



Athlete Profile (National)

Roberto Cruz – The Future Awaits

Roberto Cruz, a 24-year-old active duty Army soldier from Tampa, Fla., has been anxiously waiting to travel to Anchorage, Alaska, to participate in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games. "I'm looking forward to meeting fellow veterans and being active again in sports," he said. "My future awaits, even though I feel very frustrated at times with simple tasks like just tying my shoes."

Cruz, a native of Puerto Rico, joined the Army at the age of 21. Stationed at Fort Stewart/Hunter Army Airfield in Georgia, he was deployed to Iraq in December 2004. Now, Cruz is among the combat-wounded veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom after being shot by a sniper in the city of Tikrit on August 14, 2005.

Cruz describes the incident and his injury in vivid detail. "While I was on the tower guarding the post, I was jumped by a sniper," he said. "The bullet entered through my left arm, passed through my lung and finally lodged near my spinal cord between T-4 and T-5. I remember my body felt like it had gone to sleep, but I had no feeling from my waist down. I thought a rocket propeller had blown off my legs. I remember asking my sergeant if my legs were still there. He reassured me they were and he told me to stand up, but I couldn't."

Initially, Cruz received care at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. A resident of Plant City, Florida, he now receives continuing care at the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital in Tampa. It was there that Cruz was encouraged by a recreation therapist to join their local wheelchair team, who were already preparing to compete at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Alaska. "By attending the Games, I hope to gain additional knowledge from my fellow combat-wounded veterans on adjusting to life after being injured in war," he said. "The veterans at Tampa have been such an inspiration to me during my rehabilitation. Because of their influence, I am thinking about becoming a social worker or a psychologist."

Due to his injuries, Cruz, who is competing as a paraplegic in the novice division, will take on an added challenge of competing as a right-handed athlete. Previously left-hand dominant, he is signed up to compete in bowling, air guns and three field events at the Games. "After my injury, I never thought I would be able to compete in sports again," Cruz said. "Even though I don't have full use of my left arm and hand, and both of my legs, I feel fortunate to still have all of my extremities. I have always been physically active and I know there is a future out there for me – in sports and in life."