

Skier Profile

Russell Worth – Waiting for the Word “Go”

Russell Worth, an 82-year-old Navy veteran from Brown Deer, Wis., has more zest for life than most men half his age. Worth's mettle was first tested in 1943 as a young student at the University of Wisconsin when he was drafted into the Navy. At that time, he was transferred to the coast of Washington because an invasion by the Japanese was expected off the Pacific. After captaining planes for more than a year, he was sent to Burbank, Calif. Although he longed to be on the front lines like his two brothers, Worth never saw combat, serving most of his tour as a flight instructor before an honorable discharge in April 1946.

Returning home to Wisconsin, he owned and operated a construction business for nearly 30 years. When the cold weather finally got the best of him in 1985, Worth decided to move to St. Louis, Mo. On February 6, 1991, while driving home from his job as a building inspector in University City, the McPherson Strut (a compact suspension unit for smaller cars) on the rear of Worth's car snapped. After losing control of the vehicle, he was tossed from the driver's seat over a ten foot embankment. He landed on the frozen ground, breaking all of his ribs as well as his back. His spinal cord injuries were so extensive that he became a paraplegic.

After six weeks of rehabilitation in St. Luke's Hospital in St. Louis, Worth moved back to Milwaukee with his son and entered the Clement J. Zablocki Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center for continuing treatment. While there, he first learned of the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic when his VA recreation therapist suggested getting out on the slopes, despite the fact that Worth had never skied before. "My therapist said, 'Hey, you're going to ski'," Worth remembers. "I thought he was joking!" His first year skiing, at age 68, he received the Clinic's "UFO Award," followed two years later with the "Kamikaze Award." Worth said, "I guess I thought I was 18 years old again!"

For Russell Worth, who also competes in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, the benefits of these events reach much more than the body. "I just love being out there knowing that I am doing something truly physical—using my whole body—giving it all I've got," he said. "You feel yourself gliding over that snow and it is so therapeutic, both mentally and physically." As always, Worth looks forward to meeting new friends this year, and visiting with the old ones he has made over the years. "The Clinic just makes you feel like you have your total health back."

Worth's courageous spirit has outlasted not only paralysis, but more recent injuries as well. He came to his first Clinic nearly 13 years ago and has attended almost every year since. In 2006, he is back once again and ready to hit the slopes. "I get up on that mountain and I'm just waiting for the word 'go!'"