

INVICTUS GAMES

THE HAGUE 2020

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Competitors



Franz-Josef Schmitz is a part of Team Germany and competing in archery, rowing and sitting volleyball. He is joined by his wife and two children who are naturally very proud of him. It is the second time around for Franz-Josef because he also joined the IG2018 in Sydney.

Franz-Josef was only 20 when he joined the German army during which Germany was divided between East- and West-Germany. He saw it as his calling to join the army and serve his country. 39 years later he still proudly fulfills this duty, especially now during these challenging times. During those 39 years a lot has happened, a lot of good and bad stuff. When he got married and became a father he found it hard to combine his work life with military service. Every time he got deployed he was scared it was the last time he would see his family. But military service always comes first.

Franz-Josef sees it as his duty to fight for our shared values and make sure his country is safe. There is no freedom without security and also the other way around. Being a part of the army is not a regular job but a mission. A mission to stand up for what you believe in and keeping your family and countrymen safe. This is the message he also wants to pass on to younger generations, so they can appreciate the core values and provide security.

The Invictus Games is all about being the captain of your soul, just like the poem of William Ernest Henley says, for Franz-Josef. In 2017 he was depressed and did not know how to deal with his dark feelings. He could not make sense of his thoughts and was afraid of them. In 2018 he joined Team Germany for the Sydney-edition and finally his fear of his own thoughts were dealt with.

The Invictus Games gave him tools to deal with his mental issues and gave him a community of like-minded people. He feels safe and understood when being at the Invictus Games. It also provides a space where he and his family can have conversation that he would not have at home simply because life gets in the way sometimes. Being amongst his comrades is a very special feeling of you can see yourself in someone without looking like that person. He felt this exact feeling whilst competing in the archery match on Sunday where he stood next to Team UK and Team NL. He did not see them as competition but as comrades in arms who have their story of their own. He was very proud of them, because just like him, they have become captains of their souls.



Having made the ultimate sacrifice in conflict, Georgian double leg amputees Grigoli, Akhmed and Revaz believe in the power of sport in improving their health and keeping their spirits high. Last night they could be seen waving the Georgian flag and cheering in the front row for their fellow team members at the sitting volleyball finals.

This week 35-year-old Akhmed Safarov won bronze in the 100-metre wheelchair race after three gruelling months of training. Despite his success on the track, the best thing about sport for him is the people: to socialise with good people and to compete against rival teams. The Invictus Games, he says, are a good cause. For people like “them”: soldiers without arms or without legs, they have the opportunity to show themselves and a chance to keep their spirits up. For people like them, Akhmed says, sport is like a doctor.

Thursday Akhmed will be competing in wheelchair basketball. He says his success in basketball is a mystery. He can't believe his luck that because of the Invictus Games, he gets to fulfil his dreams of becoming a professional basketball player. He will continue training over the coming year in the hopes of qualifying for next year's Invictus Games in Düsseldorf.

The Hague is wheelchair basketball player Grigoli Minagorashvili's first Invictus Games. Hailing from Georgia's capital of Tbilisi, 48-year-old Grigoli has served in several conflicts during his 30-year military career, particularly in the contested territory of Abkhazia. In 2008 when Russian and Abkhaz forces fought against the Georgian army, he was injured in an air assault in which his stomach was struck by a bomb. No one expected him to live.

Grigoli explains that he has four nations in his blood: Russian, Ukrainian, Korean and Georgian. For him, the Invictus Games allows him to not only connect with other military personnel, but with other parts of his cultural identity. Before his injury, Grigoli was a keen sportsman, taking part in everything from karate to parkour. The Invictus Games has not only allowed Grigoli to keep active, but to try out his snippets of English and Italian, to see how other teams train, and to fulfil his dream of visiting the Netherlands. Grigoli only breaks into English to describe Anna – his wife of 26 years – as “my love”, who is proudly supporting him at the Invictus Games.

Swimmer and archer Revaz Gorgadze also relishes the opportunity to travel and compete against military personnel from other nations. Despite only speaking Georgian, he says he has already made new friends thanks to his trusted interpreter and teammate Akhmed. Showing a photo on his phone of his youngest of four, he is clearly proud to represent his country and his family.

Swimming, he says, is great for his health as it works all his muscles. He found his love for swimming at work in a military academy, which gives him daily access to a swimming pool, and helps him to keep ties with his military family. He hopes to continue his para sport participation at the next Warrior Games in the USA. Although his wife and children couldn't be here in the Netherlands, his brother is one of the 20-strong family and friends team that have come to support Team Georgia.

