

Service Members Show Mettle at Warrior Games

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Army Staff Sgt. Eric Pardo competes in discus at the track and field events at the 2016 Defense Department Warrior Games. (DoD photo)

After a week of intense international competition, the 2016 Department of Defense Warrior Games drew to a close Tuesday at West Point, New York, with Team Army winning the wheelchair basketball championship, followed by a medal ceremony, a concert and fireworks.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley reminded the audience that the competitors — representing the Army, Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard, Marines, U.S. Special Operations Command and the United Kingdom armed forces — were the best of the best.

"This is a tough competition," he said. "A lot of people don't realize what this competition means. First of all, you had to walk the hallowed grounds of the battlefield or you had to get injured or sick in the service of your nation. That alone makes you the best of the best."





Army Sgt. Monica "Mo" Southall prepares to serve in a sitting volleyball match at the 2016 Defense Department Warrior Games. (DoD photo)

Milley noted that the Warrior Games competitors had earned their places at the games by competing against a field of 2,000 to 3,000 other athletes at regional and service-level trials in track and field, swimming, shooting, archery, sitting volleyball, cycling and wheelchair basketball.

"They had to meet Paralympic standards," Milley said. "The coaches, the staff, the referees were all professionals and former Paralympians. The standards were high. This is a tough competition.

"There's not an athlete on this field who got there by themselves," he said. "They got there because of their families, their caregivers, their medical professionals, their coaches, their friends and countless others. You're a tremendously inspiring group of people. Thank you so much for your spirit of competition and your resiliency."



Members of the U.S. Special Operations Command Warrior Games team held up comedian Jon Stewart and his son 11-year-old son, Nate, during opening ceremonies of the 2016 Defense Department Warrior Games. (DoD photo)

From June 15 to 21, wounded, ill and injured athletes competed for gold, silver and bronze medals, pushing through injuries, getting engaged and reconnecting with friends. For some, this was their last Defense Department Warrior Games, and their next competition will be the Invictus Games. For others, the road to the Paralympics is just beginning.

It was the last Warrior Games for medically retired Army Sgt. Monica "Mo" Southall, but she ended with a bang — she beat her personal record in

the discus to win gold, took home gold in the shot put and was part of the bronze-winning Army sitting volleyball team.

"I knew it was going to be pretty emotional, and it was, when I threw the discus for the last time [and] when I threw shot put for the last time," she said. "It's kind of a sad ending, but not really, because I know what I've accomplished here. I'm thankful, and I plan on finding a way to give back to others."

Southall's family was there to support her throughout her final day of competition. "It's been a very emotional day, said her aunt, Mary Ward, who spent her 60th birthday cheering on her niece. "I've had my eye on her and didn't know how she was going to be affected this last day. I couldn't be more proud of her."

Southall's wife, Tempestt, said it was emotional for her, because she knows how much the Warrior Games mean to Monica.

"I know how much it means to her to come out and compete and how emotional it was going to be for her to get out there and give it her all and just do extraordinary like she did," she said. "She loves to be with her teammates. I'm just very proud that she has had the opportunity to do it for as long as she did, and she still has the support from us."



Army Sgt. Monica "Mo" Southall won gold medals in discus and shot put in the track and field events at the 2016 Defense Department Warrior Games. (DoD photo)

Southall has earned several medals at the DoD Warrior Games, Invictus Games and Valor Games throughout the years. She said she hopes to compete in the Invictus Games again, mainly for powerlifting.

"I made a mental mistake that's going to haunt me, so I have to have a chance to redeem myself, so I'd like to do one more just for powerlifting," she said with a smile. "I'd like to do other events, but that's the main event I'm chasing."

The final Warrior Games competition of the week was wheelchair basketball, and Army retained its title, dominating Team Marine Corps 62-23 for the gold.

Though the athletes felt a sense of accomplishment with the medals, most of them said their biggest takeaway from the week was the sense of

camaraderie and friendship. This year, the Warrior Games added Heart of the Team awards. These were awarded to one member on each team who best exemplified the camaraderie of the sport. The teams chose whom they received the awards and surprised each recipient.

The recipients were medically retired Army Sgt. Ryan Major, Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Dakota Boyer, medically retired Navy Airman Austin Chance Field, medically retired Air Force Capt. Chris Cochran, SOCOM Navy Lt. Ramesh Haytasingh and Royal Marine Justin Montague.



