

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

Orlando Perez – *Wheelchair Games are a Family Affair!*

As he prepared to compete at the 2005 National Veterans Wheelchair Games, Orlando Perez was all business. Carefully pulling on his gloves after adjusting his athlete number on his race chair, he was the picture of intensity and focus. However, when another athlete asked about the day's schedule, Perez was off at once to get the information. "That's what I'm here for," he said. "To compete as hard as I can and to help my brothers and sisters." That rare combination – intense internal focus and discipline and an almost compulsive interest in helping fellow competitors – contributed to Perez's selection as the 2005 Spirit of the Games Award winner.

For Perez, the most important thing in his life is family and, for him, the Games are truly a family affair. The father of three, this 32-year-old Augusta, Ga., resident surrounds himself with family at the Games. In past years, his mother has joined him from Puerto Rico, where Perez was raised. An uncle is also a Wheelchair Games competitor, and other family members have been nearby to support and cheer. Family involvement is central to Perez's pursuit of athletic success. "When I compete, I think of my family," he said. "It wouldn't be right for me not to try my hardest. I do it for my wife and kids, to show them that just because Dad is in a wheelchair doesn't mean he's any different from anyone else and can't do his best. Nobody knows when they might end up in a wheelchair and I want my kids to know that life must go on."

Perez sets the same example for other athletes. "These veterans are my family too," he said. "I try my hardest for them and want them to feel like I do, that a wheelchair athlete can be as well prepared and perform as competitively as an able-bodied athlete." Fellow competitors know first-hand how intense he is, be it on the basketball court or at the track. In June, he will join more than 500 fellow "family members" to compete in the 27th National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Milwaukee, Wisconsin – his ninth straight year of competing at the event.

Although basketball is his real passion, he also enjoys both track and softball. "I eat, drink and sleep basketball," he says. Perez has played for Puerto Rico in National Wheelchair Basketball Association events and competed in the Caribbean Wheelchair Games. "If I don't fall out of my chair at least once during a basketball game, I feel like I'm not trying my hardest," he laughed. "That's my trademark!"

A paraplegic, Perez was injured at age 19 while serving in the U.S. Army. He started competing in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games at 24, in 1999. "I got hooked on the competition and the people I met," he recalls. "Everyone wanted to help and made me feel welcome." His latest quest is trying out for the U.S. Paralympic Team competing at the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing, China. For this challenge, he is focusing on his favorite track events – the 400 and 800-meter races. If the past can be an accurate predictor of the future, expect this intense, disciplined wheelchair athlete to succeed in this next endeavor as well, as he continues to make his family proud of his achievements – in sports and in life.