Family & friends



Ranomi en Chjanoy know all about brotherhood

The smell of the swimming pool is not only familiar to Ranomi Kromowidjojo (31), but also to one of her biggest fans, brother Chjanoy (35). At the 'Hofbad' both are witnessing that brotherhood and support from family members at the Invictus Games are even stronger than they were used to in what Ranomi calls her 'swim family'. In that she doesn't just mean her parents and brother, who were her loyal companions during her travels, but also all her teammates and competitors in the world of swimming, including the para swimmers. Once upon a time Chjanoy also competed: "champion of the province Groningen at the youth swimming competition," he says, smiling.

After she quit past January as a top swimmer- Ranomi is a multiple world and Olympic champion- this is the second big sports event she visits. Earlier this month she visited the Qualification Meet 2022 in Eindhoven. She knows all the swimmers there, but must admit that, from the competitors today, she only knows some of them by face.

As soon as she was spotted at the swimming pool, the speaker took her to the microphone. “Happy faces, an amazing atmosphere, so much love,” is her first impression. “It’s not about winning or victory, but it is more important to overcome your struggles.” She feels that not she, but the swimmers need to be in the spotlight. However, she cannot get away without getting her picture taken by, and with, many fans. She undergoes it with patience, smiling all the time. “Ah well, it’s fun to do. I like people.”

Ranomi (Eindhoven), Chjanoy (Amsterdam) and their parents (Groningen) are very close and are in daily contact. At her last Olympics (Tokyo 2020) and during the whole Covid-period she missed her family dearly. “Especially when things weren’t going great, they were always there for me,” she says while clapping loudly together with the public until the last contestant touches the finish line. Chjanoy recognizes that the respect for veterans in the USA is extremely big. “Considering our appreciation for Dutch veterans there’s still room for improvement.”

Volunteer



Suddenly, she stands in front of me. Her name is Luna, Luna Slot. She has a story, as her foster father Patrick Ruben tells me. An impressive story, beautiful also. A story that fits in this setting; the setting of the Invictus Games. For two months Luna, only nineteen years old, knows she has PTSD. This week, at the Invictus Games, she was literally confronted with this. While working as a volunteer she froze. She couldn't do anything anymore. She came to herself by writing down her story. Now she wanted to read it to someone.

Edward Swier

Last year she volunteered at the Formula one race in Zandvoort. "I love sports. Sport means everything to me." This proves to be quite a story. Originally she could not play sports at home, although this was what she liked most. That's why she can freeze when she sees, or has a part in, sports games. That is why at first, she did not intend to assist as a volunteer on the sideline of a sports event. But somehow, she ended up on the list to play a role at the training sessions for wheelchair basketball.

On her way to the park that morning, she reads to me, she had told 'the monsters' in her head that 'she did not have time for them today'. From that moment on she was locked in her head. "I become more frustrated, lose control. Patrick will be twice as busy today. He is a volunteer just like me at an event and he needs to keep an eye on me because I can't control the panic and stress no more." At the scene the military vehicles remind her of a long-lost dream she had as a girl. She wanted to be a nurse in the army.

Once on duty at the wheelchair basketball things went wrong. When a ball rolled her way and she wanted to throw it back, she couldn't. The ball did not leave her hands. Because if she would throw it back, the voices inside her head told her, then she would never be allowed to touch a ball again.

Patrick Ruben recognized and acknowledged the situation immediately. He left his post and caught her. He is also a volunteer at the Invictus Games. For one year now Luna has been living with the Ruben family. She was the girlfriend of Patrick's son. "For a longer period, we noticed that things weren't going great all the time for Luna. That she in fact could stay at home with her parents anymore, especially during the Covid-pandemic. Originally, she would stay a couple of months at our place, but since then a year has gone by."

During that period Patrick tried to help her as a layman when she experienced stress. An examination by doctors led to the diagnosis PTSD. Luna is not necessarily happy with the diagnosis and knowing what she is experiencing. “She has a label now,” Patrick tells us. “It is time for her to see the benefits of that.” In conversations with contestants of the Games she learns that they have gained from their diagnosis with PTSD. The recognition and making it a topic to talk about for them was the first step to recovery.

In her letter, Luna talks about the moment at the Zuiderpark that she decided to share her story with the volunteer coordinator. While feeling useless because she quit at the wheelchair basketball training, she decided to explain why things did not work. PTSD. “For the first time since getting the diagnose I admitted to my mental disability.” She expected a negative reaction, but only got understanding.

At the Invictus Games she can meet more than enough fellow sufferers. From 500 competitors, more than half of them has PTSD, in most cases during war situations. Luna:” Of course it’s not something you tell everyone. Especially to someone outside your close circle. I am not spreading it around, but I have had some conversations with other volunteers and contestants of the Invictus Games. Usually I ask people about their hobbies, than you never know where the conversation is going.”

