

Athlete Profile (National)

Amy Riter – Proof Positive!

Amy Riter feels the weight of her words as they roll off her tongue: “There’s more to life than just sitting in this chair,” she says, allowing each syllable to rumble like a determined chant that courses through her veins, flowing from her mouth and dissipating into the open air. She says these words with a quiver in her voice; she says these words with uncertainty, but also unrelenting hope. Riter longs to put substance behind her words, make them more than something she just says. Faced with a new reality of life as a paraplegic, she realizes her words require action. Now, her wheelchair will become much more than her fate; it will become a key component to her success as an athlete competing in the 28th National Veterans Wheelchair Games. The most important factor that will contribute to Riter’s success at the Games, and in the future, is her strong resolve to embrace life and inspire others.



“Everything has changed,” she says. “Every bit of my life is different. My six-year-old son doesn’t understand. He still wants mommy to get up and play with him like before, and that’s hard.” Riter, 33, also has a two-year-old daughter. “I want to be an inspiration to my kids. I want them to know that this isn’t the end of my life, it’s just another chapter.”

Riter, who lives in Canton, Ohio and receives treatment at the VA medical facility in Cleveland, credits her tough skin on her experience as a woman in the armed forces. She served in the Navy as a machinist mate (mechanic) during Desert Storm from 1994-96. “Being a woman in the military is a wonderful experience,” she says. “It is really empowering to work with the best.” At the Wheelchair Games, taking place in late July 2008 in Omaha, Nebraska, she will again be among the best. Last year, more than 500 veterans with disabilities participated in the event, the largest annual wheelchair sports competition in the world. Although she now looks forward to going for the gold in Omaha, she nearly passed up the opportunity initially.

“I was hesitant at first,” she says. “I’m not around a lot of people in wheelchairs every day and I’m newly injured.” Riter was introduced to the Games by a recreation therapy staffer at the Cleveland facility where she participates in therapy activities. She was also encouraged by Holly Koester, an Army veteran also from Ohio and a gold medal athlete who has an 18-year history at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

Riter is making a bold entrance into the world of sports. For her first wheelchair competition, has chosen weightlifting, bowling, air guns, and two field events, shot-put and discus. For her, the camaraderie is equally important to the competition. “I never really did sports before my injury, so we’ll see,” she says. “You can either get out there and do something in your wheelchair, or you can succumb to it – and that’s never an option.” A few more words Amy Riter intends to prove at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Omaha this summer.