

## Athlete Stories

60-64

### Bradford, Paul

I was born to an athletic family in Alabama. My father was a Deaf High School All-American guard in football his senior year. His team won the Southeastern Championship and beat a couple of hearing teams that year, too. He earned a scholarship to Gallaudet, the University for the Deaf in Washington D.C. He played two years at Gallaudet, blew out his knee, and went on to make it in the hearing world, where he retired after 33 years with The Birmingham News. My father met my mother at her high school homecoming dance after the game at my dad's rival school. My grandfather had also been a good athlete, a high school All-County center in the twenties. He played tennis and was a good golfer into his sixties.

I was born an Alabama fan and attended my first game with my father when I was just seven. An early family memory is being at my grandfather's house with my extended family watching the first nationally televised prime-time college football game when Alabama defeated the great Archie Manning, who played the game with a cast on his arm. Alabama won three national titles in football from the time I was born until I started school. My father would often take me to the Alabama School for the Deaf to watch football games and basketball tournaments. In 2018, my father was posthumously inducted into the Alabama Deaf Sports Hall of Fame.

By age 10 I was playing football, baseball, and basketball, and I played on a church basketball team that went 33-0 and won a state title. The next year I started running track and field at my school and I finished third in the state that year in the 50-yard dash. I had first cousins who ran track with me and we did everything else together too, like fishing, hunting, swimming, water skiing and hundreds of pickup games in the backyard. As part of a big extended family, Thanksgiving and many a Christmas included a banquet of food and a basketball or football game between the "young guns" and the "old folks." It was a big group so by the time I was a teenager I was playing with the old folks. We all went through Boy Scouts together and nearly all of my cousins and I became Eagle Scouts. One year a track meet was held at a scout jamboree and my cousins and I took five of the seven events to bring our troop the trophy.

In my last year of YMCA football before Jr. High School, I was a 90-pound nose guard going up against blockers almost twice my size. My quickness and speed allowed me to penetrate the line and I blocked four punts in five games that year before breaking my leg just below the knee. It didn't heal properly and it ended my football career, so in Jr. High School I played basketball and ran track.

I continued to run cross country and track in High School, and in 1977 I met Bear Bryant in the Alabama football weight room with other cross country athletes there for the State Championships, where he gave us a speech about not giving up. He said we were all too puny to play football but he guessed we were all quick as a hiccup. In my junior year I discovered the Triple Jump and was one of the first in the county to approach 40 feet, earning me a scholarship to Fordham University in New York. I competed one indoor season at Fordham and left school the next year, when I decided I was no longer interested in the pre-Law program. I went back to Alabama and enrolled at the University of Alabama-Birmingham, where I played on the first club soccer team at UAB. A year later I transferred to the University of Alabama, where I played intramural football and basketball. I graduated in 1983 and worked as a Staff Writer for The Crimson White, the UA student newspaper, and I was there when Coach Bear Bryant passed away. I then interviewed people and contributed to the coverage of Bryant's legacy and death.

After graduating with a degree in Communication, I entered the working world and lived in Florida and Alabama, where I played on company and church softball and basketball teams as well as YMCA pickup games. In 1990 I broke my foot in three places in a YMCA basketball game and it was almost a year before I was running full speed again.

I moved to Oklahoma in 1991 to take a job in Oklahoma City with a major defense contractor. I played in a flag football league at Stars and Stripes Park near Lake Hefner, and later played point guard on a church city championship team and coached a church high school team to a city championship. But athletically I was looking for something more.

In 2005, I heard about the Sooner State Games, now called the Oklahoma State Games. I competed in track for the first time in 26 years, winning a gold medal in the Triple Jump and a Silver in the 100-meter dash. I came home limping but I had found my pastime. In 2010, I entered the Senior Games for the first time, competing in six events. In 2011, I earned USA Track and Field Masters All-American honors in the Triple Jump for the first time. In 2015, I finished 10<sup>th</sup> in the Indoor Triple Jump, and 9<sup>th</sup> in the Long Jump, following up with an 8<sup>th</sup> place Triple Jump finish in my age group for the outdoor season. Since then I have earned 11 more All-American awards in the Triple Jump, along with one in the long jump, and one in the 50-meter dash when, at 57, I ran a Masters personal best 50 meters in seven seconds. My 50-meter experiences have proved to me that there are still things I can accomplish, and that I don't know that I can't do them.