Luna is studying to become a nurse and during her education Mental Healthcare is also a topic. “Sometimes I get nervous about it.” “A combination of words can trigger her,” Patrick explains. “Then she shuts down into stand-by mode. Fortunately, most of the time this lasts only for a few seconds, sometimes minutes or a few hours. She is lucky it does not last for days.”

In school Luna can talk to a few people about her problems. With specialist teachers from the Mental healthcare for example, and with her mentor. The experiences from the contestants at the Invictus Games prove that talking about it helps. PTSD is nothing to be ashamed of. Luna also knows this since this week. She was at the Invictus Games on Sunday, where she sat down in the rose garden of the Zuiderpark to write her story down. And now she wanted to share it.

Luna will be okay. When she returns home to Scharmer in the province Groningen she will be a lot of experiences richer. Nice ones. Beautiful ones. And less beautiful ones.

Fanzones



One of the side events that take place this week during the Invictus Games, is 'Meet the Marines'. At this side event there have been and will be different challenges for visitors. Young and old took up the challenge in a tough competition. They went on to see who could do the most pull-ups, push-ups and sit-ups. By taking on the challenge, one can learn to identify and set his or her boundaries under the guidance of (ex)marines.

The facilitators of the side event are themselves either marine or ex-marine. The Invictus Games mean a lot to them. Many of them have themselves been on a mission. Besides that, they all know wounded military. Also, someone they know competes at swimming and athletics this year. They are working at the side this week because they wish all competitors of the Invictus Games a great day and support them with a warm heart.

What is your relationship with the Invictus games?

Koen Castelein: “We are here with an activation. We organize events and today we try to bring our events in the spotlight. We are ‘Meet the Marines’. This means we are all either marines or ex-marines. Furthermore, we are very concerned with the military. We all know many wounded veterans. Many of us who are here today were on a mission before. We support all with a warm heart. I think this is the reason why we fit here at the Invictus Games. Last year I participated in a speed mars of 76 kilometers to remember 76 years of freedom together with a wounded soldier, who actually competes here in swimming and athletics.”

What challenge did you do here today?

“At our stand we did multiple challenges today. Amongst other things we did a pull-up challenge, push-up challenge and sit-up challenge. Besides that, we had a team competition. In this challenge pairs take a parcours while carrying a fictive victim on a stretcher.”

“What are you hoping to see this week?”

“I hope to see many enthusiastic people here at our activation and of course I hope to be able to take a look at the other side events and see veterans in action.”



Ottobock can repair anything

Is this a day of horror for Ottobock? Niek Wondergem looks our way with a grin on his face. He gets the hint. After all, at no more than 50 meters from the stand of the manufacturer of, amongst other things, wheelchairs and (sports)prosthetics, is the Invictus Games stadium where the wheelchair rugby tournament is taking place. This means: a lot of hard crashes, many collisions, a lot of impact which means a big chance on damage.

Ottobock is present at the Invictus Games especially now to do all the repairs. As a service, for free. To make sure the competitors can continue their sports week. If necessary for the time being with a loan wheelchair, for example when something needs to be welded. But many of the repairs can be performed on the spot. During our conversation for example, an Italian gets a new innertube and outer tire on the left side of his wheelchair. It was flat. And while Nico is at it, he takes on the other wheel as well. His evaluation: almost worn-out.

Niek Wondergem, responsible for technical sales in the Benelux, is giving us a tour through his mobile workstation. Multiple instrument makers are working there. “During the first four days we did like 90 repairs. Anything can be fixed. Aluminum, titanium, steel, stainless steel, but also carbon. Monday after wheelchair rugby training, things were a bit busier than usual. Even a frame that was totally ripped came in.” Nico, who usually works at the department of Ottobock in Germany, fixed it with the necessary welding. Earlier this week they also had enough work to be done. “Some chairs don’t come off the plane in one piece. They get jammed during the flight.

”Wondergem is surprised by the overall good quality of the equipment of the competitors at the Invictus Games. “We do the same work for the Paralympics as well. At this event we still see many delegations who do not have good quality equipment. Of course, we help them out as well. But here, almost everyone has good stuff. But of course, it is always possible that something gets broke. Yes, especially with wheelchair rugby.

”Ottobock tries to stay in good contact with the community, the whole year round. To do this, the company organizes running clinics, amongst other things. This is the core business of Andrea Cremer. These clinics are organized for people who are missing a leg since birth, who never ran before. But also, for people who lost a limb in an accident or attack. They can ‘learn how to walk’ with a prosthesis from Ottobock. The blades look supersonic. It is possible to reach quite a high speed. “If you can run faster with them than before your amputation? Yes, if you train well, you can. But of course, it takes some adaptation. And you must train a lot, the blade is not a panacea.

