

Fort Eustis Warrior in Transition to compete at first-ever Warrior Games

By Monica Miller Rodgers

“A regular walk around Wal-Mart is like a PT (physical training) test for me,” he said explaining how undergoing rehabilitation for his amputated right leg is harder than a normal day of work.

Sgt. Daniel Lopez, a Warrior in Transition assigned to the Fort Eustis Warrior Transition Unit, was home for nine days in 2006 after finishing a tour of duty in Iraq when he stopped to change a flat tire on his car. What the Long Island, N.Y., native had avoided in Iraq for 15 months, he sustained on a New Jersey highway when he was struck by an out-of-control vehicle. Lopez’s right leg from mid-thigh down was mangled and after 21 surgeries was amputated.

A former member of the 396th Harbor Master, 11th Transportation Battalion, 7th Sustainment Brigade, Lopez joined the WTU in July 2008 to begin learning how to live without his leg.

“He is one of the hardest-working WTs I have seen focused on his rehabilitation,” said Capt. Don Little, WTU commander. “He is constantly at the gym or the pool; his determination is unbelievable.”

When the first-ever Warrior Games was announced in January, Little thought Lopez would be a perfect candidate. The Warrior Games, a sports competition for wounded servicemembers hosted by the U.S. Olympic Committee, will be in Colorado Springs, Colo., from May 10 to 14. Events include shooting, swimming, archery, track

and field, cycling, volleyball, and basketball. The Warrior Games athletes are classified into categories of injuries, including mental injuries like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and traumatic brain injuries.

Lopez submitted an application, which included a lengthy questionnaire about his strengths and weaknesses, to the U.S. Army Warrior Transition Command and the U.S. Olympic Committee. He was selected as one of the 100 Soldiers out of a pool of 9,000 wounded servicemembers to compete for the Army team. Another 100 servicemembers from the Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard will fill out the total competition of 200 athletes.

Lopez was chosen as the primary Army competitor to participate in the 50 meter backstroke and 10k bike ride using a hand bike, and he will also compete as a team member in the relay swim and sitting volleyball. He believes his best event will be the relay swim with his biggest weakness in the 10k bike ride.

Lopez started training on his own in February for his events, following a regiment he found online.

“My biggest worry is I might be at a disadvantage due to not having a trainer like the other (athletes) may have,” said Lopez. “My whole training has been on my own.”

During his training, Lopez started swimming laps each day at the Fort Eustis Anderson Field House or Aquatic Center. He caught the attention of some of the lifeguards on duty and they encouraged him to obtain his lifeguard certification. Lopez, now a certified lifeguard, is considering attending a lifeguard instructor class.

“To see somebody with his disability accomplishing what he is doing, it’s inspiring,” said Mark Zephir, a Fort Eustis lifeguard who has watched Lopez train at the pools. “He definitely grabs life by the horns.”

Even though Lopez doesn’t have a trainer, he does have a workout buddy - his 9-year-old son Daniel Lopez Jr. who is training for boxing.

“My motivation to compete is my son,” the senior Lopez said. “I want to show him, no matter what happens, you can do anything you want.”