Derrick Clark has been playing sports his whole life and doesn’t plan on stopping anytime soon.

However, the U.S. Navy veteran, who served on tours in both Afghanistan and Iraq, wasn’t always so sure of this. A recent accident during military training exercises in Georgia left him with a spinal-cord injury that his physician says could likely get worse with surgery.

Although not able to move for several days after the initial injury, Clark says he just kept trying to push through the pain once he could move.

“The military is so physical,” he says. “You don’t want to look like you’re not giving it your all, so a lot of times I was in pain, but didn’t tell anyone. I didn’t realize I was making myself worse.”

A Pittsburgh resident, Clark says even after returning home from training and receiving some treatment for the injury, it would get aggravated by things he had done easily before, like playing basketball with his 17-year-old son.

“Every father wants to get out there and play with his boy, and I noticed every time I would try to dunk a basketball or be a little too physical or run too much, I would be crawling up my steps once I got home that night,” he says. “My back would just be in so much pain.”

Clark shared this with his primary care provider because he was concerned and hoped there was something that could be done to help.

“She pretty much told me I can’t play any sports. I could cycle and swim — and that’s it,” he says. “And that was crushing for me.”

Veterans and members of the military develop skills and camaraderie at the inaugural National Wheelchair Basketball Association Veterans Development Camp and Tournament.

* photos and story by Aprile Rickert

A U.S. Navy veteran, Derrick Clark, right, played in the National Wheelchair Basketball Association Veterans Development Camp and Tournament.
Making A Return

A year after getting this news, Clark found himself on a basketball court again.

He was one of nearly 40 veterans and active-duty servicemen in Warrior Transition Units who participated in the first National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) Veterans Development Camp and Tournament, which was held during April’s NWBA National Championship Tournament in Louisville, Ky. It was made possible in part by an adaptive sports grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Over the course of two days, the players went through rigorous drills, learned how to maximize their seating positions to play at their best and brought all of these skills together for a round-robin tournament. They also met other players and program directors and watched some of the games played by the more than 90 teams compete.

Richard Harris Jr., performance enhancement specialist at the Fort Gordon Training Center in Georgia and one of the coaches and organizers of the basketball clinic, says that once they knew some funding was available to reach out to veterans, it was just a matter of using resources to locate interested players. Organizers got in contact with VA hospitals, recreational therapists, local wheelchair basketball teams and Warrior Transi-
tion Units, which is how Clark found out about it.

Harris says it’s so important for injured or wounded veterans to get involved with adaptive sports as a means to help with a healthy transition.

“There are a lot of factors that play into that,” he says. “And one of the things they identified early is participation in adaptive sports as a really big indicator that someone has a potential to have a healthy transition.”

Harris, whose father is a veteran with a disability, says there’s a normalcy that’s needed during the transition and sports can help.

“You’ll hear athletes talk about that sports is not just about sports, it has more meaning to it,” he says. “Whether you have a disability or not, those same concepts still emerge and for a lot of these individuals, participating in sports helps to build their esteem, how they see themselves in life, helps to promote maybe them setting greater goals for themselves. It’s a vehicle that will allow them to really thrive in life.”

Jeff Jones, coordinator of veteran affairs for the NWBA, says that for both veterans and those in Warrior Transition Units, participation in adaptive sports can really be a game-changer.

“The concept is to get as many veterans active as you can,” Jones says. “That’s the key about having this here. We have an opportunity to introduce them to basketball programs all over the country.”

Players came into this with all kinds of backgrounds and skill levels. While Clark had always played sports before his injury — his favorites being football and basketball — this was his first go at an adaptive team sport.

“You could go to any coach and ask any question and feel comfortable that you got not only a correct answer, but an answer that made you feel a little proud about what you were doing or happy that you asked that question,” Clark says. “I thought the coaching staff was great.”

As soon as Clark returned home from the camp last month, he shared his newfound excitement for the sport with his brother, who has a basketball court in his backyard. “We cemented it and built a fence around it so I can get out there and practice and don’t have to...”
chase the ball in a wheelchair,” he says.

Clark says he wasn’t going to stop at wheelchair basketball.

“I’m going to try to do as many as I can so I can see what’s comfortable for me — what I enjoy that I can do for years down the road. And also to teach my children, that’s something that we can still have fun doing,” Clark says.

Clark says getting to play with other service members made this an especially important event for him.

“If you’re on a team of five on the basketball court or a team of 5,000 on the naval vessel, it’s all about camaraderie,” he says. “And once you get those things together and they connect, you’ll be surprised. We probably could have moved a mountain if they asked us to do that.”

**Take That Chance To Play**

For U.S. Air Force veteran Andy Bernt, the camp strengthened his desire to compete and his advocacy for transitioning soldiers and veterans to take a chance at adaptive sports. Bernt, who played wheelchair basketball for a year and competed at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, also plays wheelchair softball, tennis, bowling and lifts weights.

Bernt was a firefighter for 26 years. As a firefighter he was always at the gym and always playing sports — including playing football in Germany when he was stationed there in the early 1980s.

He became partially paralyzed in 2005 because of complications from Hodgkin’s lymphoma. He’s now in remission.

“My first couple of years were depressing and somewhat still are, but I get out and I play because I was always a sports guy,” Bernt says. “I enjoy playing. I enjoy the competition, I enjoy the camaraderie, playing against disabled veterans or any person that’s disabled.”

Bernt says his eyes were opened when he went to his first wheelchair basketball game in 2008.

“I’m an advocate of games for newly injured,” he says. “I always advocate for them to go to the games. They’re going through the same thing I went through. If you’re in a wheelchair, life doesn’t stop.”

Bernt found out about the camp through his recreational therapist, who had spoken to Jones.

“I think that the camp was very good for me — learning from Olympians and from head coaches at colleges. That was definitely a good camp,” he says. “Learning so much and putting it all into perspective and actually doing it, playing the games and just learning the little things that help you further your game.”

Clark says Jones is now helping him find a grant to get his own basketball wheelchair. With Jones’ help, Clark also wants to find a team nearby to join or start one.

“That event gave me the opportunity to go play a sport that I love. For me I learned that I can still be active through adaptive sports and play some of the sports that I really, really genuinely love to play as long as I work at it and practice,” he says. “It gave me the opportunity to actually play basketball again at a high, competitive pace. If everyone could get out of it what I did, I think it would be a success here.”

Darron Lewis, with ball, and Andy Bernt, right, work on a drill during April’s inaugural National Wheelchair Basketball Association Development Camp and Tournament in Louisville, Ky.