A Team Army competitor for the 2016 Department of Defense Warrior Games helps Sgt. Ryan Major off the bus at the U.S. Military Academy Preparatory School, West Point, New York. (DoD photo)

Boyer said he was surprised to receive the award.

"It was the best feeling I've felt in a long time," he said. "I was cheering my teammates on to win and to do good things. I was never not going to cheer for them. This event was one of the greatest feelings in the world. You have a full team behind you and support. You're never going to find the love like this anywhere else and people who know what you're going through."

Major told Fox News that adaptive sports helped save him after an explosion took both his legs.

"It was really dark for me, going from being completely independent, a true athlete, to losing my legs," he said. "Then I started getting into sports, and it was like I could see the light — very dim, but as I pushed forward, it got brighter. And eventually, I was able to touch the light."

Major won six medals, including two golds, in track and field events and also medaled in a cycling event and a swimming event.

The Warrior Games began last week when Army Capt. Kelly Elmlinger, with help from comedian Jon Stewart, lit the official torch during the event's opening ceremonies.

"Being selected to light the torch is as much an honor and privilege as competing for Team Army," Elmlinger said. "Finishing my Warrior Games career as Team Army captain and lighting the torch at the opening ceremony is by far the most amazing experience. It's humbling to see the support from the Warrior Transition Command throughout my time on Team Army, and I graciously thank them for allowing me to participate as torch bearer in this event."

About 250 wounded, ill and injured service members and veterans competed in shooting, archery, cycling, track and field, swimming, sitting volleyball and wheelchair basketball at the academy.



U.S. Army veteran Sgt. Ana Manciaz of Los Lunas, N.M., and U.S. Army veteran Sgt. Stefan LeRoy of Santa Rosa, Calif., run track at Shea Stadium in preparation for the 2016 Defense Department Warrior Games. (DoD photo)

Stewart said during the opening ceremony that he's uplifted by the tenacity displayed by the wounded, ill and injured athletes.

Considering the Orlando tragedy, he said, "This has been a difficult week for what I like to call 'Team Civilization.' The horrors we witnessed can make you feel as though you've lost faith in our ability to persevere through those times.

"When I say I'm in need of your support, there's almost nothing in this world that gives me more support than witnessing the tenacity, the resilience and the perseverance of our wounded warriors in their endeavors," he said. "They're the ones that make me feel like we're going to be OK."

Stewart, who attended events throughout the competition, said he brought his 11-year-old son, Nate, so he could meet the wounded warriors.

"People ask me, 'How do you talk to your kids about violence that occurs in this world?'" he said. "And I realized it's time to stop telling him about the rare individuals who do harm and tell him more about the people whose names we don't know and whose resilience and tenacity we can witness. That's why I'm here today. I'm here to show him that the depth and strength of those whose names you may never know is the depth and strength of this country, and is the depth and strength that will allow us to overcome."

Stewart, who has accompanied several USO tours overseas in combat zones, also has visited many times with wounded warriors at military hospitals.

"I've seen what these individuals have to go through. They have faced the worst that humanity has to throw at them, and they decided not to allow themselves to be defined by that act but to be defined by their actions following that act, their actions of getting up off that floor. I've seen the blood, sweat and tears they've gone through to get here — and the profanity. If you go to the physical therapy room at Walter Reed, there's a lot of profanity," he said with a smile. "They do it with pride, and when they fall, their colleagues and their loved ones pick them up and don't let them give up, so I applaud the families and the caregivers here today."

More than 40 current and former members of the Army competed in this year's Warrior Games, and more than half of them are noncommissioned officers.

Staff Sgt. Eric Pardo, of San Antonio, Texas, experienced multiple injuries while serving as a combat medic, including to his ankle and left knee, a bulging disc, a traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress.

"I was told by my orthopedic surgeon, who was also a triathlete, that I could no longer run or upright cycle again in 2012," Pardo said. "He told me to try swimming and recumbent cycling. I kind of scoffed at that because, to me, that wasn't really physically demanding. I almost took it as an insult. He took away everything I did for physical fitness. I couldn't just pick up a pair of sneakers and just run anymore or take my cycling shoes and my bike and just go riding."

