

Air Force bowlers come up big in Armed Forces Championship

By Ed Mingin, Fort Dix Public Affairs

The best bowlers the military had to offer met at Fort Dix for the Armed Forces Bowling Championship. Held Dec. 4 – 8, the top eight bowlers - four male and four female - will travel to Reno, Nev., Jan. 6 - 12, where they will compete to represent Team USA in international competition.

The Air Force was the big winner, grabbing the top spot in both the male and female competition.

“I’ve made the cut for Team USA before, but lost in match play,” said overall winner Air Force Capt. Ricky Banister, Fort Meade. “That was in 2004. I won the Inter-service Championship in 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2006.”

Bannister was confident of his chances coming into the competition, but he knew nothing was guaranteed as he faced the top military bowlers.

“It was a tough week,” he said. “I was leading all week. When you’re in the lead, everyone is gunning for you, so it’s tough. The last day of the tournament, I was 300 points ahead. I was pretty confident then.”

Heading into the Reno tournament, Bannister is still confident, but says he has a few things to tweak.

“I feel pretty good. I know what it takes. I’m throwing the ball well. There are a couple of things I need to work on, but I’ll go home and get them worked out,” he said.

Air Force Master Sgt. Trish Rodgers, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, was not quite as confident as Banister heading into the competition at Fort Dix, but thought she’d have a chance to go to Reno.

“I figured I’d make the cut, but I haven’t bowled regularly in the last three years,” said Rodgers. “I pretty much picked up where I left off for the most part. I had to practice the spares a bit; that was the hardest part.”

Rodgers has never gone to the Reno tournament before, but is looking forward to the challenge.

“I don’t know what to expect. I’ve never been there. I’m sure the competition will be more than I’m used to,” she said.

The competition at Dix was hard for the bowlers, and for the coaches who made the trip.

“I probably have as many knots in my stomach as them, maybe more, because I can’t do a thing about it,” said Army bowling coach Dean Ryan.

Ryan, a retired sergeant major, is in his fourth year as the Army bowling coach. Making the trip from Fort Meade, Md., where he is the manager of the bowling center, Ryan said his team did not have much time to prepare for the Armed Forces Championship.

“We were behind the curve a bit. We didn’t have a training camp. We got caught up, but it took a couple of days,” he said.

The biggest challenge for Ryan and the other coaches was to keep their bowlers in a good frame of mind.

“We try to keep their heads in the game. I’ll watch their form and give them tips, take care of equipment, but mostly I try to keep their heads in the game,” he said. “One of my guys started losing it a bit. I told him, ‘Forget that last ball and get your head back in it.’”

Ryan’s advice worked for his bowlers, as one half of the men’s team is Army Bowlers. Lt. Vince Gothard, Fort Bliss, Texas, and 1st Sgt. William Anthony, Anbach, Germany, will join Bannister and Air Force Capt. Brian Snyder to comprise the men’s Armed Forces Team.

For the female team, Rodgers will be accompanied by Navy Chief Petty Officer Bessie Lowry, Mid Atlantic Maintenance Center, Navy Lt. Commander Anita Hawkins, Defense Intelligence Agency, and Air Force Maj. Stephanie Gardner, Spangdahlem Air Force Base, Germany.