

2011 Warrior Games: The Healing Power of Sports

By Capt. Bernie Carter, director of Navy Safe Harbor

For good reason, physical health is an essential requirement for service in the armed forces. A key tenant of Total Force Fitness, it is absolutely crucial to ensuring military readiness.

Naturally, physical activity plays a significant role in service members' everyday lives. Indeed, it often is a vital part of their personal identities. From their first days in the military until the conclusion of their service, they are expected to remain strong and fit.

But, when they become ill or injured, many service members fear their days of athletic accomplishment are behind them. In addition to losing some of their physical abilities and freedoms, many also lose their sense of self.

That's why adaptive sports – activities modified to meet the abilities of injured or ill individuals – are so important to wounded warrior care. Adaptive sports are proven to have positive and lasting effects on recovering service members' physical and emotional well-being.

Studies shows the benefits of adaptive sports are many: higher self esteem, lower stress levels, fewer secondary medical conditions, increased pursuit of higher education, and improved employment opportunities. Therefore, all enrollees in the Navy Safe Harbor program are encouraged to include athletics in their recovery and rehabilitation plans.

No venue showcases the significance of adaptive sports quite like the Warrior Games. The 2011 Games will bring together 220 active-duty service members and military veterans from all branches of service, fostering camaraderie and a healthy competitive spirit. This evening's Opening Ceremonies will kick off the week-long competition.

Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Tyler Burdick, a new member of Team Navy/Coast Guard, says of the Warrior Games: "It's great to see injured guys come together, share their stories, and get active. Despite their diagnoses, they are leading normal lives; in some ways, their lives are richer than they were before."

Though Petty Officer Burdick was injured in theater less than a year ago, he is competing in swimming and shooting events during the Games. And, while he faces a challenging recovery, he is eager to grow as an athlete.

Retired Culinary Specialist 2nd Class Richard Miller, also a new member of Team Navy/Coast Guard, agrees: "I used to be a marathon runner; after I got sick, I thought those days were gone. At the Warrior Games, I see people going through what I'm going through – or worse. They remind me to get up and compete, and that tomorrow is another day."

Miller's words seem to say it all. Adaptive sports, and events like the Warrior Games, have the power to heal – not just the body, but the mind and soul as well.

Team Navy/Coast Guard is sponsored by Navy Safe Harbor, the lead organization for coordinating the non-medical care of wounded, ill and injured Sailors, Coast guardsmen and their families. Through proactive leadership, Safe Harbor provides a lifetime of individually tailored assistance designed to optimize the success of enrollees' recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration activities.