

Healing Through Hockey

The Pittsburgh Warriors, comprised of wounded veterans, use hockey as an outlet to bond and heal physical and mental wounds from their time in the military

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There's an icy sanctuary for honorably discharged and disabled veterans in the blossoming community of Cranberry Township in Pittsburgh.

Within the confines of an ice rink at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Lemieux Sports Complex, veterans who skate for the Pittsburgh Warriors get a dose of active therapy, the kind that provides a competitive, fast-paced alternative to a clinical setting with health care specialists.

For Air Force veteran Richard J. Betler and retired Navy Senior Chief Petty Officer David G. Jackel II of VFW Post 914 in West Mifflin, Pa., the camaraderie of teamwork and execution engrained in the fabric of hockey also offers a comforting familiarity.

"It's personally given me that sense of teamwork and brotherhood back," said Jackel, who served on ships supporting Operation Southern Watch and Operation Enduring Freedom. "I was in the service for 20 years, and that's not something you can just forget, so playing hockey has helped bring that back for me."

Betler, who served with the 455th Squadron in Bagram, Afghanistan, in 2009 and 2011, echoed a similar sentiment, adding that hockey helped mimic the level of unselfish teamwork he experienced in the Air Force.

"It's given me something to focus on," Betler said. "I play goaltender, and that position takes a lot of discipline and organization. My responsibility is to my teammates, my airmen, my battle buddies. Like the Air Force, it's a team I'm proud to represent."

National Champs in Vegas

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

The Pittsburgh Warriors belong to the USA Hockey Warrior Program, joining a wide non-profit network of veteran-based teams from across the country created to help alleviate the physical and mental scars of military service through hockey.

The 16 teams currently participating in the Warriors Hockey league play a lengthy season, which includes two national festivals each year that split into four different tiers.

For the Pittsburgh Warriors, the 2019 season culminated with them hoisting one of the USA Hockey Warrior Classic titles in Las Vegas in October.

“We played out of tier four, but a banner’s a banner,” said Jackel, who plays right wing and serves as an alternate captain for Pittsburgh. “This was my second festival and I loved it. It’s awesome just being around so many other veterans from different cities, knowing that all of us get to heal together.”

In true underdog fashion, the Pittsburgh Warriors rallied back from a slow start to the tournament, winning the championship against the Las Vegas Warriors, 3-2, after scoring three consecutive goals in the final period.

“That was amazing,” Betler said. “We had lost our first couple of games but really dug deep to come out and still win it. It’s the best hockey I’ve ever played in my life — the closest we’ll ever get to the NHL stage, and that’s special.”

Betler, who recalled visiting Las Vegas on three separate occasions without having much time to scavenge for places to sightsee while in the Air Force, admitted that his plans to quench such curiosity didn’t pan out.

“I had been there three times, and each time I had seen The Strip in passing,” Betler said of a stretch on South Las Vegas Boulevard that contains a saturated portion of the city’s casinos and hotels.

“I always wanted to go do stuff in and around The Strip, but our team trip in October turned out to be all hockey and little Vegas. And you know what? I loved it.”

‘Even the Wives Come Out’

The Warriors travel well, often through a unique affiliation with the National Hockey League’s Pittsburgh Penguins via the Hockey Sticks Together Foundation. The program helps the team fund equipment, uniforms, travel and lodging for games and festivals each season.

The Pittsburgh Warriors also remain heavily involved in the community, serving as guiding hands for the youth as well as being loud advocates for veteran affairs around Pittsburgh.

“Even the wives come out and help,” Betler added. “They have their own clan and support us during games, helping us out in the community and in every way they possibly can.”

Betler and Jackel, in particular, remain strong advocates for veteran affairs in the community of West Mifflin, about 10 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, on behalf of VFW Post 914.

Jackel, who serves as a volunteer firefighter in West Mifflin, organizes community events, such as the Memorial Day services at Mitchell Paige Park in West Mifflin.

“We try to volunteer and help out as much as we can,” Jackel said. “We just want to help as many veterans as we can, getting our name out there to maybe reach some who haven’t learned about the opportunities to heal together.”

Betler, a VA employee, participates in an array of veteran fundraisers. He’s also active with the local Disabled American Veterans chapter.

For Betler, the Pittsburgh Warriors program and his continuous volunteer work in the community on behalf of veterans is an attempt at reaching a cusp.

“I believe it’s about achieving a full circle,” Betler said. “Playing hockey with other veterans has helped me transition alongside people who understand what I’ve been through. And in turn, I believe it’s my duty to help other veterans make that transition. Helping one another has been very rewarding.”

In order to qualify for participation on a team in the USA Hockey Warrior Program, candidates must provide a VA disability letter as well as proper discharge documentation noted on a DD 214 form.

For veterans who don’t qualify or aren’t interested in hockey, the opportunities to heal together and interact with one another aren’t limited as a VFW member.

Post 914, for example, offers an array of activities for veterans to bond, while encouraging members to remain active in the community.

“Joining the VFW is often a gateway to activities where veterans can interact and help each other,” said Michael P. Mauer, a VFW life member and public affairs officer for the Department of Pennsylvania’s District 29. “Hockey is certainly big here in Pittsburgh, but for veterans who lack the skills to compete on the ice, there are many other activities VFW Post 914 does that reflect well on our standing in the community.”

Post 914 earned its status as an All-State Post by actively promoting scholarship programs that include the Voice of Democracy and Patriot’s Pen. The Post has also supported youth

programs that include athletics, scouting and the West Mifflin Area Senior High School Air Force JROTC.

“Our Post was recognized on Aug. 29 by West Mifflin Mayor Chris Kelly as the borough’s Group of the Year,” Mauer added. “That award shows not just what we can do together as a VFW Post, but as a community.”

This article is feature in the February 2020 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.