



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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By Anna Eisenberg
Warrior Transition Command

No lesson needed on determination and heart in wheelchair basketball semi-finals

West Point, New York—“This coach is blowing the whistle like he’s in a parade!” screamed one fan to the right. “Let the athletes play!” came from the left. The crowd packed in close to the net, feeding off of the athletes’ energy. Intensity, emotion ran high. At the end of the night, Army team A reined victorious with a 30-10 point win against the Marines, and Air Force beat out Army team B 33-26. Army team A meets the Air Force tonight (June 17) in the wheelchair basketball finals at the 2014 U.S. Army Warrior Trials.

One of the athletes who helped Army team A roll triumphant is Sgt. 1st Class Jermeka Johnson, who discovered wheelchair basketball while recovering at a Warrior Transition Unit (WTU) at Fort Benning, Georgia. He played for Army team B in the preliminaries, but after watching his performance on Monday night his coaches decided to move him to team A.

“I am proud I got to play on team A tonight,” said Johnson. “Wheelchair basketball is a great adaptive sport. Because of my conditions, I wasn’t able to continue to run. Wheelchair basketball helps me to continue to play and also get in some great upper body work,” he added.

Army team A coach Jermell Pennie, a professional wheelchair basketball player and Paralympian, decided on the strategic move. He is creating his all-star team for September’s Warrior Games—the Department of Defense-wide sports competition for wounded, ill and injured service members.

“I am absolutely inspired by these athletes,” said Pennie, who has used a wheelchair since age five and does not remember life before his injury. “Each of these Soldiers finds their outlet in sports. I told them to step it up and bring their game tonight. I am proud of them.”

Air Force assistant coach Mo Phillips, Jr., has been involved with disabled sports for 40 years. Of working with wounded, ill and injured service-members, Phillips said “this is the greatest group I’ve worked with in a long time. For them to come in and compete with the tenacity that they do is the most amazing thing I’ve witnessed.”

Just as coaches double as fans, Family members do as well. Mary and Steven Kohnke were in last night’s crowd cheering on their son Cpl. Kyle Kohnke, active duty U.S. Marine. “We’re really proud of him,” said Mrs. Kohnke. “It’s nice to know that people they don’t even know still care,” she added, of her support of the other teams. “We’re really excited he gets to do this. I think sports have helped him recover.”

Last week’s practice week was all about fundamentals. The coaches worked with the wheelchair basketball players teaching rules, regulations, tips and tricks. What the athletes continue to prove during competition week: no lesson needed on determination and heart.

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CUTLINE: Team Army coach Jermell Pennie talks strategy to his military athletes during wheelchair basketball competition June 17 during the 2014 U.S. Army Warrior Trials at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y. The Army team beat the Marines by 20 points and will next compete against Team Air Force in the battle for the gold during the double elimination wheelchair basketball competition. More than 100 Army, Marine Corps and Air Force athletes are competing in archery, cycling, shooting, sitting volleyball, swimming, track and field and wheelchair basketball tournaments during the Army Warrior Trials, June 15-20, hosted by Army Warrior Transition Command. (U.S. Army photo by Gloria Montgomery)

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Warrior Transition Command (WTC) is a major subordinate command under the U.S. Army Medical Command (MEDCOM). WTC's mission is to develop, coordinate and integrate the Army's Warrior Care and Transition Program (WCTP) for wounded, ill and injured soldiers, veterans and their families. For more information on WTC, visit the new WTC website, www.WTC.army.mil, follow on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/armyWTC> or join Facebook at <http://facebook.com/armyWTC>.

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