

**W**e're taught the team concept from the very moment we step foot in basic training. It doesn't matter if you're a pilot, a doctor, a supply clerk, a maintainer or security forces member. Or a staff sergeant, a chief master sergeant, a lieutenant or a colonel. We're still all Airmen. And we're on the same team.

The same is also true for our Air Force athletes participating in the World Class Athlete Program. In fact, they actu-

ally belong to two teams. Yet many people don't understand what they really do for the

Air Force besides "work out all day."

Now more than ever with the Air Force chief of staff urging everyone to get fit and stay fit, some Airmen are wondering why they can't collect a paycheck to train for and play on a sports team.

There are many misperceptions about what members in this program do. After spending several hours with three of them at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., I know they do far more for the Air Force than most people see [See "Olympic Dreams," Page 20].

Misperception number one: "I wish I could spend my entire day working out." I wish I had the drive and determination to work out like our world class athletes do. We all have mandated physical training days throughout our squadrons now, but how many of us can actually admit that if given the time we'd have beads of sweat pouring down 10 to 12 hours a day, six days a week?

Those in this elite program have already proven themselves as top athletes in their respective sports. They're the best of the best,

### **As a member of the World Class Athlete Program, 1st**

*Lt. James Parker gets two years to do nothing but train in his sport, the hammer throw. The inactive flight line at Malmstrom Air Force Base, Mont., wet with freshly melted snow, provides perfect conditions needed for his sport — sparsely populated land — as he works his way up in competitions in the hopes of grabbing an Olympic spot.*

usually ranked in the top three in the nation or even in the world. And they didn't get there the easy way. A typical day for an athlete starts early in the morning and doesn't end until after dinnertime. This training regimen goes on six days a week. They're professionals in what they do — just like doctors, lawyers, security forces and others with an Air Force specialty code.

Misperception number two: "It must be nice to get an Air Force salary to

work out." Even though these athletes' job for two years is to train and win competitions, they

must remain current in their respective career fields as bluesuiters. And this is one of the hardest things for them to overcome. Try staying out of your career field for two years and then be expected to pass the skills knowledge test for your next promotion.

The World Class Athlete Program is a revolving door, meaning all athletes must continue to show progress to stay in. The moment they slip in ranking, they run the risk of getting booted out. It's a two-year program that begins two years before an Olympic year, so athletes must reapply for the next Olympic season their sport is in.

If it's every two years, then what do our Air Force members do during their two "off" years? They put the uniform on and report to work. As many seem quick to point out, they're still members of the Air Force. But just because their full-time job is now as a services officer

or pavement and heavy equipment journeyman, these athletes must still find time to train if they want to make it back into the program. They juggle two jobs in one, with constant temporary duty to competitions so they can maintain their rankings. That makes for long days working and training.

Misperception number three: "They have no right wearing the uniform." The 24 Air Force members in the program have every right to wear the uniform because they do more for recruiting than any one of us can do walking around a mall in uniform. Every athlete I talked to admitted that one of their favorite things about being in the program is the many opportunities they have to answer questions about the Air Force. These members have competed around the world in as many as 18 countries. All the while, they're ambassadors in blue, representing your Air Force.

It doesn't matter whether they wear the battle dress uniform, the service dress or a swimsuit emblazoned with the Air Force symbol. Every day, they're still representatives of the same team. So remember that team concept when you happen to have an athlete in your squadron. Be open-minded and understand what they do for our force in the long run.

Wouldn't you be proud if an athlete standing on the medal platforms in this summer's Olympics was a member of the Air Force team? That would be the best recruiting tool of all.

— Capt. Christine L. Kunz

by Master Sgt. Scott Wlogers

