

Warrior Games

In the military, there are many forms of courage. Men and women recovering from combat-related injuries, mental illnesses and other disabilities displayed their courage while competing in Olympic-style games.

Story and photos by Stephanie Sanchez

Lilina Benning slowly walked to the black line. Her soft stare quickly turned into an intense gaze; her face became firm and her body stiff.

She stood in her stance – legs shoulder-length apart and upper body turned forward. She gradually lifted her bow, which was almost as tall as she is, and drew the bowstring. After fixing her eye on the target, she waited a few seconds then released the arrow.

More than 10 people also stood at the black line on both sides of Benning. They, too, released their arrows toward their targets about 100 feet across the gymnasium.

None of them knew their final score, but they were all winners in their own right. They were service members conquering combat-related injuries, mental disabilities and other chronic illnesses.

About 200 men and women from four military services were pitted against each other in May at the inaugural Warrior Games at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo. They competed in archery, sitting volleyball, wheelchair basketball, shooting, swimming, cycling, and track and field. The message behind the five-day event was massive: life continues after traumatic, life-altering experiences.

Benning, a sergeant at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, lost her left foot and underwent several surgeries to repair her badly wounded right arm after being injured

Sept. 11, 2007. In between events at the Warrior Games, she vividly described what led to her injuries.

“I was driving my sergeant major from our camp to another camp [in Iraq]. We were still inside the wire; we didn’t go outside the wire,” she said in a quiet voice as she looked down. “We were already in the parking lot. We were close to the part where you say, ‘Mission accomplished.’ ... Then, all of a sudden, ‘Boom.’”

A rocket, propelled from outside the camp, landed behind Benning’s non-tactical vehicle and splattered shrapnel. Some of the shell fragments spilled into the vehicle, wounding Benning and her sergeant major. Several bystanders were also sprayed.

“I had to get my left foot amputated, and my right arm was injured. I have a lot of wires, plates and about 20 screws holding [my arm] in place. It can’t stay in place alone anymore. There is a lot of nerve damage and ruptured muscles,” she said as she grabbed her arm. “There was pain, but we have meds for it. I was just kind of upset because I thought, ‘Oh, I won’t be able to run or play sports.’”

An avid athlete, Benning doubted she would be able to continue participating in sports. She said her family and friends would jokingly tell her they would now play against her because she wouldn’t be as good as she used to be.

Those words served as motivation, and she made it a goal to prove her family





Far left, Soldiers walk out during the opening ceremony of the inaugural Warrior Games in Colorado Springs, Colo., in May. Near left, torchbearers from the Navy, Army, Marine Corps and Air Force stand in front of the U.S. Olympic Training Center. They were chosen to represent their services because of their leadership and dedication.



Gold, silver and bronze medals were awarded to service members winning competitions in sitting volleyball, wheelchair basketball, shooting, archery, cycling, swimming and track and field.

and friends wrong.

“It took me a while to start moving a lot and start being active,” she said. “The goal is thinking that I still can. I just have to keep moving and doing what I have to do. My injuries didn’t put an end to my life. I can still do everything I want, regardless. So I pushed myself to play in all of these games.”

In addition to archery, Benning competed in sitting volleyball and the shot put. Archery and the shot put were new experiences for her, and she dedicated countless hours to practicing. She even practiced while her husband, Marvin, a Soldier deployed in Afghanistan, was home on leave. The practice paid off – Benning won a bronze medal in the women’s shot put division.

For Staff Sgt. Curtis Winston of Fort Belvoir, Va., it only took a month of practice to master recurve archery. He won a silver medal in the sport.

“I picked this up about a month ago,” he said after receiving his medal. “I’m very excited. I came here with extremely low expectations, and I didn’t think I was going to do anything. But I finished second.”

Winston, who also competed in wheelchair basketball, said the games reinforce the idea that Soldiers “can push forward and keep moving” after being wounded in war.

Winston was injured by a roadside bomb in Iraq in June 2007. He suffered



Sgt. Lilina Benning of Fort Sam Houston, Texas, competes in the shot put. She won a bronze medal.



Sgt. Kisha Makerney of Fort Sam Houston, Texas, attempts to block the volleyball.



Sgt. David Bratton of Fort Drum, N.Y., prepares for the air rifle shooting competition. He won a gold medal.

multiple microfractures in his left leg and fractured his right hand. After three years, he must still do physical therapy.

