



Athlete Profile (Local)

Michael Smith – Showing Off His Abilities

Michael Smith, 34, a Navy veteran, is looking forward to having his parents come from his hometown of Sallisaw, Oklahoma to watch him compete in the 28th National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Omaha this summer. Although Smith is Oklahoma-born and raised, he now proudly calls Bennington, Nebraska his home, where he lives with Faith, his beloved black Labrador service dog.

“I entered the Navy to travel and see the world and earn some money for college” Smith said. His tour in the Navy took Smith to Italy for two years serving on the guided missile cruiser, the USS Belknap. While there, he served as an operations specialist, using radar to coordinate and track flight exercises for Navy planes. He was stationed in Florida for the final two years of military service, leaving the Navy in August 1996. It was his radar experience in the Navy that inspired Smith to later attend school to become an air traffic controller.

In August 1998, two years to the day from when he left the Navy and six months into his air traffic control training, Smith was involved in a serious motor vehicle accident. He explains that the spinal cord injury he received from the accident left him paralyzed from the chest down, but with some use of his arms. Through dedication and hard work with weights, Smith developed his upper body strength and now has 90 percent use of his arms.

It is no surprise that Smith will be competing in weightlifting at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games. He also plans to compete in the nine-ball event. “I love shooting pool,” Smith said. “Participating in these Games will give me an opportunity to get out and do something I enjoy.” Smith credits the Great Plains Chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America and the occupational therapy team at the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Omaha with getting him involved in the Games. “I love to compete, and participating in the Games with other veterans will show off our abilities, not our disabilities,” he said.

Surgery last October has delayed Smith’s ability to train for the upcoming Games. However, his positive outlook has him looking forward to working with his personal trainer, saying, “I plan to win some medals while competing, and not just sit clapping with the crowd on the sidelines.”

This veteran’s strong spirit and determination will not only have his parents cheering, but everyone who has the privilege of watching Michael Smith show off his abilities!