In 2020, I celebrated my 15<sup>th</sup> season in Masters Track by finishing 7<sup>th</sup> in the Triple Jump for the M60 (Men 60-64) Indoor Season, and 3<sup>rd</sup> for the M60 Outdoor season, earning my 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Masters All-American Track and Field Awards.

I work on my balance every day, getting as many workouts as possible to keep my body in competition shape. As an aircraft systems engineer, I see many parallels between defying gravity in an aircraft and on the runway during a jump. You accelerate down the runway, liftoff, and combat drag and gravity to reach for a successful landing. As with an aircraft, a good landing is the one you walk away from.

While I still suffer through injuries at times, training for Masters Track and Field gives me goals to better my fitness level and maintain my cardiovascular efficiency. There have been many mentors who offered me encouragement and instruction upon my return to Track and Field. I find a mentor at nearly every Senior meet, that older guy who has worked hard to get the most out of where he is now. Seeing those athletes competing year after year really energizes me. One day I hope to be one of those guys who can inspire others.

## **Clark III, John**

### **Finally Fit: It's Never Too Late to Achieve a Dream**

Standing on the runway at the University of New Mexico Track and Field and Soccer Complex in Albuquerque, a 12-foot pole vault pole in hand, ready to make my first jump at the 2019 National Senior Games, I felt fairly calm and relaxed. About an hour earlier, when I arrived at the stadium and started getting ready to warm up, I was so nervous I put my knee brace on the wrong leg. I did manage to get my shoes tied okay, but I could barely breathe. Maybe the 5,000-foot elevation above sea level had something to do with it, but my stomach was also tied in knots, and so I spent a fair amount of time taking deep breaths, trying to settle down, as I jogged

up and down the track, stretched, did some vault drills, and took some practice jumps. I told myself: *go out there and have fun. Enjoy the experience.*

I'd come a long way from nearly two years before, when on an almost-summer afternoon in the middle of June, I'd probably have been sitting at home on the couch, watching TV, drinking beer or thinking about drinking beer. Fat and depressed, bored stiff, I'd be wondering what I could be doing instead, but deciding, nah, maybe I'll do it tomorrow. Now, here I was, one of more than 13,000 senior athletes from all across the country gathered together for the largest event of its kind. *Me. An athlete. Competing on a national stage. Wow.*

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What an incredible culmination of a highly improbable journey that began nearly two years before when I saw a Facebook post from a guy I sort of grew up with, Bubba Sparks. When I say "sort of grew up with," our families knew each other from years and years of Little League and all the kids graduated from the same high school. Bubba is a few years older than I am, so he and I were never friends back in the day, but I knew who he was and I was friends with his younger brother and sister.

So when I saw Bubba's name attached to that Facebook post, even though it had been 40-something years since high school, I remembered him, and when I read about him talking about winning a world championship in something called Masters pole vaulting in New Zealand, I was intrigued. *Old folks' track and field? Is there really such a thing?* I thought back to my junior high school days, running hurdles and relays – even winning a district championship – and trying to learn to high jump. From the time I was nearly eight years old until I was 15, I played sports year-round, and I was good at everything: baseball, football, basketball, track. One of the major regrets of my life has always been my decision to quit playing sports my sophomore year of high school. *Maybe I could join this Masters track club. Maybe run the 100 meters or something. Might be a lot of fun.*

So after I read that FB post, I sent Bubba a message. I asked him something about Masters Track & Field, and got a polite but somewhat lukewarm response. Then, that same day or maybe a day later, I sent him another message and asked him about this pole vault thing. "Would it be ridiculous for someone my age to try to learn to pole vault for the first time ever?" I asked him. His response this time was immediate. "Absolutely not!"

To make a long story short, Bubba was in California at that time, but a few months later, he moved back to Texas and we started training together every Sunday morning at Kris Allison's place in New Braunfels. My first meet was the 2018 Texas Senior Games in San Antonio, where after six months of practice, I pushed the pole down the runway and missed the box completely on my first attempt at around five feet. After I shook off that little embarrassment, I made the bar on my second try, and then cleared 5-7 before going out at 6-feet or 6-1 or something.

