

# National Veterans Wheelchair Games



## Athlete Profile (National)

### Holly Koester – It's Been a Long, Good Road



Holly Koester is a 48-year-old Army veteran from Walton Hills, Ohio, is returning once again to the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, to be held this year in Omaha, Nebraska this July. "When I was first injured, I thought my active life was over," Koester says. "After discovering wheelchair sports, I clearly realized that this is about as far from the truth as can be imagined." Koester mustered the courage to participate in her first wheelchair sports event at the 1991 National Veterans Wheelchair Games. This year marks her 18<sup>th</sup> consecutive year as a wheelchair athlete.

Koester was injured in 1990 while on alert at the Redstone Arsenal in northern Alabama. She was driving on the post when her vehicle overturned and caused severe injuries. Discharged several months later, Koester faced returning to civilian life, with all of its challenges, as a paraplegic.

Koester quickly learned to adapt and regained her self-esteem. She attributes her positive attitude and active lifestyle to the benefits of wheelchair sports. "Racing in my chair helps keeps me motivated and focused to staying healthy and happy," she says. Healthy and happy she is – Koester took home five gold medals at the 2007 National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Milwaukee, a feat she also accomplished the year before. She hopes to bring home a few more from Omaha, adding to her already large collection.

Koester's enthusiasm is unbridled. "This event has literally changed my life and my family's life," she says. "Being a part of 500 people in wheelchairs, competing during the day and dancing late into the night, is an absolutely great time. I am so grateful I can be a part of this." One of her favorite events is the slalom competition, a challenging obstacle course that tests the athlete's agility, speed and strength. Koester explains, "There are obstacles on the course that people in wheelchairs face every day. I love the challenge of this timed event, and being able to cheer on the other participants." This year, Koester hopes to improve her times and would particularly enjoy it if more women became involved. "I would really like to encourage more women to compete in wheelchair racing" she said. "The Games may introduce you to sports, but you can go on to compete outside of the Games as well."

In addition to her strong athletic drive, Koester also is very active in her community, both as the sports director for the Paralyzed Veterans of America Buckeye Chapter and also as a substitute teacher in her local public school system. "It is important for me to give back to my community in a way that will educate others about the challenges and opportunities those of us in wheelchairs experience." This year, Koester was one of 12 veteran athletes chosen to be featured on boxes of Cheerios, in an effort to support military families. "Because I'm a substitute school teacher, the school administration was able to get local grocery store managers to donate boxes to my school" Koester said. "It was really exciting for my students and me when they would bring me a box with my picture on it to autograph!"