“Before my injury, I was a real active Soldier. It was just the fact of trying to get back into physical activities that was difficult,” he said. “But there is a light at the end of the path. You have to just keep moving forward with your life and not get down about what you’re going through right now. I got down for a while, and then I figured I’m going to make what I can with my life.”

Being around people such as Winston and Benning at the Warrior Games has helped Staff Sgt. Ryan Turner of Fort Bliss, Texas. He said bringing together service members with similar experiences helps with recovery and boosts confidence.

Turner, who competed in track and field events, began suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep apnea and a dislocated shoulder after being deployed in Iraq. He cannot lift more than 10 pounds.

“To compete with all the other branches and meet everybody who has been wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan is good,” he said. “I believe [the Warrior Games] will help service members. We trained together, so it brought a lot of team cohesion. Even though we’re in different branches, everyone was the same. We all fight the same war and train the same

way. I think it will help in the recovery process.”

Turner has gone through many physical therapy sessions, and said in the worst-case scenario, he will be medically retired. Leaving the Army would be a disappointment for Turner, who always knew he wanted to be in the military to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather and father.

Spc. Ronald Kapture of Fort Bliss said being medically retired is a disheartening reality for him, but participating in the Warrior Games lifted his morale.

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“It was really big for me. ... For a while there, I was [depressed] because everything I’ve known and done for X-amount of years, I’m losing,” he said. “I’m getting medically retired from the Army. I was upset because I didn’t want to get out. I wanted to stay in and keep going.”

Kapture, who participated in track and field events, swimming and sitting volleyball, said the Warrior Games and his NCO, Staff Sgt. Gabriel Rios, have helped him cope with leaving the Army. Kapture was

diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury after suffering numerous concussions during two 15-month tours in Iraq.

He said he plans to move to New Orleans to get involved in oil drilling. His dream is to one day start a charity that will assist wounded service members who are medically retired.

“For a lot of guys, once they lose the Army, they feel like they’ve lost themselves and their livelihood,” he said.

First Sgt. Robert Strunk said the Army has transformed his life and is a major part of his identity. He said he joined the late-entry program at 17 years old and became an infantryman.

“It was a whole new experience for me. I had been – I wouldn’t say sheltered – but just from a very small town. We had one high school in our county, and we graduated 150 people the year I graduated,” said Strunk, who has been assigned to Buckley Air Force Base, Colo., to recover closer to family. “The Army has been real good to me. It has pretty much given me everything I have in my life. I think I’ve been pretty successful just on my path of learning and education. I really attribute 90 percent to the Army – the values it has taught me and the guidance it has given me.”

Strunk said his Army career was going well until he suffered a painful shoulder separation and tore a ligament in his



Army team member Sgt. 1st Class Jacque Keeslar of the Balboa Warrior Athlete Program at Naval Medical Center San Diego attempts to make a shot during wheelchair basketball. Sailors play defense.

foot. He said the injuries happened during training in December 2008 in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.

“We were doing a helicopter exit, and I was carrying a lot of weight on me. ... As I came out, I ended up tearing scarred tissue. I didn’t know that at the time. We had done the practice and stuff, and it was just kind of hurting. But I thought, ‘No big deal,’” he said. “Because I went in really hard, I also twisted my ankle. Again, I thought, ‘No big deal.’”

After completing the training, Strunk visited Army doctors in Afghanistan. But they told him he needed X-rays to determine how severe his injuries were. Strunk refused to end his tour early.

About a month later, he returned to the United States and learned he had completely separated his collarbone; the bone was splitting lengthwise. He also had torn a ligament in his left foot.

When asked how his recovery has been, Strunk said “It has been really hard. My entire military career has been [active].”

As an NCO, he said he always worried about his Soldiers and their problems. Not having Soldiers, he said, has allowed him too much time to focus on his disabilities, which has dampened his spirits.

“There were a couple of months that were really dark for me. I spoke to professionals, and I had a great family and friend

“Sports helped me, and kept me in [the Army]. They got me back outside in the public again. I find them beneficial for some of these warriors.”

support base. ... I, however, wondered if I would ever get back to that place where I could still jump out of helicopters and airplanes, and be a Soldier like I’ve always been. That’s a huge defining characteristic of who I am,” he said. “In a dark and depressing time, I know I have some problems and disabilities, and I may never be 100 percent. But, to see some of these young men and women, who are amputees, have traumatic brain injuries and PTSD, is humbling. It’s a very humbling experience to see that and to see them out here competing and doing these things. It really lifts your spirits.”

