

From a Coma to the Podium: Two Combat Amputees at Ukraine's First Veterans Pickleball Championship

Two combat amputees from Ukraine's Sumy region paired up at the first veterans pickleball championship in Kyiv and won bronze.

SAN DIEGO, CA, UNITED STATES, July 31, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A couple of friends came over with a big roll of elastic bandage. Mykola Zarytskyi wrapped several tight rounds around Oleksandr Dehtiar's left forearm, set the paddle against the stump, and went around another dozen times until it wouldn't slip.

"Here we go," Mykola said.

Oleksandr Dehtiar grew up in Verkhnya Syrovatka, a village near Sumy. He graduated from university, worked as a press operator at a factory, and spent his weekends lifting kettlebells, playing table tennis when he felt like it, and fishing when he didn't. He did not have grand plans. He was living his life.

In 2022, his country needed him, so he went. He spent two years in eastern Ukraine. In the summer of 2024, he was severely wounded and lay in a coma for three weeks, first in Dnipro, then in Kyiv, before doctors evacuated him west to the Unbroken rehabilitation center. There, he had to learn how to speak again. Then how to walk. The war had taken his right arm and his left hand. His mother, Tetiana, never left his side.

Ten months after his injury, he entered a table tennis competition. Upper-limb amputee



Oleksandr Dehtiar, a Ukrainian combat veteran from the Sumy region who lost his right arm and left hand, holds his Freedom Fighter Paddle at the First Ukrainian Veterans Pickleball Championship in Kyiv, April 2026.

category. He finished second. He used an elastic bandage to hold the paddle, the same adaptation he would bring to pickleball.

Mykola Zarytskyi is from Bilopillia, also in the Sumy region. He studied mechanical engineering, served in the border guard service, and trained in athletics from the time he was young. He became a Ukrainian champion. After the full-scale invasion, he served on some of the hardest stretches of the front line, including Lysychansk, Bakhmut, and the Kherson region, and was severely wounded. In 2023, he competed for Ukraine at the Invictus Games in Germany. Shot put: gold. Discus: silver. Rowing endurance: gold. Rowing sprint: silver. He carried the Ukrainian flag at the opening ceremony. He came home with four medals and something harder to measure: the understanding that sport could give a person back their life. He now walks on a prosthetic leg.



Mykola Zarytskyi, a Ukrainian combat veteran from the Sumy region who plays with a prosthetic leg, competes at the First Ukrainian Veterans Pickleball Championship in Kyiv, April 2026.

“

He is so motivated now. He wants to train. He wants to participate. He wants to live actively again.”

Tetiana, mother of Oleksandr Dehtiar

The two men knew each other by name. Both were from Sumy, both veterans, both amputees on the same difficult road. They had never played together until they arrived at the First Ukrainian Veterans Pickleball Championship in Kyiv in April 2026. The tournament, organized by the [Ukrainian Pickleball Federation](#) (UPF) and the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine, drew 104 combat veterans from 20 regions competing in four categories. The

[Freedom Fighter Paddle](#), co-designed with Ukrainian artists Dasha Volkova and Andrii Voloshyn and bearing Ukraine's national symbols, was the official paddle of the championship. The war, outside, did not stop.

Oleksandr and Mykola decided to pair up almost immediately. There had been no months of training, no joint preparation. From the first session, Mykola worked on Oleksandr's confidence, helping him read the game and find his spots on the court. He brought the steady voice that doesn't leave when the score gets tight. There was no coach and no student. Just two wounded men learning how to compete, and how to trust, together.

On the court, they looked whole. They looked strong. One played without hands. The other played on a prosthetic leg. Together they found a rhythm. They ran down balls in the corners, drove, returned, dinked, and sped it up when they had to, leaving nothing on the floor but sweat.

By the end of the tournament, the unlikely pair stood on the podium with bronze medals.

The UPF called them back to the stage for a special award: Fantastic Team. They handed each of them a Freedom Fighter Paddle, bearing Ukraine's national symbols and a verse by poet Taras Shevchenko: "Boritecya – poboryete!" (Fight and you shall overcome). Only real freedom fighters deserve this paddle.



Oleksandr Dehtiar and Mykola Zarytskyi receive the Fantastic Team award at the First Ukrainian Veterans Pickleball Championship in Kyiv, April 2026, joined on stage by Tetiana, Oleksandr's mother, and tournament officials.

On the final day of the championship, a woman came looking for the organizers. Her name was Tetiana. She was Oleksandr's mother. She had been there the whole time, through the coma, through the hospitals, through the months of relearning how to speak and walk. She had told him, over and over, that he could do anything. She wanted to thank someone for the competition, for what it had done to her son.

"He is so motivated now," she said. "He wants to train. He wants to participate. He wants to live actively again."

She said it with tears in her eyes.

Oleksandr still fishes. He went back to it after losing both hands. He plans to keep playing pickleball. He wants bionic prosthetics one day, a car he can drive himself, and to see more of the world. He and Mykola share a dream like everyone else in Ukraine: for the war to end, and for everyone to come home.

About [Anywhere Pickleball](#)

Anywhere Pickleball is a San Diego-based company and the official strategic partner of the Ukrainian Pickleball Federation. The Freedom Fighter Paddle is available at freedomfighterpaddle.com.

anywherepickleball.com

About the Ukrainian Pickleball Federation (UPF)

The UPF is the 60th member of the Global Pickleball Federation, developing pickleball across schools, gyms, and rehabilitation centers throughout Ukraine.

pickleballukraine.net

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