

An Army of World Class Athletes

In it to WIN

By Stephanie Sanchez

Their mission is different, but the mentality is the same – to win.

Unlike Soldiers concentrating on fighting two wars, a group of more than 80 Soldiers nationwide focus on representing the United States and U.S. Army in international sport competitions. Their ultimate goal: to compete in the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics in London.

The Soldiers are assigned to the World Class Athlete Program, which was started in 1997. Since its inception, 40 Soldiers have represented the United States at the summer and winter Olympic Games. At least 615 Soldier-athletes and -coaches have participated in the Olympics since 1948, according to the WCAP website.

Biathlete Sgt. Jeremy Teela; bobsledders Sgt. John Napier, 1st Lt. Chris Fogt, Sgt. Mike Kohn and Sgt. Shauna Rohbock; and former Army National Guardsman Steven Holcomb competed in the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada. Alongside the Soldier-athletes was five-time Olympian Sgt. Bill Tavares, now an assistant bobsledding coach.

After winning gold and bronze medals, the athletes immediately returned to their sports training, said 1st Sgt. Christopher L. Button, the senior enlisted advisor with WCAP.

The program is very competitive. Each Soldier maintains an intense discipline, working out at least twice a day yearlong and sustaining a strict diet. Some athletes eat up to 7,000 calories a day.



Sgt. 1st Class Dremiel Byers, a heavyweight Greco-Roman wrestler in the blue and black bodysuit, competes against his opponent.

Courtesy photo

“I can honestly say the mentality of Soldiers here is that there is no second place – they’re here to win. They have Type A personalities and are very driven. They’re very driven toward succeeding,” said Button, who has been with the program for two years. “They realize what they’re doing [here], and they have a great opportunity to train and represent the United States and the Army.”

For every Soldier in the program, there are 10 others applying to get in, he said.

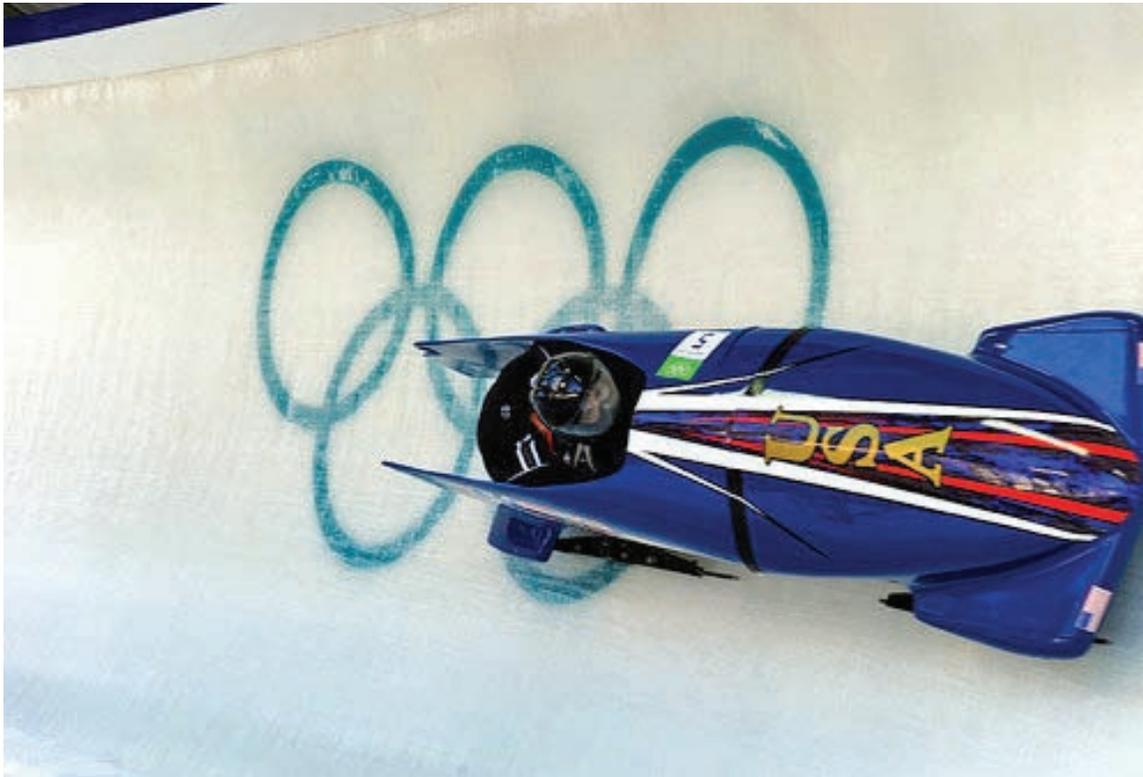
To be considered, Soldiers must have completed Individual Entry Training and must be in good military standing. The Soldier must also play an Olympic sport. Reservists and Guardsmen can apply but must go on active duty. There is also an age limit of 34.

