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FEATURE-Olympics-War vets thriving in Paralympic field of battle

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By [Verna Gates](#)

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama, Aug 2 (Reuters) - When U.S. soldier Scott Winkler was deployed in Iraq, he never imagined a freak accident would leave him paralysed or that he would fight back to represent his country in a new venue -- the Paralympic Games.

Winkler, 35, is now a world class shot putter in his category of disability and is to compete at Beijing.

It is a far cry from the hopelessness and pain he felt the day a case of ammunition fell on him while he unloaded a truck north of Baghdad in 2003, leaving him a quadriplegic with no movement from the chest down.

Winkler was one of hundreds of athletes training at the Lakeshore Foundation, a civilian rehabilitation centre near Birmingham, Alabama, with the hope of one day winning gold at the Paralympic Games.

Twelve of the 206 athletes on the U.S. team for the Paralympics are military veterans. Three of those were injured in Iraq.

Their stories trace the despair that comes with the loss of limbs for veterans and the determination they have found to use sport as a means to rebuild their lives.

"I fought for my country. Now I win for it," said former army specialist Winkler. "It's a great honor."

Winkler spent years in rehabilitation and first arrived in 2006 at Lakeshore, an official Olympic training site for able-bodied and disabled athletes.

In high school, he had competed as a sprinter and a long jumper but at Lakeshore he excelled in throwing sports he had never tried before such as shot put, discus and javelin.

"If you believe, you can achieve," said Winkler, who was in June categorized in a class in which it will be more difficult for him to compete when Olympic evaluators found that a tiny abdominal muscle worked.

Winkler is only able to throw with his pectoral muscles and arms and argues that he set a world record at his new class at the trials because of superior determination.

"No matter what they put me to, I am going to come at it my hardest," said Winkler.

DIVING ACCIDENT

Winkler trains at Lakeshore with Carlos Leon, a former Marine and Iraq veteran, who throws a shot put from a specially-designed stand at the gym.

Leon, 23, can stand and has some feeling and motion in his arms and is thus termed an "incomplete" quadriplegic. He lives at Lakeshore and trains full time.

Leon returned from two years in Iraq in 2006 to an assignment in Hawaii and broke his neck in a diving accident six weeks later. He is medically retired from the Marine Corps.

To secure his spot on the U.S. team, he set a new world record in the discus of 22.04 metres at his disability class. He had already won silver in the discus and bronze in the shot put in the Pan American Paralympic Games.

"I came to Lakeshore six months after my accident to participate in a sports camp I discovered sports give you hope and a confidence that doctors and medications can never give," said Leon.

Winkler and Leon compete in different classes of disability but they both work in a sports mentoring program for Iraqi veterans sponsored by the U.S. Olympic Committee.

Noah Galloway lost an arm and a leg in a roadside bomb in Iraq in December 2005 and is now working his way toward Paralympic marathons and triathlons.

"I remember everything to the point of the explosion," said Galloway, describing a village, a setting sun and something black moving fast through the bushes after he hit a tripwire on a road south of Baghdad.

Without an elbow, Galloway can no longer weight lift, his preferred sport, but enjoys challenging able-bodied friends to a race on his prosthetic leg, which ends in a C-shaped spring.

"If I could just get the other leg to keep up," Galloway joked, a first-timer who is not going to Beijing.

(Writing by Matthew Bigg, Eediting by Miles Evans in Beijing)

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