

Para-Athletes train for U.S. team



Eric Scicchitano/The Daily Item

Christ Rasmussen trains in Montgomery on Thursday, in hopes of becoming a biathlete for the U.S. Paralympic team.

Paralympic hopefuls to lead Lewisburg 4th of July parade

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MONTGOMERY — U.S. Paralympic hopefuls training in biathlon and cycling in the Valley will lead Saturday's 4th of July Parade through Lewisburg.

The athletes ride bicycles or hand-cycles an estimated 200 miles spread over five days in five different areas, ending with the Union County Veterans' annual celebration. This year marks the eighth iteration of the Free-

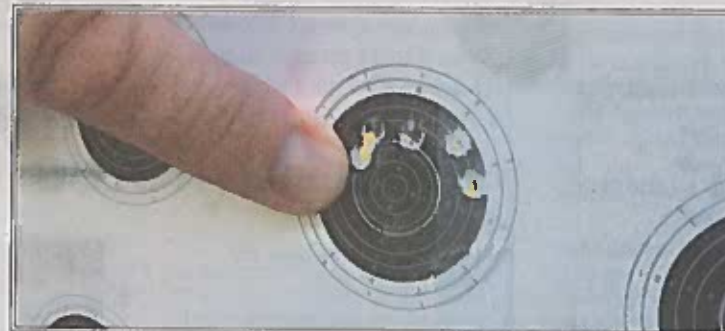


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dom Ride, an event open to cyclists of all ages and capabilities.

"It allows veterans to decompress, to vent. It's therapeutic," said Sgt. Major Kevin Bittenbender of the U.S. Army National Guard and organizer of the cycling event, citing a Veterans Affairs study that found 22 veterans commit suicide daily.

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Russ Myer, president of Capital Region Nordic Alliance, Albany, N.Y., talks about the accuracy necessary for biathletes competing in rifle shooting.

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“Anyone and everyone who wants to ride with us, they can,” Bittenbender said, inviting veterans and non-veterans alike.

Bittenbender, a rifle-shooting coach with the Paralympic team, this week is hosting training sessions at his Lycoming County home along with Russ Myer, of the Albany, N.Y.-based Capital Region Nordic Alliance.

After biking Thursday in the Muncy-Montoursville area, four athletes training for biathlon fired pellet or infrared rifles at targets 10 meters down range on Bittenbender’s lawn. They’d later use adaptive skating equipment to mimic skiing

equipment used in winter games, traveling to the Riverwalk in Williamsport Thursday to get some miles in.

Christ Rasmussen of Coldwater, Mich., laid prone on a blanket, steadying an air-powered rifle — aiming, firing and hitting his target. A below-knee amputee, the Army veteran is an experienced Paralympic bobsledder looking to break into biathlon. Bittenbender said two spots on the team will open ahead of the 2022 games in Beijing, China.

The biathlon ranges from 7.5 kilometers to 15 kilometers for male athletes — 6 to 12.5 for women — and includes target shooting at 10 meters. Athletes are divided into sitting, standing, and visually impaired categories.

The event began at the 1994 games, which always follow the Olympic Games.

“When you shoot, you’ve got to control your breathing,” Rasmussen said, noting it’s important to steady one’s heart rate after skiing between targets. “Every miss here is a penalty loop.”

Like Rasmussen, Paralympic hopefuls David Collins, of Corona, Calif., and above-knee amputee Julius Schram of Huntington Beach, Calif., are Army veterans. John Faust of North Carolina, training with the athletes, is a Marine Corps veteran.

Kevin Burnside of Little Falls, N.Y., isn’t a veteran. He lost his legs to spina bifida.

“The big thing we can do,



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Russ Myer, of the Albany, N.Y.-based Capital Region Nordic Alliance, left, and Kevin Bittenbender, of the Union County Veterans Committee. Bittenbender is a rifle-shooting coach for the U.S. Paralympics.

what sports offer, is inclusion and connection,” said Myer.

For more information, visit www.unioncountyveterans-4thofjuly.com and [\[talregionnordicalliance.org\]\(http://talregionnordicalliance.org\). Call 844-838-7329 to join the ride or reach out through the Veterans Committee Facebook page.](http://www.capi-</p></div>
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