Soldiers in the program can be called to deploy at anytime.

Each Soldier in the program dedicates his or her life to archery, bobsledding, boxing, fencing, shooting, tae kwon do, wrestling, Paralympic volleyball, handball or track and field. There are also biathlon and modern pentathlon athletes.

Many people know little about the program, and some have a misconception that the Soldiers only play sports all day, he said. But much more goes into being part of WCAP, he added.

Soldiers in WCAP, Button said, train as hard as other Soldiers. “One of the only differences is when my Soldiers don’t win, they have the opportunity to come back another time. As opposed to if someone is out in combat, if they don’t win, people die,” he said.



World Class Athlete Program bobsledders compete in the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada. Soldier-athletes participating in the Olympics were biathlete Sgt. Jeremy Teela; and bobsledders Sgt. John Napier, 1st Lt. Chris Fogt, Sgt. Mike Kohn and Sgt. Shauna Rohbock. Former Army National Guardsman Steven Holcomb, a longtime World Class Athlete Program Soldier, also competed.
Courtesy photo

For some of the Soldier-athletes, the passion for their sport started in childhood.

Sgt. 1st Class Mike Prieditis, a nationally ranked judo athlete, has been training in the martial art for 30 years.

“My parents kind of pushed me into martial arts because I was kind of a klutzy kid. They thought maybe that would give a little bit of grace. I don’t think it really worked; I’m still a klutzy kid,” he said jokingly. Judo “is really part of my life. I’ve been doing judo longer than I’ve been doing anything, except breathing.”

Prieditis, who has been with WCAP for seven years throughout his military career, said he enjoys the contact and competition of the sport.

“I have three children, a wife, a house, a lawn and all those things. I try to work all those things in there, as well as my training, to get myself prepared.”

Judo is similar to jiu-jitsu. Throughout a match, competitors throw, choke, pin and arm-lock their opponents. The goal of the sport is to throw a person down on their back, choke the person until they tap-out or pass out, or hold the person in an armlock until they tap-out.

At times, Prieditis, who is 6 feet 4 inches tall and weighs 250 pounds, competes against 300-pound men. But the weight difference doesn’t hold him back; he has mastered throwing his opponents.

“Almost everybody is bigger than me,” he said. “If I make one mistake with a guy like that [weighing 300 pounds], he’s just going to lie on top of me and pin me. It’s really hard to get a 300-pound guy off you.”

Each week, Prieditis goes to the gym two to five times to do

an explosive cardio workout or lift heavy weights. He also practices judo four or five nights a week. He is consuming between 6,000 and 7,000 calories a day to increase his weight from 250 to 270 pounds, so he can be more competitive in the heavyweight category of judo.

After his weekly routine, Prieditis said, “There is not much gas left in the tank. It’s a pretty demanding schedule.”

Sgt. 1st Class Edward O’Neil, a Paralympic volleyball player, said he trains two to three hours, five days a week. He wakes up at 5:30 a.m. every weekday for volleyball practice, takes a lunch break and then does cardio and weightlifting.

O’Neil, who had his left leg amputated after being injured by a roadside bomb in Iraq on May 25, 2008, has a prosthetic leg that helps him run, cycle and swim.

After his strenuous training, O’Neil said, “I have all the other things going on in my life as well: I have three children, a wife, a house, a lawn and all those things. I try to work all those things in there, as well as my training, to get myself prepared.”

O’Neil started playing volleyball in high school in 1985. He played on the school team for about three years, and then played recreationally.

“I’m 40 years old, and when I was in high school or junior high ... the U.S. [Olympic] teams had a lasting impression on me. I always thought it would be great to go to the Olympics. But, realistically, I’m only about 5 feet 9 inches, and I didn’t think I was tall enough or a good enough athlete,” said O’Neil, who has been with WCAP for one year. “I undermined my own efforts to ever possibly make it to that level.”

Being in WCAP, O’Neil said, has helped him grow as an athlete. He said he has progressed at a faster rate because he is able



to focus solely on his sport.