All my training friends from New Braunfels had qualified for the 2019 National Senior Games and I really wanted to join them, so I kept working hard – battling various major and minor sprains and strains, bumps and bruises along the way – and signed up for the Oklahoma Senior Games. If I could somehow finish in the Top three in my age group (60-64), or clear 8-1, I would qualify for Nationals. As it turned out, I only cleared 7-6 (a new P.R. for me) but that was good enough to take the top spot and send me to Albuquerque.

To say learning to pole vault at the ripe ol' age of 60 saved my life is not a huge exaggeration. I have lost somewhere around 40 pounds, gotten in the best shape physically I've been in at least a decade, and made outstanding new friends from across the country and around the world. After a lifetime of kicking myself from time to time for quitting sports way back when and wondering – *what if, what if?* – I am officially an athlete again, a competitive athlete. Describing the satisfaction and fulfillment from that could fill a book, and in fact, there is a book out there written by little ol' me that details my entire journey and transformation from a depressed, fat, old man feeling like life was passing him by to a happier, healthier, fairly content "older" guy looking forward to the future. Read my book, *Finally Fit*, for the rest of the story, which you can find by clicking on this link: [www.johnhenryiii.com/my-books](http://www.johnhenryiii.com/my-books).

## **Humphrey, Diego**

My name is Diego Humphrey, and my love for the outdoors dates back to my childhood days of running along the borders of the plantation estate and streams of my birthplace in Birch Grove, St. Andrew, Grenada. This was the very beginning of exploring my personal self and the open fields of nature.

Medical school, residency, fellowship training, and the busy schedule of my profession as a cardiologist has brought many a drought to running, so much so that I ran in any 5K that I was able to participate in no matter how far apart from each other. I did so until Ellen, my dear wife, enforced upon me that I shouldn't run those races without training. That was about 10 years ago. Shortly thereafter I joined the Muskogee Running Club where I met and interacted with great people and fabulous runners. My running distance progressively increased to participation not only in 5K but in 10K, 15K, quarter, half, and full marathons. While training for my first 15K, I sustained an iliotibial band injury. I extensively researched the topic not only to find a cure, but to avoid future injury while continuing to enjoy running. I remember exactly when I purchased Chi Running by Danny Dreyer. I realized that with the proper training, physical conditioning and "body sensing," it might be possible to run a marathon even at the tender age of 55 years. After training for one whole year, I finished my first marathon on November 18, 2012. To date I've completed four full marathons, and my goal is to do a fifth next year.

Throughout the years, running has been rewarding to me in several ways. It's allowed personal time during which some of my most creative ideas have been formed, such as naming of places and creating a new business/organization to promote preventive heart health. Running has given me the opportunity to be an example for my patients, most of whom are affected by heart disease. Participating as a member of Team Oklahoma Sports and Fitness has provided extended opportunities to encourage both young and old to be physically active. As a senior runner, I hope to do this as long as I'm able!

## **King, Marcy**

In December of this year I celebrated my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. My husband took me to Las Vegas for the big event. We did not go to gamble or party; we went to play pickleball at the Plaza!

My journey as an athlete started when I was four. My dad ran the local bowling alley and I learned to bowl. I was passionate about it. I practiced every day after school and on weekends. I got pretty good and bowled competitively in high school and in college. In fact, my goal was to have a career bowling on the women's pro tour. But alas, I decided to get married and become a mom. My passion for bowling did not end and I continued to bowl for fun for many years.

When I was 54 I learned that I had a benign brain tumor that had to be removed. The surgery was a success but left me with very little hearing in my left ear and only one balanced nerve. It also left me with two years of headaches and high blood pressure. I spent the next two years taking medications that did not work and packed 25 pounds onto my 5' 2" frame. This was not how I wanted to spend my senior years. Life as I had known it had changed and I did not like it. I was really at my wits end when I discovered acupuncture and I got my life back. However, I did not get back the sport of bowling. It was just too painful for my head and neck.

I had always been active and competitive, so what was I supposed to do now? I tried running, which I could do but not competitively. I walked the A2A Half Marathon in 2019 and my feet are still not happy with me. I needed to find something I could do to be active, stay healthy and have some fun.

