

GET IN THE GAME

By Amy Keiter

Back about a year and a half ago, upon his return from a trade mission to British Columbia, Governor Kulongoski asked me to connect Oregon to the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games. Then, looking over the rims of his glasses and wagging his finger at me, he added, "And don't forget about the Paralympic Games. I want you to do something meaningful with the Paralympics."

The Paralympics were originally created fifty years ago in England as "parallel Olympics" for disabled veterans returning home from World War II. Today they run immediately after every Olympics games, and are open to disabled athletes from around the world.

With that very broad (unfunded) mandate, I set out to come up with a meaningful idea. "What if," I thought, "we could bring some of Oregon's disabled veterans to the Paralympics, to inspire them by showing them how people with similar disabilities were competing at the highest levels of sport." It seemed simple: raise some money, find some vets, and go.

It was NOT simple, but that's what the "Get a Vet in the Game" committee did: we raised more than \$100,000 and brought 30 veterans, each with a companion to the Paralympic Games two weeks ago in Vancouver.

Imagine my surprise when I learned that the Governor turned down the opportunity to attend the Olympics with all the bigwigs, and instead opted to take the seven-hour bus ride with my delegation to the Paralympics.

The many, many months of detailed and complex planning paid off. Our delegation was expedited through the Canadian border, and were honored at a "Three Nation Dinner" that included veterans from Canada and Great Britain, as well as our group of US veterans. (Incidentally, as far as we know, Oregon was the only state to have organized such a effort.)

In addition to Governor Kulongoski, the dinner was also attended by the US Ambassador to Canada, the Minister of Defense of Canada, the head of the Vancouver Olympic Organizing Committee, the Premier of British Columbia, the head coach of the gold-medal winning Canadian Olympic hockey team, and more rear admirals and brigadier generals than you could shake a stick at.

After dinner, the vets were invited onto the ice to try "sledge hockey" -- the Paralympic version of ice hockey. And yes, the Governor was on the ice too, on a sledge, playing goalie. That evening was the highlight for many on the trip -- the experience, the hilarity, the bonding that took place had all 60 of us grinning from ear to ear.

The next morning, we all turned out (in the rain) to support one of our own: Luke Wilson, of Hermiston. Luke lost a leg in Iraq, and was honored to be a torchbearer in the Paralympic Torch Relay. The Governor was also there to high-five Luke as he proudly received the torch from a Canadian (double amputee) vet and passed it to a British comrade.

That night was the Opening Ceremonies of the Paralympic Games, and we were all there to cheer wildly as more than 500 athletes from 44 nations paraded in, followed by a spectacular show with amazing audience participation.

We were all completely exhausted by the time we got back to the hotel for a pizza party. But we were up early the next morning to attend the first match of the sledge hockey competition, rooting for Canada as they shut out Italy, 4-0. Since the delegation had experienced firsthand how difficult the sport is, they'd become rabid fans of the game.

On our way home, we were hosted to a lunch by the Royal Canadian Legion, with a remembrance ceremony for fallen soldiers, and then we re-boarded the buses for an amazingly quick dash across the border and long ride back to Portland.

This mission was a wild success. I know because the vets have been hounding me to plan a similar trip for the London 2012 Paralympic Games. And I also know it was a success because it truly has had an impact on the vets. One of "my guys" spoke softly to me in the hotel lobby. A victim of an improvised explosive device, he has been in constant pain. "I haven't smiled in three years," he said with a small, but real, grin. He told me that the trip made him realize that he needed to get out of his box. "I loved being around all these people who understand what I've been through without having to talk about the war." Then he gave me a bracelet made of parachute cord that he got in Iraq.

The vets are already asking me to organize another trip -- to the London 2012 Paralympics Games. And I'm tempted to say yes.