The Warrior Games, he said, give wounded Soldiers the opportunity to surround themselves with people who have similar disabilities.

“I’ve always been a proponent of enlisted – the NCO – and officer categories, but this creates a new component or subgroup in the military culture,” said Strunk, who competed in prone rifle and pistol shooting. The games “give wounded warriors the chance to get out there and understand one another’s experiences, sit

down and talk to each other, then share this [experience] with somebody else or several other people. We’re able to put it in perspective and find the tools others are using to succeed and continue, hopefully, in their military careers.”

Sgt. Robert Price, who carried the Olympic torch during the opening ceremony, said the games were important for him because sports were a big part of his recovery. Price lost his right leg when he was clearing a route in Iraq in January 2007.

“Sports helped me, and kept me in [the Army]. They got me back outside in the public again. I find them beneficial for some of these warriors. Many of them just sit around in their barracks and don’t do anything,” said Price, who competed in shooting, sitting volleyball, archery and track and field events. “I tried to get them motivated to come do something that is going to be beneficial for them [his comrades], either out in the civilian market or in their military careers.”

The Warrior Games, he said, give wounded Soldiers a chance to test their abilities. That is why he rallied Soldiers at his Warrior Transition Battalion and got them motivated to participate in the games.

“This brings Soldiers out of their shells and gets them out there. I’m living, walking proof that life doesn’t end at that

point” after your injury, he said. “You can always get up and move on and carry out your mission one way or another.”

Sgt. Maj. Ly M. Lac, senior enlisted advisor of the Warrior Transition Command, the office that created the Warrior Games, said he chose Price to carry the Olympic torch because of Price’s leadership and achievement.

Soon after his leg amputation, Price set a goal to walk his daughter to school within a few months. So, he went through physical therapy and did walk his daughter to school, Lac said. Then, Price set a goal to pick up a hobby; and within a few months, he was an indoor champion in archery.

“He then said, ‘I want to take a PT test with no alternate event.’ You know, as an amputee, you have to learn how to run again. They said he barely passed his PT test, but he passed without any alternate event,” Lac said. “The guy is just phenomenal. The guy knows his injury, overcame it, set some goals and achieved those goals. Junior NCOs need to follow in his footsteps.”

Active wounded Soldiers seem to recover faster, Lac said. He said Soldiers should think about their abilities instead of disabilities.

“We have seen physically fit Soldiers go through the rehab process quicker because they are fit. Therefore, I think this event will instill the ability to overcome the injury or illness, and aggressively go through rehab,” he said. “The purpose of this event ... is to bring the spirit back to the organization, the warrior transition units, and to develop an infectious disease of athletic competition and challenge Soldiers both physically and mentally.”

As of April, there were more than

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9,600 recovering Soldiers in warrior transition units, and about 6,500 wounded veterans in the Army Wounded Warriors Program, Lac said. He said the military works to place rehabilitating Soldiers back into the Army and in jobs they are able to perform. The program also helps Soldiers transition back into civilian life by helping them find a job or get into school.

Of the active-duty Soldiers in rehab,

about 50 percent have returned to duty and the other 50 percent have been medically separated since the war began, Lac said.

“The key thing is trying to get these Soldiers to do whatever they want to do. If they are fit and mentally and physically tough, we’re going to help them transition back into the Army. ... They can stay in if they want to,” he said.

“Leaders always think about their Soldiers; they think about not being able to lead their group or individuals into combat. They think, ‘Do I have the ability and mental toughness to lead my Soldier through combat without putting them at risk?’ If they can do that, they will stay in. But if they think they’re going to put their Soldier at risk, they are obviously going to tell [their superiors they want to get out]. ... These Warrior Games gives them the ability, a kind of check-and-balance, and that perspective to say, ‘Wow, I didn’t think I could bike 60, 70 miles. I didn’t think I could swim 800 meters.’ This gives them the ability to see where they are and gives them a focus of where they need to be.” 

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This page, the Army basketball team rallies after being defeated by the Marines in the championship game. The Army was awarded the silver medal. Opposite page, Warrant Officer Johnathan Holsey and Navy Master Chief Petty Officer Will Wilson, who are leg amputees, comfort Sgt. Monica Southall after helping her finish the handcycle race. Southall suffers from torn rotator cuffs and had never handcycled.



