

SPORTS



Wheelchair doesn't keep May from playing hard

By Lynn Warren
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Midlothian's Jimmy May holds so many records and awards he has no true accounting of the number.

But he is certain of one personal record and knows it will never be broken. In 1981, Jimmy May participated in the first National Veterans Wheelchair Games, which were then held at the McGuire VA Hospital in Richmond.

"There were 74 participants in a dozen or so events," recalled May. In comparison, last year's games in Anchorage, Alaska, drew 638 athletes from all over the United States, competing in 20 sports broken down into 78 events.

May took the court in basketball, bowling, softball, table tennis and billiards – the maximum number of events allowed per athlete – becoming the first and only athlete to compete in 26 consecutive Wheelchair Games.

Rising above adversity

While serving his country in Vietnam, May was wounded in the back by a homemade mortar shell and permanently paralyzed. But despite his injury, he has never let his disability become a liability.

"Jimmy May is an amazing story," said Alison Aikele, spokesperson for the Virginia Department of Veterans Affairs. "He is another example of the amazing will of our country's veterans."

The Wheelchair Games are run "just like the Olympics with gold, silver and bronze medals awarded in each event," explained May. Over more than two decades of competing, May has won 70-80 medals – possibly holding a record for the most wins.

But for May, it's not about the number of medals he's received. He sees more value in just participating in the games.

"I feel that if I hadn't have done it, I would have gone downhill, gained weight and aged rapidly. I've seen guys that started these programs, and when they gave them up, they just went downhill. But more than that, the number of really great friends I've made is unbelievable."

Local competition

May doesn't limit himself to just national events. The 58-year-old is not only a competitor but a major organizer and advocate for the disabled population both locally and nationally. He is president of the Independent Wheelchair Athletic Association and serves as the secretary of both winter and summer bowling leagues.

He makes time to play basketball and softball and is an accomplished billiards player. Basketball is his favorite "I have big hands, and that helps me do it pretty well," he said.

He also has considerable skill at the pool table, placing third in a Paralyzed Veterans of America tournament held in Richmond recently.

Wheelchair Games strategy

Events at the Wheelchair Games are divided into three divisions depending on the degree of disability, and those divisions are then divided into three experience classes – novice for inexperienced competitors, regular for



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Jimmy May has won more than 70 medals while competing in the annual National Veterans Wheelchair Games. Billiards is one of his top events.

experienced competitors under age 50, and masters for those over 50.

May obviously qualifies for the masters group, but he points out an interesting strategy: "You do not have to go to masters at 50; you can elect to go. But in some cases where masters have years of experience in a particular sport or event, such as billiards, table tennis or shooting, you might just be better off staying in the regular class. Despite the fact that the wheelchair athletes only compete against other athletes with similar disabilities, the playing field is not always completely level. At 50-years-old you may have to compete against a 30-year-old in prime physical condition."

This requires competitors to choose their sports wisely. May has gradually phased out of his participation in the 100 and 400 yard dashes, the javelin and the slalom.

Setting a new goal

For the first time, May missed the games held in Milwaukee this summer because he had to undergo vascular surgery.

"At first I had planned to go and compete and have the surgery when I got back. I finally decided to go ahead with the surgery, but I was still thinking a few days before that I might still go."

Even lying in recovery, May was thinking about going to Milwaukee. "I still thought I might go and compete," he said.

But cooler heads prevailed, and May stayed home.

"But I'm going next year," he said, and probably the year after and the year after as he starts his quest for a new record: being the oldest to compete in the Wheelchair Games.



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