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CATCH the NEWS

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Special Edition

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For Orlando Perez, Spirit of the Games Winner, the Games are a Family Affair



"Nobody knows when they might end up in a wheelchair," says Perez, "and I want my kids to know that life and achievement go on."

Orlando Perez is all business as he prepares for the first of three races in which he will compete on the fourth day of the 25th National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Minneapolis.

He carefully affixes his athlete number, 10, to the back of his low-slung slingshot racer. He pulls on his gloves, snugging them tightly. He's the picture of intensity and focus.

A few feet away, another competitor asks no one in particular about the afternoon's race schedule. Perez is off at once to retrieve the information.

"That's what I'm here for," he said later, "to compete as hard as I can and to help my brothers and sisters."

That rare combination—intense internal focus and discipline and an almost compulsive interest in helping fellow competitors—contributed to the selection of Orlando Perez as this year's Spirit of the Games winner.

Ask him and he'll tell you that the most important thing in life is family, and for Perez, the Games are a family affair. The 30-year-old Orlando, Fla., resident is

a father of three and surrounds himself with family members at the Games. This year, his mother Elizabeth Luna joined him from Puerto Rico, where Perez was raised. His uncle, Francisco Lopez, is also a Games participant, and his son Armando (Orlando's cousin) assists them both.

Perez, a paraplegic, was injured in the Army at age 19. His grandfather was a career soldier and

Perez had hoped to follow in his footsteps.

"My father died," said Luna, "and Orlando often says he hoped his grandfather would be as proud of him today as he was of his choice of a military career. We are all so proud of him."

Family involvement and support are central to Perez's pursuit of athletic success.

"When I compete, I think of my family," he said. "It just wouldn't be right for me not to try my hardest. I do it for my wife and kids, to show them that because Dad is in a wheelchair doesn't mean I'm different from anyone else and can't do my best."

"The true power of success is to get back up stronger when you have fallen."

- Orlando Perez

"Nobody knows when they might end up in a wheelchair," he continued, "and I want my kids to know that life and achievement go on."

Perez strives to set that same example for other Games participants.

"The vets are my family, too," he said. "I try my hardest for them. I want them to feel like I do, that a wheelchair athlete can be as well prepared and perform as

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25 Years of the National Veterans Wheelchair Games

Looking Back and Looking Forward

Throughout the week, we have celebrated 25 consecutive years of the Games. We were reminded that the first National Veterans Wheelchair Games were a part of VA's recognition of the "International Year of Disabled Persons," and that 74 veterans from 14 states competed in Richmond, Va., in 1981. This week, we learned that as many as eight of those original athletes are still competing.

But why did one special event in a special year become a part of the fabric of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), and in the process become the largest annual wheelchair sports event in the world? Two people with special insight on those questions are Tom Brown, VA's National Director of the Wheelchair Games, and Andy Krieger, PVA's Director of Sports and Recreation.

Brown has been in a leadership role for the Games ever since that first year in Virginia. He was a recreation therapist at Richmond when he got the green light to organize and hold the first Games.

They relied heavily on VA staff and community volunteers, and it might well have been a one-time event. But the veterans who participated that first year took the idea home with them and kept it alive. Brown remembers getting the call from officials at the Wood VA Medical Center in Milwaukee, Wis., asking him to assist them in presenting the Games again in 1982. "They said, 'our guys had a great time in Richmond. We want to do this again here in Milwaukee.'" According to Brown, veteran-to-veteran conversations kept the Games alive

and growing in those early years. The pattern of holding the Games in various areas of the country also evolved, to even out the travel burden and allow participants to experience different regions of the country.

It soon made sense to broaden the resources needed for presenting the Games, and in 1985 PVA became a co-sponsor. Many of the veterans participating in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games are PVA members. The organization's



A 25th annual Games display was set up outside Ballrooms A/B all week.

expertise in presenting sporting events and its ability to bring in corporate sponsors were the natural complements to VA's program of rehabilitation. PVA's co-leadership in the endeavor has helped the Games grow, both in number of competitors and the variety of sports offered.

Brown and Krieger could write a book about the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

Brown can describe something unique about every single year. He can tell you about the time a mid-western storm forced rescheduling of an event, but how no event has ever been completely cancelled due to weather in the 25-year history of the Games. He has special memories of challenges overcome and the sense of achievement that came about when the Games were held in Puerto Rico,

and the feelings of awe that came with the first Games kick-off on Times Square in New York.

