



Athlete Profile (National)

Holly Koester — Teaching Others Makes A Difference!

In August 1990, Holly Sue Koester, now 46, of the Cleveland suburb of Walton Hills, was involved in a car accident while driving on a temporary road on her way to Red Stone Arsenal. As a result, the then 30-year-old Army captain suffered a spinal-cord injury that paralyzed her from the waist down. She was hospitalized at the Cleveland, Ohio, VA Medical Center, where she learned to face life using a wheelchair. It was there that she learned about the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

"When they told me I would never walk again, I really didn't know what to think," said Koester. "I didn't think I could do anything. Then I just saw some of the other guys and they would come into my room and show me how easy it was to get into the chair and get back into life. I have to credit the guys at the hospital where I was recuperating. They showed me everything they could do – and I said, 'if they can do it, I can too.'"

"Sports had always been a big part of my life, but I figured I would just be sitting on the sidelines watching everybody else play while I cheered them on. Then, two of the therapists at the VA hospital got me involved in sports. I had only been using a chair for six months when I first competed in the Games."

At her first Wheelchair Games in 1991, Koester proved to herself that she still was an athlete in every sense of the word, winning two gold and two silver medals. Now, she has improved that record and typically wins gold medals in just about every event she enters, such as track, weightlifting, slalom, air guns, 9-ball and others.

The determination Koester displayed during her first National Veterans Wheelchair Games matched her winning spirit at the 1996 Games, where she earned the cherished Spirit of the Games Award. Each year this award is given to one athlete who most epitomizes the qualities of a true champion: athletic excellence, sportsmanship and strength of character.

In the years since then, life has improved a lot for Holly Koester. She received her certification to teach grades K-8, and enjoys teaching children to not be intimidated by people who use wheelchairs. In addition to teaching local children in two Ohio school systems, she is the sports director for her Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) Buckeye chapter in Cleveland. She was an Olympic torchbearer and volunteered at the 1996 Paralympics in Atlanta, and she was active in the planning of the 2002 event in Cleveland. To her, the most important thing she has done these last few years has been reaching out to newly injured people who are still going through rehabilitation.

"I think if we don't get them when they're newly injured, they end up lying around and often become hermits. We (the PVA Buckeye Chapter and local VA therapists) try to get them out there and get them educated," she said. "I tell them, 'you have to be here (at the Games)...you have to go and hear the cheering, and do it for *yourself!*' We all want to be productive, and these Games encourage you."