

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

Aubrey Youngs – Looking Forward, Not Back

Aubrey Youngs, a 26-year-old combat veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, will be returning to the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Milwaukee, Wisconsin this June. A maintenance and supply specialist for the Indiana Army National Guard, Youngs was on active duty in Afghanistan when she was injured, the result of a warehouse fall while stocking shelves. A paraplegic, Youngs has been in a wheelchair for just over two years and receives care at the VA medical facility in Saint Louis, Mo.

A resident of Newburg, Indiana, Youngs has been looking forward to competing in some of the events she tried out last year as well as a few new ones. "In 2006, I competed in the table tennis and slalom events," she said. "It was very hard and challenging, and I did have some frustrations. However, the other participants and VA staff were very encouraging and that is one reason why I am coming back again in 2007." As a veteran who was recently injured, Youngs still faces the challenges of re-learning the everyday tasks that new wheelchair users work hard to master. Such activities as hopping curbs or maneuvering through narrow doorways or steep drops are all routine challenges for individuals in wheelchairs. The opportunity to interact with other veterans with similar conditions provides Youngs and other veterans an excellent venue in which to hone their wheelchair navigational skills.

In addition to the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, Youngs has also attended the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, another of VA's national rehabilitation special events for veterans with disabilities. She describes the two programs like this, "I learn a lot every day and am greatly inspired from participating in these events – they help with everything from balance and chair techniques to personal growth and inner strength."

At the 2007 National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Milwaukee, Youngs plans to compete in the archery, table tennis and nine-ball events. "I am ready to go for the gold in 2007," she says with enthusiasm. "I have been practicing archery for months, but table tennis is my game!"

Like many veterans attending the event, the camaraderie is as important as the competition. "It is so nice to get together with people who don't judge you for being in that chair. It is great to have an opportunity to do normal activities that are often not available to those of us in wheelchairs," she says. After her injury, Youngs admits that rehabilitation was hard, life was very challenging and it offered a bleak outlook. Over time though, working with VA therapists and attending the national rehabilitation events, things began to change. Now, when she is not training for wheelchair sports, Aubrey Youngs is working toward her degree in game and simulation programming from DeVry University. She also enjoys spending time at home in Newburg, with her family and two dogs. "Most importantly, I find myself more motivated to get out of bed and do things – because I know I can."