But after a couple of weeks, "I decided to give this cycling and swimming thing a shot," he said.

Pardo's main events during this year's Warrior Games were archery, cycling, swimming and sitting volleyball. He also participated in track and field events.

In 2014, Pardo participated in the Army Trials held at West Point and won the gold medal for recumbent cycling with a 2-minute lead.

"Cycling helped me heal," Pardo said. "Before that, I was focused on what I couldn't do.

After I started cycling, I felt like I was back. It helps me get rid of the agitation; it helps me push through a lot of the physical barriers. I don't feel like I'm broken anymore. I'm not a defective piece of equipment. Look at what I have done.

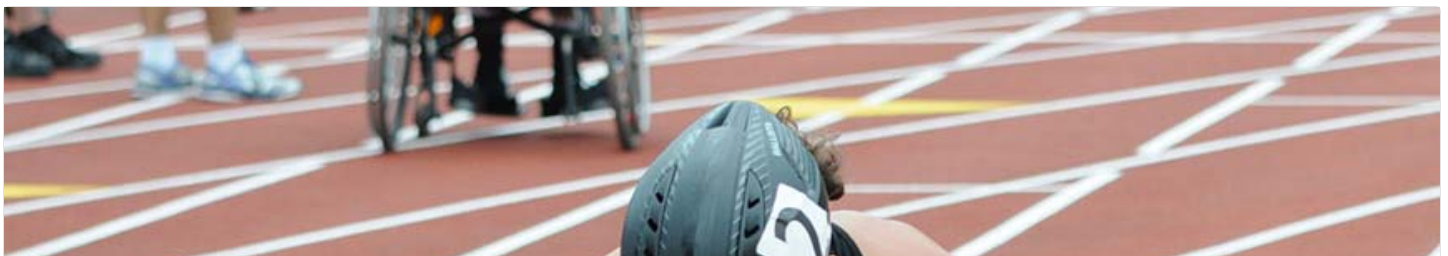
"When I'm riding and swimming, you can't text or call me," he said. "Whatever it is, it can wait till later; I'm in my zone."

U.S. Army Reservist Staff Sgt. Ashley Anderson, who recently competed in British Prince Harry's Invictus Games, also competed in the Warrior Games.

Anderson suffers from a herniated disc in her lower back and heart problems, "along with behavioral health issues," she said.

Anderson suffered the injuries during a second deployment in Guantanamo Bay and was introduced to adaptive sports while recovering at Fort Riley, Kansas. She also competed in the 2015 Warrior Games.

This year, she participated won three medals in swimming events and another for her role on the sitting volleyball team.





Army Capt. Kelly Elmlinger broke the meet record in the recumbent cycle at the 2016 Defense Department Warrior Games. (DoD photo)

But these Games aren't just about friendly competition among injured active and veteran service members from the branches, Anderson told Channel 12-KEYC in Mankato, Minnesota, near where she is from. It provides a community.

"It's hard, you know, outside of here to talk about our injuries with other people," she said. "It's easier to talk, to get help, see how other deal with their recovery and get advice from them."

Anderson told KYEC, "I want to achieve a personal best but mostly, the important thing is going out here, having fun and meeting everybody else from the branches and just having a great experience."

When Milley declared the games closed, he handed the Warrior Games torch off to Navy Vice Adm. Dixon R. Smith, commander of Navy Installations Command, to symbolize the start of the run-up for the next games, which the Navy will host in Chicago next June.

A C-17 Globemaster III from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, conducted a flyover. Actor Gary Sinise performed a concert with his Lt. Dan Band for the athletes and their families, and then a fireworks display closed out the evening.

But this is just one major step in the road to recovery for wounded, ill and injured service members.

U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Allan Armstrong, of Fort Hood, Texas, competed in archery and credited the Warrior Transition Battalions for getting him into archery.

"Adaptive sports gave me the confidence to recover," Armstrong said. "It takes time to go through this process."

Retired Army Staff Sgt. Gregory Quarles, from Ringgold, Georgia, also competed in archery events.

"I picked shooting archery at adaptive sports at the WTB," Quarles said. "If there's someone out there that needs it, adaptive sports is a lifesaver. Get out there and do what you got to do. You're not alone."

Shannon Collins of Defense Department News contributed to this article.