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DoD Warrior Games | Inspiration in the Big Easy | Healthy Military Families



The 2017 DoD Warrior Games Invade Chicago

By John Prue

The Department of Defense (DoD) Warrior Games, a Paralympic-style sports competition for seriously wounded, ill or injured post-9/11 service members and veterans, took place this summer in Chicago, Illinois. Approximately 265 athletes representing the U.S. Army, Navy/Coast Guard, Marine Corps, Air Force and Special Operations Command teams were joined in the “Windy City” by teams from the United Kingdom and Australia. All teams includ-

ed athletes with upper-body, lower-body and spinal cord injuries; traumatic brain injuries; visual impairment; serious illnesses; and post-traumatic stress, who, from June 30 through July 8, competed in a range of events, including archery, cycling, track and field, shooting, sitting volleyball, swimming and wheelchair basketball.

But this, the eighth annual hosting of the games, would be different. According to Jerry Hieb, director of Navy Fleet & Family Readiness, “What made this

year’s Warrior Games unique was that for the first time, the games were not conducted on a military installation, which provided the public with the opportunity to witness firsthand the courage and resiliency of these warrior athletes.” Competitions were held at world-class venues throughout the city, including McCormick Place, Soldier Field, United Center, Lane Tech Academy, the University of Illinois at Chicago and the beautiful Museum Campus, off Lake Michigan.

Air Force Master Sgt. Israel "DT" Del Toro, competes in the men's 22 kilometer recumbent cycling competition at the 2017 Department of Defense Warrior Games.



DoD photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Natalia E. Briggs

Military Adaptive Sports Program

The DoD Warrior Games serves as the culminating event for the Military Adaptive Sports Programs. Many of the recovering service members and veterans use adaptive sports and other adaptive conditioning activities to assist in their overall rehabilitation, as well as to overcome the challenge of adjusting to their new normal after their serious illness or injury. With oversight by the Office of Warrior Care Policy, the Military Adaptive Sports

Program provides reconditioning activities and athletic competition for close to 12,000 wounded, ill and injured service members. The program was designed to enhance recovery by engaging those wounded warriors early in individualized physical and cognitive activities outside of the traditional therapy setting. The overall benefits include reduced stress, increased quality of life, lower blood pressure, weight management and an enhancement of the rehabilitation process.

In addition, all wounded, ill and injured service members and veterans also have access to a program, called the "Healing Arts," which allows them to express themselves through music, writing, dance and other artistic modalities to help improve their quality of life.

The DoD Warrior Games began in 2010 when the U.S. Olympic Committee, in partnership with the Department of Defense, hosted the first games at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado

Springs, Colorado. For the next four years, the games were held in Colorado Springs, but that changed in 2014 when the DoD assigned the service branches to host the games and to assume all responsibilities of coordination and execution. First up was the Marine Corps, which in 2015 hosted the games at Marine Corps Base Quantico in Virginia. The following year, the Army hosted the games at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York.

Taking the Games Off Base

In 2017, it was the Navy's turn to host the games, and the decision was made, through the Commander, Navy Installations Command, to use the senior staff of the Navy Wounded Warrior-Safe Harbor Program to serve as the search committee for the right location. Wounded Warrior-Safe Harbor is the Navy's sole organization for coordinating the non-medical care of seriously wounded, ill and injured sailors and Coast Guardsmen, and for providing resources and support to their families and caregivers. Each service has an adaptive sports pro-

gram, and the intent was to help spread the word to both service members and the public about the importance of these programs in the healing process. The Navy planning team wanted to increase public awareness of the DoD Military Adaptive Sports Program, and taking the games off a military installation was seen as the best way to do so. Chicago, with its world-class athletic facilities and strong military connections dating back to World War I, was the ideal location for the 2017 Warrior Games.

Planning and Execution

The Navy's partnership with the city of Chicago, started with the Chicago Mayor's Office, through the Director of Veteran's Affairs, and extended to the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. The Chicago Park District was also a major partner and helped with coordination and promotion of the Warrior Games. The park district, with its past experience hosting the Valor Games in partnership with World Sport Chicago, has been involved with supporting military veter-

ans and participating in adaptive sports competitions since 2011.

