

Veteran working to be on target (The News Journal)

Larry Binger has new event in Wheelchair Games

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For 28 years, the Department of Veterans Affairs and Paralyzed Veterans of America have put on the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

For 25 of those years, Newark resident Larry Binger, a retired United States Navy veteran, has participated in events like the javelin, discus, shot put, bowling and trap shooting.

Binger, who calls himself "The Rolling Sportsman," is Delaware's lone representative to the 2008 games. He leaves Wednesday for Omaha, Neb., where the games begin Friday.

Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., will honor Binger at Cafe Adria in Newark from 11-11:30 a.m. Tuesday. Newark mayor Vance Funk is also expected to be in attendance.

After 20 years of living in Newark, Binger is finally being recognized for his accomplishments. But this year's games will be more difficult than in years past for the 62-year-old disabled veteran. He said he is many years removed from when he won five gold medals in one wheelchair games.

After injuring his right arm in last summer's competition, Binger said his doctor suggested he stop participating in the shot put. Needing a new event, Binger settled on archery because he thought it would decrease the stress on his arm.

"I thought, 'This isn't that difficult,' " Binger said, "until I got the bow."

Binger has been practicing archery since February but has only been at a range to shoot arrows a dozen times. At the

wheelchair games, he will have to shoot six arrows each at targets 30 and 50 meters away.

After practicing mostly at Ommelanden Range in New Castle, which doesn't have targets longer than 30 meters, Binger was set up with Loyal "Matt" Matthews, an Army veteran and president of New Castle 100 Archers Club in Newark.

Practicing for the first time from 50 meters Wednesday, Binger shot for nearly two hours with mixed results. But he was far from discouraged. Just realistic.

"I like the sport, but it's a hard sport to learn," he said.

Jon Burgess, who owns Eagle Eye Archery in Camden, Del., and coaches Binger, said expecting Binger to be a first-class marksman with less than six months of practice is ludicrous.

"When we first came out, because he really didn't know anything about archery, there [were] some hurdles getting him to learn exactly what to do," said Burgess, who was in the Air Force for 20 years. "That first day we probably lost a half dozen arrows going into the woods."

Burgess, who donated a bow for Binger to use at the games, said his student has steadily improved. Before this year, Binger had never even held a target bow. But he still has a long way to go to seriously compete for a medal.

"I'm not going to be dead last," Binger promised. "I may be next to last, but I won't be dead last."

Binger reached out to Burgess for help once he decided to take up archery. Their military backgrounds brought the two together.

"This was really something new for me," Burgess said of coaching. "I have done instruction with kids before. But my shop gets so busy and I'm a one-man shop, [so] I don't do it anymore.

"Larry is kind of close to home, because I'm a 20-year Air Force vet and he's a Navy vet."

Archery is Binger's newest pursuit, but he says bowling is his best event. Before focusing more on archery in recent weeks, Binger said he bowled nine games a day, five days a week to prepare for Omaha. He said he averages 150-160

per game.

The rest of his training is cardio, but he makes his trips up and down Newark's Main Street count for more than just exercise. Four or five times a day, Binger rolls along Main Street checking in at the shops that are sponsoring him, volunteering where he is needed and trying to get the word out about the games.

"Every time you tell someone you do wheelchair sports, they say 'Oh, you're in Special Olympics,' " Binger said. "Excuse me? Not even close here, people. But that's the only thing they know about because they get advertised.

"I just want them to know it exists."