”Cremer and Wondergem agree that the Invictus Games are unique. “This community is amazing. The atmosphere is exceptionally great. The participants are very relaxed. Despite being in a competition there is no rivalry of any kind. It’s a beautiful experience.”



‘Actually, this is just one big Open Day’

You can find it all the way back in the Fanzone: the giant “Dit-is-Defensie’ (This-is-Defence) tent. This tent is all about the future: developments in areas such as robotics and energy transition. Just outside the tent one can learn more about the present. There is the vehicle commander who calls the nearby vehicle his ‘home’, for example. Children, teens, adults, everyone seems to find their way to his home. “A vehicle like this attracts attention” he says. “People will yell out: Hey, it’s a tank!” He has to suppress a smile: “It is not a tank, but it sure looks like one.” The almost-tank attracts visitors of the Fanzone like a magnet. The vehicle commander, who likes to stay anonymous, and his colleagues are bombarded with questions and answer all of them enthusiastically. He appreciates having this opportunity.

At birthday parties, at some point all of them will inevitably be asked what it is that they do exactly, or how their deployment was. Questions that may seem easy, but they can be very complicated. “Nobody truly understands it” he explains. He thinks it is a shame that the world of the armed forces is so often closed off to outsiders and hopes that by talking to as many people as possible, he can increase people’s notion of the work of the armed forces. And he is succeeding. “Actually, this is just one big Open Day”.

The connection that is sometimes missing with civilians, is very much present among military personnel and veterans. “There is an immediate connection with other members of the armed forces. It does not matter if someone is from a neighbouring country or from the other side of the ocean, you form a bond after just a few sentences. Even though you might not have the same experiences, it is easy to imagine how it has been for them. The emotions and feelings are the same.”

The same sense of belonging and being part of a team that is displayed here, is also what drew him to join the military, and the infantry in particular. He compares his platoon to a football team: “You cannot play without a goalie. You need each other and you accomplish things together.” He strongly feels this sense of belonging on the premises of the Games.

Primarily, the Invictus Games are for veterans that have sustained mental or physical injuries. “I do not have very severe or impressive experiences myself” he says. However, being here feels special. “I have some mixed feelings – being here voluntarily” he explains, “but it is lovely.” In addition to the veterans themselves, the Invictus Games are also there for the Friends and Family. “Their stories are actually even more impactful” the vehicle commander nods. “When I am deployed, I am not concerned with what is happening back home. The personal stories of family members show me once more how much a deployment impacts them too.”

De Invictus Games is een internationaal sportevenement voor fysiek en/of mentaal gewonde militairen. De Invictus Games gebruikt de kracht van sport om herstel te stimuleren, revalidatie te ondersteunen en breder begrip en respect te genereren voor hen die hun land dienen of gediend hebben.

‘Invictus’ staat voor ‘onoverwonnen’. Het symboliseert de vechtlustige geest, van fysiek en/of mentaal gewonde militairen. Het laat zien wat je, ondanks je verwondingen, kunt bereiken.

Aan de Invictus Games, die in het voorjaar van 2022 in Den Haag worden gehouden, doen 500 deelnemers mee, uit 20 verschillende landen. Zij zullen actief zijn in tien verschillende sporten.

Alle deelnemers mogen, op uitnodiging en kosten van de organisatie, twee vrienden of familieleden die hebben geholpen tijdens het revalidatieproces meenemen naar het evenement.

Iedere deelnemer aan de Invictus Games heeft zijn eigen verhaal, maar allen hebben ze de innerlijke kracht gevonden om door te gaan en zichzelf op te richten. Alleen, met hulp van familie en vrienden, maar altijd mede dankzij de kracht van sport.

The Invictus Games is an international adaptive sporting event for Wounded, Injured and Sick Servicemen and women, both serving and veteran. The Games use the power of sport to inspire recovery, support rehabilitation and generate a wider understanding and respect of all those who serve their country.

The word 'Invictus' means 'unconquered'. It embodies the fighting spirit of wounded, injured and sick Service personnel and personifies what these tenacious men and women can achieve post injury.

The Invictus Games is about much more than just sport – it captures hearts, challenges minds and changes lives.

The Invictus Games 2020 will be held in The Hague in the spring of 2022 and invites 500 competitors, from 19 different countries. They will participate in 10 different sports.

All competitors may bring two friends or family members who have helped during the rehabilitation process, at the invitation and expense of the organization.

The participants all have their own story of physical and/or psychological injury or illness. But all of them have found the inner strength to go on and reinvent themselves. Sometimes alone, often with the help of family and friends, but always through the power of sport. The Invictus Games The Hague 2020 is *the* platform to share their stories and add another chapter to their book of life.

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