

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

Darrell Lawrence – Adapt and Overcome



For many athletes, the reward for hours of dedicated training is the honor and recognition they are given when receiving the gold, silver and bronze medals reserved for being best of the best. But for Darrell Lawrence, a 30-year-old Army veteran from Gresham, Oregon, training for and competing in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games gives him more than a timed moment of glory. Lawrence has discovered that participation in the Games helps him excel well beyond his physical disabilities.

A crew chief for a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter unit that served in Iraq, Lawrence was injured while his unit was transferring from Ft. Campbell, Kentucky to Hunter Army Airfield in Georgia. "After my accident, I was in a complete state of disbelief and denial that I would be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life," Lawrence said. "However, I am discovering that with adaptive activities like the National Veterans Wheelchair Games and National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, I can work through and around my limitations."

Lawrence earned three gold medals in five events at the 2007 Wheelchair Games, where he competed as a novice athlete. For the 2008 Games in Omaha, Nebraska, he will compete in air guns, slalom and handcycling, and will move into a new classification for more experienced athletes. "I will have tougher competition this year," he said. "That means there will be a lot of guys there with a lot more experience than me. That's OK though – I'm ready for the challenge."

One event that Lawrence is looking forward to again is the wheelchair slalom. The event features an obstacle course that tests an athlete's strength, skill and speed. Lawrence parallels the slalom to the challenges that wheelchair users face in everyday life. "Hopping over curbs, pushing up steep ramps or controlling yourself coming down those steep inclines must be practiced, as these are obstacles we face daily."

Since returning from the 2007 Games, Lawrence vowed to "get out of the house and do something other than just sitting around in (his) wheelchair." He created a regular training schedule to prepare for his competition events and also improve his overall physical conditioning.

Reflecting on why events such as the Wheelchair Games are such a valuable experience, Lawrence says, "It's a very uplifting feeling to be surrounded by other vets similar to me. They served honorably, they've encountered a life changing injury, and now they are challenging themselves and reaping the rewards of those challenges."

Lawrence currently receives his health care at the Portland and Seattle campuses of the VA Puget Sound Health Care System. "The VA therapists at both have been extraordinarily helpful to me," he said. "My first nine months of rehab were very hard, but I continue to realize that I must find new ways to adapt – and overcome."