



Athlete Profile

Michael Fleuker – A New Experience for this Recently Injured Vet

More than 40 years after serving in the U.S. Army in Vietnam, Michael Fleuker, 64, had a devastating accident that changed his life forever. In May 2006, an unexpected fall in his garage resulted in a spinal cord injury that now classifies him as a quadriplegic. Only one year later, Fleuker has signed up to compete in the 27th National Veterans Wheelchair Games, taking place in Milwaukee, June 19-23, 2007. He looks forward to getting back to some of the sports he enjoyed before he was injured – along with several new ones.

After his accident, Fleuker spent five months in the spinal cord injury unit at the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee, one of the hosts of this year's Games. "I think that the VA Medical Center is a mighty fine place," Fleuker said. "They do one heck of a good job, especially in the spinal cord injury unit." It was during a recent hospitalization there that Fleuker was able to enjoy several Milwaukee's highlights including a Brewers baseball game, the Milwaukee Zoo, a local museum and other local areas of interest. "The spinal cord injury staff get you out and involved and it is very enjoyable," he said. Also while in the hospital recovering, VA therapists told him about the National Veterans Wheelchair Games and encouraged him to participate. A resident of Watertown, Wisconsin, Fleuker says, "it is quite a coincidence the Games are being held so close to home this year." He looks forward to the new experiences the Games will offer, as well as just being away from home at a hotel during the week-long event.

While serving in Vietnam from 1965-66, Fleuker's military occupation was a machinist, but his duties for a headquarters company were quite diverse including being a gunner on a tank retriever, driving trucks all over the country and even repairing clothing. After his tour, he went to college for several years under the GI Bill and later owned a tavern and restaurant business for some 28 years. Until his accident, he never envisioned needing VA's specialty services. Although his injury slowed him down and necessitated selling his business, Fleuker maintains an impressively positive attitude and outlook for the future.

Before his accident, Fleuker enjoyed baseball, football and swimming. At the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, he is signed up to compete in the field events (discus and shot-put), swimming (backstroke and freestyle), weightlifting and handcycling. To prepare for the competition, he is getting in shape and continues to go to the VA Medical Center for physical therapy three times each week. Michael Fleuker says that he "has come a long way" in the six months since his discharge from the hospital. He may be a novice for the Games this year, but this local veteran is a seasoned participant when it comes to facing challenges. To the other competitors he says, "Wisconsin is a beautiful state and a nice place to come to for the Games." He is welcoming all visitors.