

Maryland's Athletic Bill Demby Named DAV Outstanding Disabled Veteran for 1990

"I win when I try. That's my motto. I win when I walk out onto the field or court, ready to play."

Billy Demby, a double-leg amputee from the Vietnam War, relates this simple truth with undeniable honesty and conviction to audiences nearly every day of the week in cities across the country.

Demby, who lost his legs below the knee when a Viet Cong rocket hit the truck he was driving in 1971, has become a recognized spokesman for the disabled since a DuPont Company television commercial featured him playing stand-up basketball on artificial legs in 1987.

Since then, Demby, a life member of National Amputee DAV Chapter 76, has been appearing before audiences of children and adults and on radio and TV talk shows to instill hope and motivation for the disabled, and to promote a better understanding of the handicapped by the able bodied.

Demby, a 39-year-old native of Maryland's Eastern Shore, overcame numerous obstacles to become an outstanding athlete in a variety of sports, including wheelchair and stand-up basketball, track and field

events, wheelchair volley ball, skiing, and automobile drag and road racing.

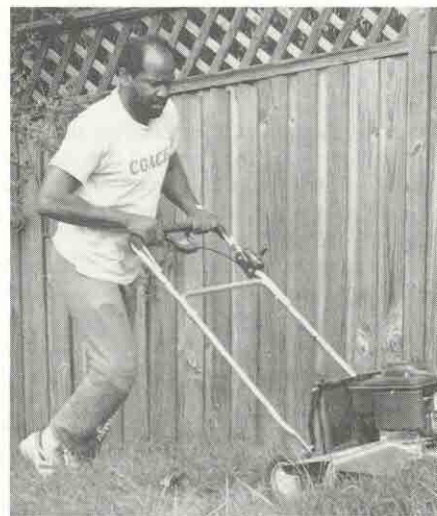
That's why William Albert (Billy) Demby has been selected as the DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran for 1990.

Demby was injured when a rocket struck the driver's door of the gun truck he was driving with a squad of men near Quang Tri, Vietnam, on March 26, 1971.

"I saw my leg laying on the floorboard, and I couldn't believe what I was seeing," he said. "I reached down to feel my leg and my hand became bloody from the stump. They were yelling from the back of the truck to keep going, so I tried to step on the gas with my right foot. I just felt a crunch, because it was just a mass of flesh and bones."

Someone else drove the truck out of the line of fire while a medivac helicopter overhead was being radioed for help. Within minutes, Demby was loaded onto the helicopter and flown to the 95th Evacuation Hospital.

"I was conscious during the whole time, up until I was taken into surgery," Demby said. "My first thought when I realized I had lost my legs was about my mother tell-



Double-leg amputee Bill Demby overcame more than the loss of both legs in his fight to rebuild his life after the Vietnam War. Demby works on his car and does the yard work like most people. But few have starred in a national advertising campaign, right, that turned a disabled veteran basketball player into an overnight sensation. The commercials, produced by the DuPont Chemical Co., demonstrate the effectiveness of the prosthetic appliance, the Seattle Foot.

ing me that I was always in the wrong place at the wrong time. Then I thought I would never play basketball again, and I wondered how my family would handle it when I returned home without legs."

Demby, who was 19 at the time, was put on a plane for the U.S., but had to spend several weeks in a hospital on Guam when one of the arteries in his leg broke during the flight. He then was flown to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C., where he spent a year being treated and rehabilitated.

It was during his stay at Walter Reed that Demby met his wife, Toni, who was employed in the education branch and regularly visited the patients to encourage and help them continue their education. Bill and Toni were married in 1976.

Demby describes the years after his release from Walter Reed as "four to five years of hell." "I guess I was feeling sorry for myself," he said. "I turned to alcohol and drugs. It was a very difficult time for me."

Demby, who had been an outstanding athlete in basketball and track at Queen Anne's County High School in Centerville, Md., before his injuries, realized that sports could give him the self-confidence he needed to move on into other areas of his life.

