

Athlete Profile (Alaska)

Tom Wilson – “Hosting the Wheelchair Games is a Privilege”

Neighbors might see Tom Wilson, 56, practicing for the Wheelchair Games from his front porch in Anchorage. “I practice about three to four hours a week for the field and air rifle events right in my own front yard,” said Wilson. “So far, none of my neighbors think it’s too strange!”

Wilson traded the sunny skies of California for the snow and ice of Alaska when his company offered him the opportunity to open a new store in Anchorage. “Alaska is so beautiful,” he said. “Who wouldn’t want to come up here?”

A U.S. Army combat veteran of Vietnam, Wilson is a paraplegic. At the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, he has competed in air guns, shot-put and bowling events. Winning five silver medals in his previous attempts in air guns and shot-put, Wilson finally reached his long-time goal of winning the gold medal in shot-put in 2003. “I’d been trying for so long and I was ready to be number one,” Wilson said. “I was extremely proud of myself.” Since that time, he has continued to win several additional medals in both the shot-put and air guns events.

To Wilson, competing in the Games helps him work through the frustrations of his disability, brought on by a stroke. “It’s hard going through life when you wake up one day and you can’t move a part of your body. One day I was doing stained glass and leather work, and the next day I couldn’t tie my shoes.” While he is still working on keeping an optimistic outlook, the Games help Wilson focus on the positive aspects of his life.

Athletics are nothing new for Tom Wilson. In high school he was a sprinter on the track team. “I liked being part of the team then, and I feel the same way now being among the Alaska veterans. We root for each other and watch each other compete – we are an Alaska family.”

At past Wheelchair Games, veterans from more than 45 other states, plus Puerto Rico and Great Britain, have competed. Wilson believes the other athletes are always fascinated with Alaska because most have never visited “the last frontier.”

“There is so much to do in our state, such as fishing, skiing, whale watching and seeing the various glaciers and mountains,” Wilson said. “As host of the Games in 2006, we will showcase our state and give other veterans and volunteers the opportunity to experience part of America that was once foreign to them. And that will be a privilege.”