In June of 2019, my husband and I discovered pickleball. We had friends that kept telling us we needed to come play pickleball at our local YMCA. We finally bit the bullet and went to check it out. Instead of just watching, we were encouraged to get on the court and play. This was a new sport for me, and I immediately wondered if I could do it with one balanced nerve. I finally just turned my mind off and onto the court we went. It was absolutely amazing, and we were hooked.

My husband and I play four or five times a week in our community with a great group of people at different skill levels and ages. It is great to be able to show the 25 to 40 year-olds that people over 60 can be active and highly competitive. In fact, my husband and I win more games against these young whipper snappers than we lose.

Pickleball has given my husband and me a way to stay active, be competitive, meet new people, and do something we love together now and for many years to come. Never let your age deter you from trying something new. You might surprise yourself.

## **Lindell, Vickie Ann**

I am Vickie Ann Liddell, a child of God, senior champion athlete, widowed mother of 10 beautiful children, and a retired band director. I retired after 22 years from teaching high school band in June, 2019. I knew in my heart that I wanted to run track after retirement even though I had *never* participated in track other than as an observer. My children were successful at track and field. I loved the sport and would often run around my high school campus prior to retirement.

Upon retirement at age 63, I reached out to my children's AAU track and field coach who agreed to work with me. I believe I had to make a believer out of him first. He would say things that made me think he didn't know how serious I was about running. But the time came when he had to make a believer out of me for I was ready to throw in the towel. I never voiced the words but I sure thought, "What am I thinking that I can do track at age 63?" That's when my coach said, "Ms. Liddell, you have got to believe you can do this." That's the secret, believing that you can. Faith says you can, but doubt says you can't.

My first year in 2019, I suffered a hamstring injury but kept going after the recovery. That same first year, I won races in Memphis, Tennessee; Seattle, Washington; and at the Arkansas Senior Olympics where I was blessed to win gold in the 100, 400, and 200 meter dashes surpassing the previous record set in the 400. In 2020, the only race that I've been able to compete in so far (due to events being closed because of COVID-19) was the Oklahoma Senior Games. The Lord blessed me again to sweep gold in the 50, 100, 200, and 400-meter dashes. I had fun running the 4X1 as well. I'm currently training to participate at the Birmingham, Alabama indoor meet set for December 13, 2020. At the Birmingham, Alabama indoor meet on December 13, 2020, I was again blessed to walk away with gold in the 60 meter, 200 meter, and 400 meter dashes with a personal best in the 400 meter.

Overcoming ageism has a lot to do with my faith in Jesus and training with youths. When our governor closed track practices due to COVID-19 concerns, I continued to train on my own. I remembered the warm-ups and the drills the coach had previously taught. So a day comes when I'm attempting a broken 600 where I run a 300, slowly run a 100 then sprint at 200. I had to overcome doubts in my head. Track is hard and I was seriously trying to talk myself into committing to the broken 600. I chose to do a 200 and a 100 instead plus a 400 cool down jog. While doing the cool down I was reminded that I had no doubt about doing this 400 (even after the full workout and drills) because I *believed* I could. I have to believe for the other things, too.

I came back the next day and completed the broken 600! I train with his AAU youth. Training with and seeing those examples helps motivate me and makes me faster. There was another time when I was so out of track shape that I just wanted to rest and come back to practice on another day. We were training and I was out of breath and tired. I told coach, "I can't breathe." He replied, "What?" I then yelled, "I can't breathe." He responded, "Come on, next set." So I got up and competed the workout. Turns out, I was able to breathe as I was able to yell. I was just out of shape. The word of God is true, that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Only believe!

I love competing and running. It makes me happy, joyful, healthier and youthful. I feel more alive. I know it's one of the things I'm supposed to do in life. I feel and look better now than I did around 20 years ago. I like the way I feel. I love the joy and support from my children. They tell me that it's now their turn to support me in my track events and they like doing it. Their track experience is a blessing to me. I call on them with track questions. They drive me to events and show up in large numbers. I did apologize to them for saying things like,

“Don’t slow down, speed up, etc.” I have a much better understanding of how the 400-meter works now. I like how my part is inspiring others. My children are now all working out and some are considering participating in the Open/Masters races. I have seen more adults at the track jogging as opposed to walking. I believe I’ve even encouraged my coach who is 69 to train more. I know one other senior in her 70’s who decided to do the race walk as a result of my experience. Life is better when you are in shape and not overweight. Track and field has helped me achieve this and enjoy the fellowship of other seniors who run. When I set out to run, I had no idea the benefits I would receive nor the places I would travel. I love the wonderful friendship and encouragement among us senior athletes. It has just begun. Next year I will compete at the National Senior Olympics. It will be just two years past retirement and only two years of track experience. I’m looking forward to the day, Lord willing, when I compete in the USA Track and Field National and perhaps International Olympics. Only Believe!

