

## Veteran NCOs thrive in team environment as they prepare for Warrior Games

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As the members of Team Army train for the Department of Defense Warrior Games, from June 30- July 8 in Chicago<sup>1</sup>, they find healing and motivation along the way.

About 250 seriously wounded, ill and injured veterans and active duty service members will compete in the Warrior Games this year. Teams representing the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Coast Guard, Air Force and Special Operations Command will face off during the event, which is meant to be a provide an environment of sportsmanship and camaraderie to aid the individuals' physical, mental and spiritual growth and recovery.<sup>2</sup>

Former Sgt. Brandi Evans is looking forward to her second consecutive Warrior Games. In 2003, she was hit by a car while crossing a street. She was medically discharged in 2007 for the injuries she sustained to her knee and hip, before there were adaptive sports and reconditioning programs available. Evans said she is grateful for the opportunity to be a part of Team Army and train alongside fellow Soldiers again.<sup>3</sup>

"There was nothing like this available for us when we got injured back in the early 2000s," Evans said. "So this program is phenomenal for us. I wish so much I had had it way back then."

The first Warrior Games took place in 2010 and was sponsored by the U.S. Olympic Committee in Colorado Springs, Colorado. From the beginning, the purpose of the games has been to enhance wounded warriors' recovery and to expose the competitors to the benefits of adaptive sports. Teams of veterans and active-duty service members with upper- and lower-body injuries, spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, visual impairment, serious illnesses and post-traumatic stress disorder face off in archery, cycling, sitting volleyball, shooting, swimming, wheelchair basketball and track and field.<sup>4</sup>

The experience has made a difference in Evans' life, even though more than a decade has passed since her accident.<sup>5</sup>

"My injuries led to me not doing anything for about 12 years," Evans said. "My husband has cycled for years and always wanted to get me on a bike. But I always made an excuse for my

knee or my hip. I told him I couldn't do it. Once I learned about adaptive reconditioning and the Warrior Games and saw all of these veterans competing, it was such a motivator. Seeing somebody else who has a more severe injury or a double amputation – if they can do it, you can do it. No excuse. It just inspires you and motivates you to try harder, be better. We help each other through the struggle. It's not really about yourself anymore. You are a team.”

Retired Sgt. Jodie Lemons agreed that the team atmosphere has been key to her recovery. After severely injuring her knee in a training accident in 2011 and several failed surgeries, she was in a dark place.<sup>6</sup>

“Just being part of a team again is huge – to be in a unit again,” Lemons said. “As NCOs, we lead from the front, but out here we lead from the rear too. We are helping each other, coaching each other. You can never succeed without the aid of another individual. We would not make it this far if we did not have the support we do from our team. Nobody gets left behind out here. Nobody gets forgotten. We motivate each other and encourage each other to give it our all. It doesn't matter where you finish; we are going to come out of here as a team and a family.”

Many wounded warriors start their journeys to the Warrior Games while assigned to Warrior Transition Units, where staff works with them to create plans for their recovery and transition. More often than not, adaptive sports and reconditioning activities are a part of an individual's plan. Others, like Evans, are veterans who left the Army before such programs were available. Both veterans and active-duty Soldiers start by competing at the unit level, then move on to participate in regional trials. The top competitors proceed to the Army Trials, where they train with experts and vie for spots on Team Army.<sup>7</sup>

The Warrior Care and Transition adaptive sports and reconditioning program not only changed Lemon's life, but it also saved it. It has given her new goals and ambitions, as well as coping skills that will aid her for the rest of her life.<sup>8</sup>

She credits her mentors, coaches, and teammates for creating the positive team atmosphere she needed to heal.<sup>9</sup>

“This is my first time hands-on with a shotput and discus,” Lemons said. “I knew nothing coming into it. I missed my one day of training here at the Army Trials because of a sand storm, so I got remarkable instruction and training from my teammates. There is so much to learn. It’s a great challenge to try something new for the first time, and to see these athletes – some have been doing this since high school. They have so much knowledge to bring to the table.

“Regardless of the sport, no matter how physical, it is always mental,” she said. “You’ve got to get out of your head, and that is a huge struggle for me. Even here with the discus, it is finesse. When I first got in here, I just thought you muscle through it, but you don’t. It is a huge mental game.”

Lemons said working with fellow veterans and Soldiers again has given her the confidence she needed to look beyond her fears and realize her possibilities are endless.<sup>10</sup>

“For me, this shows me what I *can* do as opposed to what I can’t,” Lemons said. “... I can only go up. Moving forward, I think this is going to have a tremendous impact, both physically and mentally. I’m going to be not only a better wife, a better mom but a better individual. I’m not an active-duty Soldier anymore, but I would love to get more involved with this and pay it forward.”

## References

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