The Chicago Park District actively advertised the Warrior Games via multiple platforms: Using its day camp program and its summer camp theme "Heroes," the park district not only promoted the games to approximately 30,000 day-camp children and their families, but, during the games, also ran field trips to various Warrior Game competitions, helping to cheer on the athletes. Promotion for the games was incorporated into the park district's annual float, and the Warrior Games, along with some of the athletes, were included in Chicago's Memorial Day Parade, which is one of the country's largest parades.

Gerry Henaghan, the special recreation manager for the Chicago Park District, and her staff spent nearly a year assisting Navy personnel for facility visits, with planning, permitting and several other logistical aspects to support the execution of the games. Since 1968 when the park district organized its first Special Olympics for individuals with "intellectual disabilities," adaptive sports in Chicago have been a key contributor in developing those, young or old, with physical or visual impairments. "Every person has the right to enjoy recreation and sports," says Henaghan. "It is our duty to provide the equipment, guidance, education and, most importantly, the acceptance by individuals, their friends and family members."

Corporate partnerships were also a vitally important source of financial support for the games. Boeing and the Fisher House Foundation signed on to be the presenting sponsors of the 2017 Warrior Games and many other key sponsors soon followed. The Fisher House Foundation covered the cost for two family members to accompany each athlete, which included their transportation, lodging and some meals during the nine-day competition. The families/caregivers are a big part of the recovery and rehabilitation process,



DoD photo by EJ Hersom

Marine Corps veteran Sarah Rudder teaches starting from the blocks during track practice for the 2017 Department of Defense Warrior Games in Chicago, June 30, 2017. Rudder is an ambassador for the games.



U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Colim Sheridan

Athletes' family members cheer on their teams during the 2017 DoD Warrior Games.



DoD photo by EJ Hersom

Medically retired Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Sarah Rudder carries the 2017 Department of Defense Warrior Games torch into Soldier Field in Chicago, July 1, 2017.

and while the games are primarily focused on the athletes and their incredible experiences and accomplishments, it's important to acknowledge and recognize the tremendous dedication and support of hidden heroes: the athletes' family members and/or close friends who have made their own sacrifices to help their warrior athletes with their recovery efforts and athletic achievements.

The Warrior Games

To participate in the Warrior Games, each service conducts trials about three to four months prior to the start of the games to determine the team members and who will participate in what events. Active duty and veterans select who will participate in these trials, but selections are also made based on past participation in the adaptive sports program and previously held "sports camps." All athletes eventually go through a classification process for their individual sports and are placed in certain categories by their functional ability, including muscle power/range of movement, along with limb deficiency and/or visual impairment. It is not uncommon for athletes to compete in more than one sport.

The games kicked off July 1 with a tremendous opening ceremony at historic

Soldier Field, featuring comedian Jon Stewart as master of ceremonies. The introduction of the teams and athletes, along with the lighting of the official torch, were the emotional highlights. A mega-concert, starring Kelly Clarkson and Blake Shelton, capped off the opening ceremony of this world-class event for world-class heroes!

The competition was outstanding with several very exciting individual performances and thrilling team sport finals for both sitting volleyball and wheelchair basketball at the United Center. There's not a heavy focus on the overall team medal counts but, after the games, the "Ultimate Champion" is recognized, based on receiving the top number of points over the entire competition. This year, U.S. Air Force Veteran, Senior Airman Jamie Biviano won the gold; U.S. Air Force Veteran, Captain Austin Williamson won the silver; and Veteran, Staff Sergeant John J. Stanz from team Special Operations Command won the bronze medal in the Ultimate Champion category.

Conclusion

The success of this year's games rests with the dedication and hard work of the athletes and their caregivers, who are the true heroes. But, the willingness

of Navy senior leaders and the staff at the Navy Wounded Warrior-Safe Harbor Program to think outside the box and explore a novel approach to the games is equally deserving.

The media coverage before, during and after the competition included Warrior Game athletes being featured in interviews on ESPN, a one-hour Sports Center live broadcast from the United Center and a variety of athlete vignettes on ESPN and other national news outlets. More than 51,000 people attended the 2017 Warrior Games and events. This compares to roughly 1,000 people who attended the Warrior Games at the United States Military Academy in West Point last year. The Navy Wounded Warrior-Safe Harbor Program fulfilled its vision of a Warrior Games, supported by the citizens of a large metropolitan city, with events played out in world-class venues and with increased media attention to recognize and promote the Military Adaptive Sports Program to the public.

As we say in the Navy...Bravo Zulu! 🌿

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