Krieger has been a part of PVA's leadership team for 10 years. He also recalls the unique locations over the many years of the Games, but makes special mention of the people he has met throughout the years. Just as the friendships made and the camaraderie of the Games is a central value of the Games for the athletes, Krieger (and many of the officials and national staff) values the friendships made through the event.

"Each year, I have the privilege of getting to know a whole new group of local PVA and VA staff. I really appreciate that I have been able to keep many of those folks as friends that I can keep in contact with on a daily basis."

What will the next 25 years hold for the National Veterans Wheelchair Games? It is clear that both VA and PVA remain committed. As

Krieger said, "We know that sports is a proven tool in rehabilitation." The Games serve as both an introductory event that is a great first step for novice athletes, and valued experience for those who return to the Games on a regular basis. The size, scope and mission of the Games is a formula that can now be described as "tried and true." That formula, plus the athletes that participate and the people that present the National Veterans Wheelchair Games each year, are the best predictors of continuing success.

So with our crystal ball firmly in hand—okay, it's really a basketball—here's our prediction for the future. In the coming years the Games will:

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Chasing the Midnight Sun—Come to Alaska in 2006!



Spectacular wildlife, breathtaking scenic beauty and 20-hour days are the backdrop for a once-in-a-lifetime experience in Anchorage, Alaska, at the 26th National Veterans Wheelchair Games, July 2–8, 2006. Excitement in the local community is already high as area residents eagerly prepare to share the spirit of Alaska with participants at next year's Games.

Athletic events will be held at venues throughout Anchorage. In addition to the regular roster of competitive sports, plans are underway for two exhibition events: sled hockey and disc golf. The outdoor events will allow participants and guests to drink in the beauty of

the Chugach Mountains, one of six mountain ranges surrounding the city. On a clear day, Denali (Mt. McKinley) can be seen glistening majestically in the distance.

An extra day has been built into the 2006 Games to give athletes and their families an opportunity to experience the wonders of Alaska, with a variety of events being planned to coincide with the Games. The annual July 4th parade, themed "The Price of Freedom," will be held downtown with plans for Games competitors to participate. Thousands of Alaskans turn out for this fun event, which includes an afternoon of entertainment, food and activities on the nearby Park Strip. In addition, there are tentative plans for the annual Sadler's Ultra Challenge 267-mile wheelchair and handcycle race to end in Anchorage during Games week. Imagine being greeted by a crowd of wheelchair athletes after participating in a grueling racecourse through the mountains and valleys between Fairbanks and Anchorage.

The largest city in Alaska, Anchorage has a population of

254,000 encompassing 30 different neighborhoods. The community covers nearly 2,000 square miles—from Portage Glacier on the Turnagain Arm of Cook Inlet, to the historic Native village of Eklutna, on the Knik Arm. With natural wonders around every corner, Alaska is an experience like no other.

Take a few days before or after the Games to really experience "The Last Frontier." Plan a fishing trip, ride the Alaska Railroad, take a glacier cruise or pan for gold. With great local interest in arts and culture, Anchorage is home to several first-class museums featuring Alaskan history, wildlife exhibits, aviation and Native fine arts. There are many scrumptious dining establishments, with local seafood taking center stage. (Wild Alaskan salmon is a special local delicacy.) Shop for unique gifts such as ivory carvings, Native crafts, furs, jade products and luxurious qiviut accessories.

Explore the Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau web site, www.Anchorage.net, to request a free visitor's guide, preview sample itineraries and link to trip-planning tools. Get "Wild About Anchorage!" Don't miss the 26th National Veterans Wheelchair Games!

Departure Information

HILTON AND HYATT HOTELS NORTHWEST AIRLINES

PASSENGER DEPARTURE PROCESS: If you cannot get your luggage down to the Marquette/LaSalle Room at the Hilton, have it outside your door by 10:30 tonight. Go to the Marquette/LaSalle Room to identify your luggage so that it can be tagged with your flight number and you may receive your boarding pass. You must have identification with you and you must bring all who are traveling with you to receive their boarding passes. Tomorrow, plan to take the bus to the airport to arrive at the Transit Center at least two hours before your scheduled flight departs. With your boarding pass you will be able to go to security for check-in and then go directly to your departure gate.

