while meeting with old friends and making new ones. The camaraderie of the crowd was evident in the abundant smiling, laughing, and hugging, which continued throughout every competition. You could easily see that even severe physical limitations did not mean the end of a potentially fulfilling life.

The day-long Health & Fitness Expo consisted of an assembly of vendors promoting and selling new devices, sports and recreational equipment, products, and services related to the well-being of veterans. The Office of Research and Development (ORD) provided information about VA-funded research programs and explained to veterans and caregivers how to access healthcare information, much of which is published in the Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development (JRRD).

The Rehabilitation Research and Development Center of Excellence in Pittsburgh had an exceptional presence at the games. The Human Engineering Research Laboratory (HERL) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, directed by Dr. Rory Cooper, focuses on the design and performance of wheelchairs and the physical stresses they impose on users. The HERL researchers’ regularly attend the Expo to collect data from athletes to evaluate the impact of wheelchair competition on the upper limbs. However, Dr. Cooper does more than collect data—he participates. Dr. Cooper’s events include swimming and wheelchair slalom. Researchers from Pittsburgh accompanied Dr. Cooper and cheered him on to win several medals in both events. Through activities such as the Wheelchair Games and participation of VA researchers, the VA is able to keep research relevant to the needs of veterans.

For disabled sports competitors, intermittent depression is replaced with a sense of hope and inspiration while veterans celebrate their inner strengths and experience their abilities instead of dwelling on disabilities. The Games offer the chance to build dexterity and work around injuries and pain due to progressive illnesses. The Games are truly a memorable and uplifting experience. We encourage everyone to attend the 25th National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 2005.

Robert Ruff, MD, PhD
JRRD, Deputy Editor, Veterans Health Administration
Cleveland, OH

Lisa Finklea
JRRD, Graphics Designer, Writer
Baltimore, MD