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Visually impaired athletes push themselves for gold at 2016 DoD Warrior Games

WEST POINT, N.Y. – When some people think of "wounded warriors," they may think of prosthetic limbs and wounded veterans in wheelchairs. However, a small percentage of those



WEST POINT, N.Y. (June 16, 2016) Visually impaired Army Veteran Cpl. Mathew L. Mueller (center right) is guided around the track by his partner, Adam Blow (center left), in the 800m race at the track and field competition of the 2016 DoD Warrior Games, June 16, at the United States Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.

veterans are visually impaired and that creates a whole new set of obstacles and challenges, especially in a competition like the 2016 Department of Defense (DoD) Warrior Games, being held June 15-21.

"We kind of get overlooked sometimes because we don't look necessarily look like we have the scars that other wounded warriors have, unless you see us on a daily basis," Army Veteran Cpl. Mathew L. Mueller explained. "All of us here have disabilities, but we will not be defined by what disabled us."

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.

Approximately 250 athletes participate 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.

"You have to be very trusting, in your coach and your partner," said Navy Veteran Airman Brittany Jordan. "But it's so much fun, so rewarding, especially in archery. When you hear that 'thud' sound, meaning you hit the actual target somewhere, it's so awesome."



Jordan, 27, of Mobile, Alabama, is one of the visually impaired athletes competing in the Warrior Games. Jordan is part of the Navy Wounded Warrior – Safe Harbor Adaptive Sports and Recreation Program, delivering year-round competitive and recreation opportunities for wounded, ill or seriously injured sailors and Coast Guardsmen.

Tiffany Little, Jordan's sister and a non-medical care attendant, motivated her to join in the athletic competition.

"After I was injured, I was saying to myself, 'I can't do this, I can't do nothing!' My sister pushed me to get out there and get involved," Jordan explained. "That's when I decided I wanted to get out and inspire others and show them that you can do stuff, even though you're visually impaired."

"I love to have a guide because then it becomes a team sport, so I know that there's someone struggling with me, someone helping me and encouraging me," Mueller added. "Ultimately, I want to give back to the people who helped me get me where I am today."

Mueller, 26, of Phoenix, Arizona, is more than 70 percent visually impaired, but he doesn't let that stop him from being an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) back home. He also draws upon his interaction with the other athletes and the support of his family to motivate him to win at this year's Warrior Games.

"All these athletes have so much heart, so much courage and determination they fill me up and my cup overflows because they inspire me every day," Mueller added. "Through all that, I just want to give it all and do my best. My family is here, so I want to put on a good show for them too. They helped me through my recovery, so I want to give back to them by giving them a couple of gold medals."

"I'm very competitive so I like a lot of athletic events like this," said Air Force Veteran Tech. Sgt. Freddie Rosario. "It gives me a chance to get my mind off of all my injuries and other stressors, both combat and non-combat related. It's a big morale boost for me."

Rosario, 35, of Melbourne, Florida, suffered a retinal tear in his right eye that led to an abnormal eye growth. He is part of the Air Force Wounded Warrior (AFW2) Program. Their



mission is to provide well-coordinated, personalized support and advocacy to wounded, ill and injured service men and women as well as their family and/or caregivers.

"It's good to go out there and do your best, represent your service, your country and this atmosphere with everybody who is going through a similar situation like yourself, brings us together like family," he concluded.

Part of Rosario's support team is a fellow wounded warrior, Air Force Staff Sgt. Andrew Bergdorf, 29, of Clinton, Ohio. Bergdorf, a cancer survivor, gave up his spot in some of the running races to be Rosario's partner on the track. In running events, the visually impaired athletes are tethered to their partner, to guide them around the track. For Bergdorf, it's his way of giving back to his fellow service members.

"I look around and look at these athletes, I see it in their eyes that they want to run, but can't, so this way, I feel like I'm running for them," he said. According to Bergdorf, there's a learning curve in being partnered with a visually impaired athlete.

"In running, you've got to get down your arm swing, communicate with each other and know when to pick it up or slow down," Bergdorf said. "Shorter races are easier."

"In archery, I'm blindfolded, so I've got to be very trusting in both my coach and my sister, who'll be my eyes," Jordan added. "Like in tandem cycling, I'm in the back and my feet are clipped into the pedals. She'll change the gears, yell out when we're turning left or right, so I'll know what's going on but I can't do anything about it. Like I said, it's very trusting."

For all the visually impaired veterans at the Warrior Games, it's more than just a competition. It's the chance for them to be seen as something more than just a blind person, but rather an athlete, a competitor and an equal.