"Sports really got me back on the right track," he says. He cites several people who got him started back into sports. These were Jim Winters, Andy Hastings, and Kenny Winchester.

"Let's face it," Demby says. "People set the tone for disabled people to follow. But, I think you have to go beyond that. Jim Winters went beyond that. He took a bunch of us amputees to Steamboat Springs, Colo., for a week, and tried to teach us to ski. I didn't learn anything, but it challenged me to see if I could learn."

"Andy Hastings came along, and he suc-

ceeded in teaching me to ski. Now I can teach others like me to ski. It's the dominoes effect."

Demby now is a certified ski instructor in the National Handicapped Sports association's "Learn to Ski" program, which has clinics each winter throughout the country for people with various types of disabilities.

Kenny Winchester, who had been involved in drag racing with Demby before he went into the Army, got him interested in drag racing and road racing again. Demby had to give up auto racing because of the expense, but hopes to get back to it someday. A skilled auto mechanic, he still likes to tinker on his 1955 Chevrolet two-door sedan.

It was while he was teaching other disabled individuals to ski that he was invited to try out for a wheelchair basketball team. He now plays regularly with the Washington, D.C., Bullets wheelchair basketball team.

The wheelchair basketball led to an invitation to try wheelchair track and field sports with the U.S. Amputee Athletic Association (USAAA), and he soon was racing in marathons and 10K races. In field events, Demby holds the national amputee record in the shot put, discus, and javelin.

He was selected in July 1987 for the USA Sitting Volleyball Team, which competed in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, and was elected by his teammates as team captain. He competed with the USAAA team in the 1988 Paralympics in Seoul, Korea, placing 4th in the shot put and 5th in the javelin and discus events.

Demby also credits his wife, Toni, for helping to get his life straightened out. "She played a big part in my rehabilitation," he says, "especially for staying with me through it all, particularly the drugs and alcohol bit."

"When I realized the effect on my fam-

ily, I went back to school to re-educate myself," he said. He earned an associate of arts degree from Prince George's Community College in Maryland, and now is able to counsel other disabled people, particularly encouraging and motivating disabled children.

He's a regular volunteer speaker in the "disAbility Awareness Project" of the Howard County, Md., School System. Once each week, Demby or other handicapped individuals share their lives, their challenges, and their frustrations with students to help non-impaired children better understand the world of the disabled. The program is specifically designed to promote and increase awareness of the abilities and challenges of people that society has labeled as "disabled."

In 1984, Demby became one of the original testers of a new artificial limb called the Seattle Foot, developed for the Veterans Administration by Dr. Ernest M. Burgess, director of the Prosthetic Research Study at the VA Medical Center in Seattle, Wash. The foot, made with DuPont "Delrin" acetal resin, is more resilient and flexible than the limbs Billy had used previously.

The new prosthesis gave him more freedom and mobility than he'd ever had before. "It was like unlocking the door and walking into the sunshine," he said. "Just to be able to walk faster with my wife and my daughter. It adds a new dimension to my life."

One of those dimensions was an occasional visit to school yards and recreation leagues to play stand-up basketball. Demby's big break came when he was selected to appear in a DuPont commercial in 1987, playing stand-up basketball in a New York City school yard with able-bodied players.

The commercial, which has been aired nationally several times, dramatically illustrates how courage, stamina, and new technology can help an individual overcome his disabilities. Now, Demby is asked to speak to children and adult audiences throughout the nation, sometimes a demanding schedule that takes him away from home for several days each week.

"It's something I like to do," Demby says. "But, at times it gets a little hectic, especially since I like to spend more time at home with my wife and 10-year-old daughter Krishawn."

Demby, who is soft spoken and a little hesitant when talking about himself, becomes outspoken and eager to explain the views of the disabled when being interviewed by radio or TV hosts.

"New technology helps the handicapped to do things most people take for granted," he said during a recent radio interview. "The DuPont TV commercial has been very important in my life, and I hope it has opened the doors for others who view the commercial. I hope others will see the disabled as a person, not as a disabled person."

