

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

The Brauns – A Couple Always On the Go

Jerry Braun remembers the warmth of the sun on the back of her neck as she chased her dreams on the baseball field some 63 years ago. She was six years old at the time, playing ball with the neighborhood boys on sweaty, summer days. Her grandmother, of course, would have no such nonsense – little girls didn't play sports, they had tea parties. But Jerry, strong-willed and clever, schemed, complaining of cold legs in order to get out of wearing dresses. Once in jeans, she kicked up some dirt getting to the field to hit her home runs. When her grandmother discovered Jerry's secret, it was back to wearing dresses. Today, Jerry is 69 years old and still loves sports. Each year, she and her husband, William, travel the countryside going from one competition to another. This July, the duo will leave their home in Fort Gordon, Georgia and head to Omaha, Nebraska for the 28th National Veterans Wheelchair Games. It's an event they haven't missed in a dozen years.



"The Wheelchair Games are the first ones we found where we could compete with people our own age," said William, 61. "We really enjoy the competition and we like to practice together. We do everything together."

William, a combat veteran of Vietnam, served in the Army and the Marine Corps. He will compete as a paraplegic in field events and has also entered the sled hockey exhibition at the 2008 Games. Jerry is an Army veteran as well, also of the Vietnam era. She is an amputee and, like her husband, has chosen the field events and sled hockey as her sports.

"I have benefitted health-wise from the Games," said Jerry. "You can do anything you want to do as long as you wrap your mind around it. There may be limitations, but those are in the mind only. Our favorite event is the National Veterans Wheelchair Games because of the high level of competition and what we have in common with the other athletes. I would like to see more new people at the Games, especially more women."

Most veterans learn about the National Veterans Wheelchair Games from VA medical facilities where they receive treatment, or from their local chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America. Each year, both organizations co-present the event on a national level. This year, nearly 600 veterans have registered for the Games, of which almost 50 are women.

"It's word-of-mouth that gets the information out there to new veterans," said William. "And, they have to find all the money themselves in order to go. A lot of them don't know they can get help from their local veterans' service organizations for these events."

According to Jerry, the Games are powerful. "Once they get there and compete, most stay," she said. In addition to this event, both Jerry and William compete in the National Veterans Golden Age Games, for veterans age 55 and older.

William and Jerry are hooked, that we know. Last year, they went to eight wheelchair events in seven states. Perhaps it's that six-year-old girl from Jerry's past who still motivates her, whispering, "Ditch the skirt; go for home plate!" Because they do most things together, William shares the benefits as well. And that's exactly what they do – go, go, go!