

RIVER CITY DAILY

Spirit of the Games Issue

Newsletter of the 32nd National Veterans Wheelchair Games

SPIRIT OF THE GAMES

Veteran Phillip Rosenberg
Photo by Stephen Tyler



As a young boy growing up in rural Wisconsin, Phillip Rosenberg, 62, was surrounded by heroes. His father and three uncles had served in World War II. One uncle was shot down over the English Channel. His father fought in the Battle of the Bulge.

“It seemed like every adult male had served,” said Rosenberg, a native of Pulaski, Wis., a town of 5,000 people best known for “Pulaski Polka Days”, one of the largest festivals dedicated to the Polish in the United States. “When I came of age, it was just my turn, so I enlisted.”

Serving in the 1960’s almost certainly meant an all-expenses paid trip to Vietnam. Arriving in 1969, Rosenberg served with the famed 82nd Airborne Division located at Phu Loi and the 9th Infantry Division located at Dong Tam. Midway through the tour, he was wounded and received the Purple Heart.

“I got knocked over by a blast wall,” remembered Rosenberg. “Somehow three of my fingers got severed. I picked ‘em up, put ‘em in my pocket and hustled over to the medic. Later, they re-attached my fingers.”

Injured, Rosenberg returned home in 1970 to a country that was eager to get out of Vietnam.

“It was not a very receptive society,” he said.

He enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) and played for the baseball team. Then in 1974, his life changed forever.

“October 2,” said Rosenberg. “A car accident. I spent 18 months in rehab at the Milwaukee VA.”

After physical therapy, Rosenberg gradually learned to re-adjust to his altered life. Bit by bit, a new sense of purpose arose. Then...a mission redefined.

From Injured to Active

“I was a three-sport athlete, served my country and I was just sitting around,” he said. “I deserved better for myself, we deserved better from our country.”

Rosenberg got involved with the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) and started advocating for wheelchair accessibility and parking. He got back into school. He started making things happen. In the fall of 1979, he, along with three other Veterans, founded the Wisconsin Chapter of the PVA, a chapter in which he serves as President today.

“Disabled Veterans had a lot of needs,” said Rosenberg. “So we got to work.”

Graduating Magna Cum Laude from UWM in 1982, he launched a career in teaching in what he thought would be his life’s work, but his mission was redefined again.

“1982 was also the first year I attended the Wheelchair Games,” said Rosenberg. “They were in Milwaukee and with the



encouragement of Dr. Atzla Gahatit, Chief of Spinal Cord Surgery and Don Schmitt from PVA, I decided to go. They were really pushing us guys to go. I’m glad they did because a whole new world opened up.”

Still a Competitor

A year later, Rosenberg left teaching and became a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor for the Clement Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee, Wis. It was a mission that lasted for the next 26 years, almost as long as his attendance streak at the Wheelchair Games.

“I’ve gone to 31 consecutive Games missing only the first one here in Richmond in ‘81,” said Rosenberg. “It’s amazing to think back on all of the lives these Games have helped. I am so honored to have been a part of it.”

Over the years, he has participated in nearly every event the Games have offered. Softball? It’s one of his favorites in the early years. Trap shooting? He was afraid he would go head over heels the first time, yet to this day he still travels the PVA trap shooting circuit. Quad Rugby? It’s built for his competitiveness.

“I tell the young guys, if me, at 62, and Bull, at 65, can still do it, so can you,” said Rosenberg referring to last year’s Spirit of the Games recipient, Jerry “Bull” Baylor. “I wish they had the event when I was younger though.”

Baylor first met Rosenberg at the ‘82 Games in Milwaukee. He added “Like Phil, I’m a fierce competitor and we’re two of the oldest around playing Quad Rugby. I think it’s a testament to the healing power of these Games that we’re still so competitive after 30 years.”

Healing power, competitiveness and drive. These are some of the very attributes to live a full and happy life, reminds Rosenberg. It’s a message he wants to share with his brothers and sisters returning from overseas or those Veterans who have suffered a catastrophic injury.

“If you think your life is over, it will be,” said Rosenberg with his jaw set firm. “The Games are a teaching mechanism, not only with sports, but with life. You’ve got to build that first level of independence. Set goals for the future. Gain confidence and you will do anything you want to do.”

After 31 years coming to the Games and now three years into retirement, you might think that Phil Rosenberg is going to slow down a bit. Well, think again.

“There’s too much I still want to do,” he exclaimed. “I’m getting ready to hit the road, travel to Europe. I want to see all 50 states, all the parks and monuments this country has to offer. I don’t know if I’m gonna have time to pack it all in, but I’m gonna try!”

Phillip Rosenberg. Mentor. Advocate. Competitor.

BRINGING IT HOME

We call these Games, but this is pretty serious. Serious competition, serious fun, and serious medicine – better than anything a doctor could prescribe.

I remember preparing for my first Games in 2008 in Omaha. Every morning I would wake up and head to the gym before work. I would spend an hour training heavy on the bench press. My goal was to hit 400 pounds in the week leading up to the Games. I knew that if I stuck with my training program I could set a personal best at the Games and hopefully take home the gold medal as well.

It didn't always work out the way I planned. But I gave it my best. And that's the best compliment I could ever get ... to say I gave my best and never once cashed it in. There is no substitute for hard work.

I know many of you feel the same way, and I hope you've had a chance this week to share that message with some of the first time athletes here at the Games. Because coming here for the first time can be overwhelming. It starts with apprehension and maybe a little fear. Then as the competition begins, they start cheering on their teammates and giving hi-fives on the court. That's when the smiles start. And there's been plenty to smile about this week.

We smile because we're proud of ourselves and what we've accomplished. But we have to remember to capture that feeling and take it home with us. Because these Games shouldn't end when you get back home. The Games are just one step in the rehab process. They're about healing our bodies and our minds. The biggest take-away for me is the importance of setting goals, making a plan and sticking with it. Whether it's starting a business, landing a job, quitting smoking, or setting a personal best on the bench press – goals keep

us moving. And when we're moving, we focus on what we can do, not what we can't.

That's the idea behind our new office motto – Mission ReDefined. We are going to redefine how we engage Veterans in adaptive sports. And it is our hope that along the way, you will redefine your objectives and potential. One of the ways we want to do this is through adaptive sport programs in your communities. This way, you can take that feeling of accomplishment back home and build it even further.

Our website has all the tools and resources you'll need, whether you're a Veteran, family member, or VA staff: <http://www.va.gov/adaptivesports/>. One feature on our Web site is a national sport club finder. This is a tool that all Veterans can use regardless of age or ability. Just type in your zip code and it will generate a list of adaptive sport programs in your community. If nothing comes up through the website, let me know by e-mailing mike.welch5@va.gov and we'll see what other resources are available.

As the Games come to a close, I ask each Veteran to take a moment to think about what you've done here – all that you've accomplished – and find a way to keep it going once you get home. To our partners at the Paralyzed Veterans of America and our hosts here at the Richmond VA Medical Center—thank you for your dedication to serving Veterans. You are the ones that motivate and encourage Veterans on a daily basis. If you are interested in starting an adaptive sport clinic at your facility, contact my office via e-mail vacoadaptiveSP@va.gov for information and resources.

Semper Fidelis

Christopher J. Nowak, National Director, VA Office of National Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events