For athletes aspiring to get into WCAP, O'Neil suggests they participate in as many competitions as they can and strive to make a name for themselves.

The program, he said, helped him through his recovery.

"After I was wounded, I didn't know where my career was going or if I was going to be able to stay in the Army," he said. "The World Class Athlete Program has given me a direction to stay on track in my military career and, hopefully, represent my country in the 2012 Paralympics Games. That would be the cherry on top of my military career."

Competing in the Olympics has already been a dream come true for Sgt. 1st Class Dremiel Byers, a heavy-weight Greco-Roman wrestler. He was a 2008 Olympian in Beijing.

Among his many accomplishments, Byers was named 2009 Greco-Roman Wrestler of Year by USA Wrestling. He previously won the award in 1999 and 2002. He also won a silver medal at the 2009 World Championships, along with a gold medal in 2002 and a bronze medal in 2007 at the same competition.

In a feature series on the Army website, he said the Army "will have to kick me out twice. The Army allows you to dream big, and I'm proud to be part of it."

Byers, who has been with WCAP for 13 years, didn't always know about Greco-Roman wrestling. He said he heard about the sport in 1996 when he competed in the All-Army Wrestling Trials.

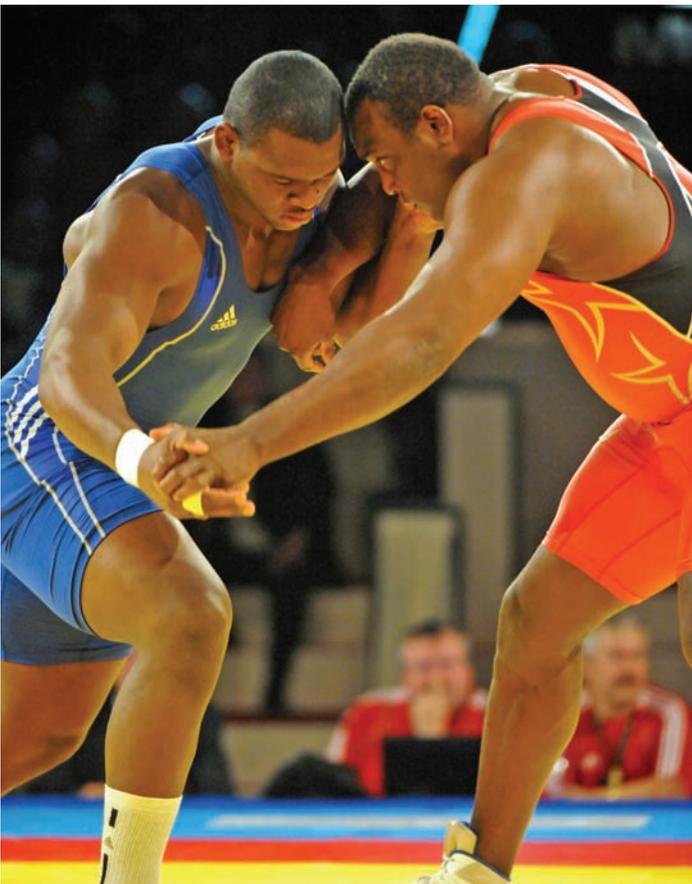
"I wrestled in high school. I entered my first tournament [outside of high school] at Fort Lewis, Wash., in 1995. I won the post tournament, and the right people saw me wrestle that day," he said. "They decided it would be a good idea for me to go to the All-Army Wrestling Trials. ... From there, well, that was it."

Greco-Roman wrestling involves just the upper body; competitors are not allowed to touch their opponent's legs. The higher and harder you throw your opponent, the more points you receive. If the person lands in a potentially dangerous position, such as on the neck or the bridge of the shoulders, the thrower wins.

To prepare for competitions, Byers does a lot of cross-training. He said he likes to compete in as many competitions as possible to get to know his opponents and their techniques.

"Once you find out you're good at something like [a sport], you want to know just how good you are at it. I think to be the best in the world at anything says a whole lot about your ability," he said. "A lot of people are good at something, but they never get a chance to prove it. I'm very fortunate to have this opportunity to do so." 📺

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Courtesy photos

Top: Spc. Carrie Barry, a World Class Athlete Program boxer, wins the bronze medal in the women's lightweight division of the 2010 U.S. National Boxing Championships. Bottom: Byers, in the red and black bodysuit, competes against his opponent.