FOR PASSENGERS FLYING OTHER THAN NORTHWEST AIRLINES, FOLLOW PROCESS BELOW FOR YOUR JULY 2 DEPARTURE:

Your luggage should have been picked up by 7 p.m. Tomorrow, plan to take the bus to the airport to arrive at the Transit Center at least three hours before your scheduled flight departs. A volunteer will escort you to your airline ticket counter to identify your luggage and issue your boarding pass.

25th year (cont.)

- allow you to experience or see rehabilitation improving lives of veterans;
- come to a city near you—or maybe to a city far away;
- feature events that have always been held—and some that have never been held;
- allow you to meet old friends and make new ones;
- always be a unique, challenging, and rewarding celebration of the human spirit!

*Newsletter printing costs
donated by Pfizer.*

Spirit Winner (cont.)

competitively as an able-bodied athlete.”

Fellow competitors know first-hand how intense he is on court and at track.

“If I don’t fall out of my chair at least once during a basketball game, I feel like I’m not trying my hardest,” he laughed. “That’s my trademark.”

Basketball is his passion. “I eat, drink and sleep basketball,” he said. Perez has played for Puerto Rico in the National Wheelchair Basketball Association and competed in the Caribbean Wheelchair Games.

He has competed in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games since 1999 when they were held in Puerto Rico, where he lived at the time. He had recently joined the Puerto Rico PVA Chapter. “I got hooked on the competition and on the people I met,” he recalls. “Everyone wanted to help and made me feel welcome. The vets are great. They’re family, too.”

Family man, athlete, achiever—that describes Orlando Perez, 2005 Spirit of the Games winner. His first race of the afternoon is over. Meticulous preparation and physical intensity have paid off with a resounding victory in the 400-meter class V open division race. He raises both arms high and yells out his famous “woo-hoo” as he crosses the finish line. Then it’s into his mother’s arms for a big hug and a quick return to the finish to urge those behind to do their best.

What’s next? More races, basketball and softball at these Games, and a future of making his family proud and helping others find purpose and fulfillment in wheelchair sports. “I’m going to continue participating in as many Games as I can,” he said, “and I want to get into coaching. I’m getting the experience I need and that’s where I want to use it.”

That’s good news for everyone—his family in Florida and Puerto Rico, and his growing family of fellow wheelchair athletes. Congratulations, Orlando—and *woo hoo!*

Thank You from the Public Affairs Team



The Public Affairs team at the 25th National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

From all of us working in the 25th National Veterans Wheelchair Games media center, thank you for allowing us the privilege of working with you this week. Because of your willingness to share your stories, not only with us but also with the Minneapolis, national, and international communities, we have had some outstanding results this week.

Newsletter

Our ace newsletter team produced six editions of the daily newsletter without fail, hopefully providing you with interesting reading and important information each morning. Thank you so much for your wonderful interviews and inspiring stories. All editions of this week’s “Catch the News” and much more are available on the web site: www.wheelchairgames.org.

Hometown News

This week, our terrific hometown news team prepared nearly 400 individual news releases on the athletes who requested one, an amazing feat in itself. They also made hundreds of phone calls and sent numerous e-mails to local media across the country letting them know about the Games. All of your news releases were posted on the Games web site on Wednesday by our talented on-site web team, along with your event results and photos.

Photography

Speaking of photos, our dedicated team of photographers took more than 13,000 action photos of the athletes this week, all of which were cropped by our team of Photoshop staff, who worked from dawn until way beyond dusk to get the job done. The results are impressive, with more than 99 percent of those athletes who requested a news release having a photo to accompany it.

Media Support

Our media support team have been pitching the Games to local and national media since mid-May, and their efforts multiplied significantly this week. Because of their hard work, more than 430 confirmed media placements have appeared—so far—in newspapers and on TV and radio outlets nationwide. (And to our British vets, we’re also pitching your involvement in the Games to the British media.)

In collaboration with the hometown news program, we expect the number of media placements to continue to increase over the next several weeks.

Again, thank you all for making our jobs at the Games so successful and so much fun. We are excited about the 2006 National Veterans Wheelchair Games coming up next July in Anchorage, and look forward to seeing you there.

Safe travels home, everyone!

Your 2005 NVWG Public Affairs Team