

Athlete Stories

75-79

Fitzgerald, Kathleen

Underdog Runners Challenge Top Dogs

As I sit at the dinner table and enjoy the company of fellow athletes, I reminisce about the gold medal that hangs from the chandelier above the center of the table. It was an unexpected win because of a “series of unfortunate events” affecting the odds-on favored team and, I might add, a bit of luck for us.

But first, let’s set the scene: athletes are at the track planning for the 4 x 100-meter relay at the 2015 National Senior Games in St Paul, Minnesota. All runners want to win *gold*. The ones awarded at Senior Games are not real gold. They do not hold any monetary value. But, there is prestige, “the glory of winning,” and medals are not easily won, no matter the color and no matter the odds.

The odds of winning a medal is interesting. Winning medals in a Senior Games competition is dependent upon your age. The fifty-year-old and ninety-year-old athletes have the best chance of winning medals because their age group participant numbers are the lowest. The fifty-year-olds are still working and are not able to train and travel to compete the way retired folks can. The ninety-year-olds have outlived their opponents. Our team competed in the 70-74 age group.

Ours was a pick-up team. We met at the competition and needed four runners. Two of us average Joes “just wanted to run.” We found our third runner, a mom who asked her children if they thought it was a good idea for her to join us because she had never run in a relay and they encouraged her. Our fourth team member was a last-minute pick up.

For individual running events, like the 100 meter dash, the odds of winning a gold medal in our age group is about one in 30. The odds are much better than winning gold at the Olympics but still, runners have to be super fast to win. There were four teams competing in the 4 x 100 relay in our age group, so the odds of collecting a gold medal in our relay was one in four. Our team liked the odds. We had competition but were still underdogs.

To win a medal we had to be faster than only one other team. That would give our team the bronze medal. For us, *bronze* was just fine. The winner of a relay race is not always the fastest four runners. There is a lot of strategy involved. It is the fastest four runners who put together the best strategy, execute well, and have *Fire in Their Bellies* who win. This fire does not diminish with age. *If it is there, it is there.*

We practiced passing the baton then decided who had the best start and who was best to run the anchor leg. We adjusted our passing lane distances to take advantage of individual team

member's speed and experience, then set our running order, and practiced passing the baton. We were ready to run.

At check in we learned that the favored team, because of a series of unfortunate events, had been disqualified. One of their runners had sustained an injury. When they added an ineligible runner to their roster they were disqualified. This left three teams to run in the event.

It is not nice to gloat at another team's failure and we did not do this *exactly*, but we were starting to taste victory. Now our team was assured the bronze medal if we completed the relay legally. In this case, "just being there" meant we would bring home a medal. For us, any color was okay but we now desired the *silver*.

Our team was out on the track in our assigned lanes ready to run. The excitement of the event coursed through our veins. We were psyched and ready knowing that we were guaranteed a bronze medal and if we ran as fast as we could, we could maybe, just maybe, win silver.

The gun went off and the race began. Our team got a good start and held its own around the first curve, down the straight away and around the second curve. We passed the baton each time without a hitch. We were just a bit behind as the teams headed down the home stretch. We were hoping to win a silver medal.

But wait. . . first, you need background information about our last-minute pickup runner. She had been dropped from the "Hot Shot" team because of her slower than normal performance in the preliminaries of the 100 meter race. Their captain did not ask her why her time was slower. Instead, the captain asked her if she minded being replaced. She really wanted to run, but acquiesced to the team captain's request. The captain then found a *faster* replacement runner. What the captain did not know was that her slower time was due to food poisoning she had experienced the night before the preliminary run, causing her time to be a bit off.

Two days later, at the time of our relay, she was in more than tip top running shape. In addition to being a fast runner she had *fire* within her. She ran our "anchor leg." Never underestimate the power of fire. Now, back to the race. Something wonderful happened as the teams came down the home stretch. Our anchor gained distance over the other two runners, slowly at first but then with a great burst of speed, she sprinted over the finish line first giving our team the gold medal.

