

COACH LONNIE HINCHEN

Present

3RD ANNUAL WHEEL CHAIR BASKETBALL
ROUNDUP



Tribute

Prisoner of War Veteran

Johnny Wottenholler

Come see Four Professional Wheelchair Basketball
Teams
Exhibit Heart and Passion

When: November 2nd

Where: Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Corona

Game Time: 10:am & 12pm

For Ticket information please contact

Roosevelt High School, 7447 Scholar Way, Eastvale CA 92880 -951 738 2100

C.L.Y.F.O Non-Profit organization sanction by The NWBA 501 (C) (3) 45-5131980



[When Johnny Came Home: A Story of Wheelchair Basketball at Naval Hospital Corona](#)

Filed under [Corpsman](#), [Hospitals](#), [Military Medicine](#) { [no comments](#) }

By *André B. Sobocinski*, historian, [U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery \(BUMED\)](#)



[Naval Hospital Corona, Calif.](#), was a crown jewel of [Navy Medicine](#) in the 1940s. A former luxury resort for Hollywood stars, the [U.S. Navy](#) purchased it 1941 by order of President [Franklin Roosevelt](#) for use as a hospital. Indoor spas that had once pampered Hollywood's elite were now used as "hydrotherapy treatment centers" for Sailors and Marines; the resort's luxurious bedrooms were now saved for the many thousands of war veterans recuperating from wounds and illnesses. The [hospital](#) had a carpentry shop, an art studio, and a "toy factory" where men, physically and psychologically damaged by the war, could repair their weary minds and bodies through arts and crafts. [Corona](#) also

boasted a world-class gymnasium that was used for rehabilitative activities and from where the newest adaptive sport of wheelchair basketball would take off.¹

Today, wheelchair basketball is a mainstay of competitive sporting tournaments like the [Warrior Games](#), and the [Paralympics](#), and played by an estimated [100,000 men and women across the globe](#).² Although sources differ on specifically when it was first developed, all agree it was born in the wake of [World War II](#) and first played exclusively by wounded veterans. In her article, “Miracle of Ramp C,” Hildegard Level credits [Robert Rynearson](#), an assistant athletic director of special services at Birmingham Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital in Van Nuys, Calif., as the game’s originator.³ It was at Birmingham’s gymnasium in March 1946 that a Navy physician, Lt. Cmdr. Gerald Harry Gray first saw basketball used as a diversion and physical therapy for paraplegics. Inspired by the game’s potential, Gray set out to create a competitive team that would both inspire the legions of disabled veterans and become a symbol for the budding recreation.⁴ The result would be [Naval Hospital Corona’s](#) “Rolling Devils,” a basketball team comprised of [World War II](#) Marines and Sailors who had suffered paralysis during through accident, combat injury, and polio. Leading Gray’s Devils on the court was a 31-year old Marine Colonel⁵ and former triple-threat athlete named Johnny Winterholler.



“The Rolling Devils,” American wheelchair basketball pioneers. Former All American athlete and POW Johnny Winterholler can be seen fifth from the right. (Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Kinzer O’Farrell)

It’s been said that Johnny Winterholler was an “athlete’s idea of an athlete, and a coach’s answer.”⁶ An All-American in baseball, basketball and football at the University of Wyoming, Winterholler could easily have turned pro when he graduated in 1940. So it was a surprise to many classmates and professional sport teams when Winterholler decided to obtain a commission in the Marine Corps in June 1940. Following Marine Basic School in Philadelphia, Pa., and a tour of duty at Marine Corps Base San Diego, Winterholler was sent to the Philippines where he would become one of the five thousand men and women defending the islands against a Japanese invasion in early 1942.

When the defenders heroic last stand ended in [Corregidor](#) in May 1942, Winterholler was taken prisoner of war (POW). He would spend the next twenty-four months suffering agonizing abuses and dietary deprivations at prison camps in [Bilibid](#), [Cabanatuan](#), and in [Mindanao](#). In March 1944, as he slowly wasted away, his fight for survival nearly came to an abrupt end when the weakened blood vessels in his spinal column spontaneously ruptured causing immediate paralysis below the waist. Until the prison camps were finally liberated in February 1945, Winterholler would spend his remaining days sprawled on a stretcher fending off ants and starvation while developing dangerous bed sores.

When Commander Gray first met Winterholler at [Naval Hospital Corona](#) in 1946, he saw a man, who despite his hardships, was imbued with a “natural bounce and contagious enthusiasm.” Gray knew instantly that the Marine would be able to spark others with similar physical disabilities.⁷ With Winterholler on board as team captain, Gray began establish regular practices at [Corona](#). Soon after, Gray began arranging exhibition matches where the Devils would play newly formed VA hospital teams. They would even play against able-bodied amateur and semi-professional basketball players who would handicap themselves in wheelchairs for the duration of the contest.⁸

By 1947, the Winterholler-lead Devils were something of sports sensations. One reporter wrote that the Devils were “probably the greatest wheel chair operators in the world. It is amazing the speed they can muster, while moving their vehicle with one hand and waiting for a basketball pass with the other.”⁹ Winterholler *the athlete* was being dubbed by the national press as the “demon on wheels,” “spider,” and the “accurate shooting Colonel.”¹⁰



Practice game at Naval Hospital Corona. (Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Kinzer O’Farrell)

By 1949, in large part to the Devils, wheelchair basketball had expanded beyond hospital settings. It had become a serious competitive sport played by a host of homegrown teams with such colorful names as the “Bulldozers,” “Gizz Kids,” and “Rolling

Pioneers.” Owing to the sport’s newfound popularity, Dr. Tim Nugent, head of the Student Center of Rehabilitation at University of Illinois, organized the first [National Wheelchair Basketball Tournament](#) in 1949.¹¹ Later that year, Nugent united the six-tournament teams under a [National Wheelchair Basketball Association \(NWBA\)](#). Today, the NWBA consists of 181 basketball teams and 22 conferences.¹²

Postscript

Despite their roles as pioneering flag-bearers of wheelchair basketball, the Rolling Devils would fade into obscurity as team members left the hospital to begin new lives. By 1948, Dr. George Gray, a naval Reservist, would return to his private practice in Oakland, Calif. In June 1947, Col. Johnny Winterholler, married with two children, moved to Los Angeles to become a Certified Public Accountant. In 1949, he moved to Oakland, Calif., where he obtained a job as office manager in George Gray’s medical practice. He would later be inducted in the University of Wyoming Athletics Hall of Fame and in 2008 become a namesake for the Lovell High School gymnasium in Lovell, WY.