

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

Gary Orlando – An Example for Everyone



Gary Orlando, 55, is a combat-wounded U.S. Army veteran of Vietnam from Erie, Pa. When he entered the military, he was training in electronics. After being sent to Vietnam, however, he became a helicopter door gunner for the infantry. While serving in that role, Orlando's chopper was shot down and his neck was broken. Now a quadriplegic, he receives continuing health care from the Erie VA Medical Center.

The extent of his injuries has not stopped Orlando from competing in sports, though. In June, he is joining more than 500 fellow veterans to compete in the 27th National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Milwaukee, Wisconsin – his ninth straight year competing at the event. "It makes me proud to look back on the events I've been to and know that I am a contributing member of society," Orlando says. "It's great to get the chance to show the world and ourselves that we do have abilities and not just disabilities."

In his years of competing, Orlando has returned home with a collection of winning medals, including a silver last year in the motorized wheelchair rally. This year, he is signed up for that event as well as the Power Chair 220, Power Chair Relay and nine-ball, in which he has frequently won medals. Competition is stiff at the Games, where the athletes compete against other veterans from across the country with similar levels of injury. "Medals are nice to win and I'm always happy to get one, but if I don't, I have a bunch at home that I can enjoy when I get back," Orlando reasons. "It's the camaraderie of the Games that makes them so special for me. I really like to speak with newly injured veterans and help out in any way I can."

This past April, Orlando attended the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic in Snowmass Village, Colorado, where he tackled the Rocky Mountains using an adapted ski device. "It was really a lot of fun to go back and ski again this year," he said. He also attended the Clinic last year, which was his first time on skis.

Orlando has enjoyed being around the younger and newly injured veterans at the Games. He has also visited newly injured troops at both Walter Reed Army Medical Center and Bethesda Naval Hospital. "I went up to Ward 57 while visiting my aunt, who was ill at the time, and just introduced myself. I told them that I was their age when I was injured so many years ago, and I could relate to what they were going through. There weren't too many people giving support to us after we were first injured. I really enjoyed being able to share with them."

For the past five years, Orlando has also spent time visiting area elementary and secondary schools with his local chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America. "This is one way we can expose students at an early age so they can become familiar with our injuries and know what it means to be in a wheelchair," he says. "I get nice handmade thank-you cards that mean the world to me. I get them out when I'm feeling down and they really make my day better."