I look at the gold medal that hangs on the chandelier above the dinner table and reflect on how our team of four average-Joe women got together at the track and left with gold medals. It is not always the fastest team who wins, but the team that is fast, and is maybe, just maybe, a little lucky. That gold medal hangs on the chandelier as a remembrance of the victory.

Robinson, Buck and Janet Thornton

Janet and Buck's Physical Journey

Buck Comma: I played sports in high school, but my main interest was boxing. I fought in the Golden Gloves until I turned pro at the age of 25. My pro record was 34 wins and 2 losses. In 1968, I tried out for the Olympics and missed making the cut by one fight. During these years I also competed in the Toughman Contest and in weightlifting competitions. As a young boy we lived by a golf course and I caddied on the weekends. On Mondays the course was closed so the owners let me play. That was an opportunity that to this day has provided me with exercise as well as social interactions. By working for the pipefitters union I lived in all but three states....AND, of course all states have golf courses which allowed me to keep up my game.

Janet Thornton: I didn't start exercising until after I had my first child. Jack LaLane was on TV so I exercised everyday at nine with him. That lasted three months and my activities for the next 10 years were taking care of a house and three boys, and working a fulltime job. After my third son was born I heard someone say that anyone could run a mile. At the age of 29 I thought, "OK, I can run a mile." I did and learned the true meaning of "Cotton Mouth." I also started playing racquetball, which became my first love of activities. For the next several years I kept running and playing racquetball.

Then came Monika, my new best friend who was a runner. When we were both 40, she encouraged me to run and ride bikes. THEN she heard about this group called the Stoten's. In order to be a part of this organization you had to be over 40, run a marathon, ride a bike 200 miles in two days, swim a mile, and climb a mountain in excess of 14,000 feet. I told her I would train with her but never dreamed that in 1984 we would complete all those challenges and become two of three women who had ever qualified for this organization. This opened up a whole new active life for me. We continued to ride bikes, climb mountains such as Pike's Peak, Mount Washington, Wheeler Peak, Twin Lake's and numerous others. Plus, I started going to the gym. There was a new program called BODY PUMP and I really enjoyed that so much that I went almost every day.

THEN CAME THE MERGER: JANET AND BUCK: We knew each other from high school, and in 2006, we were reunited and married. In that year we received a card about the Senior Games, so we researched the opportunities and Buck started playing in the golf tournament and participated in the weightlifting competition. Then we found out that all states have Senior Games and they allowed out-of-state participants. For the next 12 years we traveled to San Antonio, College Station, Sun City, Hot Springs, Topeka, Kissimmee St. Cloud, Laughlin, and other areas where Buck competed in golf. He has over 50 medals. Janet competed in bike riding one year and won a gold medal.

We are now 82 and 79 years old—but still playing! I (Buck) am still playing golf and winning. Now we both play new sports, cornhole and bowling, that we started this past September. I (Janet) still walk a couple of miles three or four times a week. Our plans for 2021 are for Buck to compete in golfing, and both of us to compete in cornhole and bowling. During these years we have worked through a rotator cuff surgery and back surgery (for Buck), and both of us have had knee

replacements. We hold to these words: *You don't quit playing because you get old. You get old because you quit playing.*

Robinson, Levi

Seventy-Nine-year-old Weatherford resident Levi Robison qualified for a national golf tournament at the Oklahoma Senior Games golf tournament held at Muskogee Country Club earlier this month.

Robison played in the 75 to 79-year-old flight and finished first place as he shot a round of 79. With this score, he has earned the right to represent Oklahoma in the National Senior Games in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in November 2021. Robison's score of 79 was the fourth best score in the tournament. Robison was the only player to qualify in his age group.

"I am really looking forward to this tournament and representing Oklahoma," Robison said, and added, "it is a ways off and I plan to begin training in April 2021. I started training for this year's tournament in April. I am ready to get out there and play."

Robison qualified for the National Tournament through an organization called Oklahoma Senior Games. "Qualifying for the National Tournament is only done once every seven years." The National Tournament is played in odd years.

Robison said he started playing golf when he got out of the military service and his best round was 67, which he shot at Prairie West Golf Club in Weatherford. "The older I got, the better at golf I got, even though usually it's the other way around." Robison said, "I love playing golf and have a lot of fun doing so."