



## **Athlete Profile (National)**

### **Erik Tate – A Combat Veteran of Desert Storm Passes The Torch**

In September 1991, then 29-year-old Erik Tate was lying in bed at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. A Fairfax County, Va., police officer, Tate was in the Marine Corps Reserves when he was deployed for Operation Desert Storm. During a routine convoy, he was involved in an accident and explosion that resulted in burns over 65 percent of his body and loss of his left leg. "I'm lying in my bed, and this guy walks into my room and said he wants me to go skiing," recalls Tate. "But he didn't know who he was talking to — I hated the snow and cold weather. I was in great shape before my injury and I didn't like skiing then. I certainly wasn't going to ski now."

Sandy Trombetta, Director of the National Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, was that guy. He remembers that day, too. "I was there to show a video of the Clinic and to talk to the patients about coming out for it. About five were assembled in one area, but I found out one guy wasn't well enough to get out of bed, so I went to him. First I saw his wife sitting outside his room with her face in her hands looking so incredibly sad. Then I walk in and I see him, no leg and terribly burned. It was a heart-wrenching moment."

Trombetta was determined to get Tate on the slopes and spent hours telling him about it. "When Sandy finally left, all I could think was — there's a man more determined than I am. So I decided to give it a try."

"I always thought I was a confident person, but the Clinic took my confidence level a step higher and changed my life dramatically," said Tate, now 41. "The therapy I have received at both the Clinic and the Wheelchair Games, no doctor could give me in any type of hospital."

Later, Tate joined VA staff on a visit to Walter Reed to talk to a group of veterans from Somalia. "I felt like the Vietnam veterans passed the torch to us, and I wanted to pass the lessons I learned from them to the newer vets."

Tate has taken what he learned at the Winter Sports Clinic and the Wheelchair Games, and gone on to become a father of two children and a member of the Fairfax County, Va., Police Department. Several years ago, he brought his then 5-year-old son, Miles, to the Wheelchair Games. Putting his head together with his dad after each lift and crossing fingers on both hands as his dad made each attempt, Miles acted as Tate's coach in the weightlifting competition. It was a proud moment for both when Tate brought home the gold medal.

Those who meet Erik Tate are instantly affected by his enthusiasm, positive attitude and infectious smile. "I could have given up a long time ago," he said, "but I think you're born with a certain amount of determination and it's up to you to actually take control of your life. I grabbed that string of determination, strength, courage and faith, and I just can't let go!"

This year, 15 years after his injury in the Gulf War, Tate said, "Competing in sports has always been part of my life and the events at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games allow me to continue that part of my life."