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Paralympians help to coach, mentor the athletes at the 2016 DoD Warrior Games

WEST POINT, N.Y. – The Paralympics are the pinnacle of competition for disabled athletes. At the 2016 Department of Defense (DoD) Warrior Games, a group of Paralympians are helping to coordinate, coach and mentor these wounded warriors to help raise their level of competition and mold some future Paralympians.

“It’s my way of giving back, because the men and women in the military have done so much to keep us safe. What an honor for me to be able to be here,” said Lee Montgomery, Paralympian and National Wheelchair Basketball Association Hall of Fame member. Montgomery is a coach and venue manager for the Warrior Games wheelchair basketball competition. He won a gold medal in wheelchair basketball at the 1990 Pan American (PanAm) Games in Argentina.

“The way these men and women are going out there and giving it 100 percent, the energy that they have to win, the heart to give it their all, they are competing on the same level as many Paralympians,” Montgomery said.

The 2016 DoD Warrior Games is an adaptive sports competition for wounded, ill and injured service members and veterans at the United States Military Academy at West Point, June 15-21. Approximately 250 athletes are participating in eight sporting events, representing teams from the Army, Marine Corps, Navy/Coast Guard, Air Force, U.S. Special Operations Command and the United Kingdom (U.K.) Armed Forces.

“Really, what it means is taking what I’ve been exposed to, and my experiences, and sharing it with the wounded warriors,” said Scott Danberg, Sports Director for the Warrior Games. Danberg has competed in multiple Paralympic events since 1992 and won the silver medal in the javelin at the 1992 Paralympic Games.

“We’re doing good quality things to give them (the athletes) a nice taste of the level of professionalism you can expect at the Paralympic Games,” he continued. “This is absolutely a



stepping stone for many of these athletes. It's a nice introduction to motivate them to keep hitting the pavement, keep training, and don't give up. The results will speak for themselves."

"I truly believe we already have some Paralympians participating this year," Montgomery added. "It's just a matter of taking that next step, to compete more service trials, then in the Invictus Games, and on to the Paralympic Games. It's those steps we all have to follow to get to a point where we can say, 'okay, I'm at the height of my athletic career.'"

Besides inspiring and mentoring these wounded warriors to raise their level of competition, one of the Paralympians comes back every year to meet the wounded warriors and continue his work to make prosthetics and wheelchairs better for people with disabilities.

Dr. Rory Cooper is the founder and senior researcher for the Human Engineering Research Laboratory (HERL) at the University of Pittsburgh. He is also a wounded warrior himself. The Army veteran received a spinal cord injury while on active duty. His injuries pushed him to become the leading designer in wheelchairs and prosthetics, including wheelchairs designed specifically for athletic competition.

Cooper also was a bronze medalist at the 1988 Paralympic Games in Seoul, South Korea. His passion for helping disabled veterans has made him a mainstay at every Warrior Games since its inception, including going back to the earliest incarnation known as the Veteran's Wheelchair Games.

"I've been involved with disabled veteran's athletic events when they were first called 'Veterans Wheelchair Games,'" Cooper explained. "More recently, I did some of the outcome studies on the Warrior Games and the impact on the athletes. More importantly, I'm here to talk to the athletes about what their future might hold."

Being a wounded warrior himself, Cooper can empathize with the athletes and help them use athletics as part of the healing process. "During the rehabilitation process, it's absolutely essential for them to be able to train, be on a team again, and striving to be your best just like when you were on active duty," Cooper stated.

"That's what you see here, you see a lot of peer mentoring, peer learning, so people can look down the road and see what to shoot for," he added.



Cooper knows that competition like the Warrior Games is just the first step towards Paralympic competition. Last year, at the PanAm Games in Toronto, he was on hand at various medal ceremonies to pass out medals to the winners. He remembered several athletes that he awarded medals to he previously awarded medals to at past Warrior Games.

In the end, these Paralympians see a continued future for the Warrior Games and want to continue to be a part of it. “I would like to see the partnership between the Department of Defense and the Veteran’s Administration grow,” Cooper said. “I want to see the Warrior Games continue as a multi-sport venue like it is, and to be part of not only the initial rehabilitation, but the lifetime rehabilitation for wounded warriors.”

“This is something, deep down inside, that we all need to succeed and grow, not just as athletes, but as people with disabilities,” Cooper concluded. “It’s our duty to help these veterans, who have sacrificed so much for us, to lift them up and show them we care.”