I graduated from Henderson State University, Arkadelphia, Arkansas in 1978 with a degree in Music Education. My local newspaper is the Arkansas Democrat Gazette. The experience at the 2020 Oklahoma Senior Games was superb!

## **Stewart, Regina**

As a young girl, I was a tomboy who played hopscotch, jumped rope, climbed trees, and raced with my brothers in the streets in a small town, Pauls Valley, Oklahoma. I know now that this developed me into a fast runner. It also helped me to win Girls Junior Olympics from All School Track Meet.

Running was natural for me so in my senior year in high school, I was able to compete in my first and only track season. Although I finished fourth in the state that year, there wasn’t an opportunity to continue running. I knew I had a lot of running left to do, so as a young adult I played softball and participated in Sooner State Games and yearly Corporate Challenge. Upon learning of Senior Olympics in my thirties, I know I could fulfill my dreams of being in the Olympics once again.

In 1998, I needed surgery from a torn ACL and I remember telling the doctor I wanted to continue being an athlete. I ran my first Oklahoma Senior Game in 2010 and qualified for 2011 Nationals. I realized the competition was different from what I had experienced. Timewise, I could compete, but that lasted for a few years before I realized I was not training to be the best and healthiest to stay in the 10 ranking. After my first Nationals I had to have arthroscopic surgery on same knee from ACL. I continued to run but never trained properly and developed several injuries that I ignored so I could keep running. I have since learned that if I want to continue and run for a long time, I would have to change my mindset. I want to run until I reach my great grandmother’s age of 104. Running helps me be a better wife, mother and grandmother. I can enjoy activities with them and the bound and memories I can leave behind.

I overcame ageism by continuing to stay active and not just doing enough for everyday living. I want no limitations, and if I can help it, I want to grow old in numbers only. I feel running is letting the world know age is just a number and if you want, you can accomplish anything.

Coming from a family of athletes, the same brothers who have made me a runner were great runners and professional athletes in football, so because of that I have running in my DNA. The greatest thing about Senior Games is the friends you meet and the knowledge shared with each other. So for the all the times I didn’t win a medal it was ok—it means I made it there another year and so did my friends.

## **Swift, Angela**

As kids, my four brothers and sisters and I were always throwing or kicking a ball around, running, climbing trees, riding bikes, and enjoying the outdoors in rural Oklahoma, but I will never forget the day I was introduced to organized team sports at our small school.

One day, our school principal walked into our fourth-grade classroom, whispered to our teacher, then asked all the girls to stand up beside our desks. After a quick survey, he asked my friend Sherrill and I to follow him. Our apprehension and bit of fear that we were in trouble quickly subsided when he led us to the basketball gym where the fifth and sixth-grade girls were practicing. Our principal was also the basketball coach and he needed two girls to finish out his roster. Sherrill and I were the tallest fourth-grade girls and so we were recruited

to join the school team a year ahead of normal. Although the two spare uniforms “swallowed us up” as my mother said and we sat on the bench plenty during games, Sherrill and I were thrilled. The next year, our classmates were permitted to join in on the fun and challenge of learning and improving their basketball skills, and they were also introduced to the nervousness and thrill of competition.

To even out activities throughout the year, our school made track and field training available to the girls, which included traveling to other schools for meets and to the countywide competition. Basketball and track and field were the only two organized school athletics available to the boys as well. We played together on the school basketball teams until after our eighth-grade graduation at which time we dispersed to schools in different communities, most of which did not offer basketball or any sports teams for girls.

Thing is, those schools that did not offer sports teams for girls DID offer sports teams for the boys. That seemed unfair. It reminded me of the feeling I had as a very young girl when my brother signed up for peewee little league baseball and I assumed I would be playing on the team with him. The confusion and frustration when my parents explained to me that girls are not allowed to play was difficult to reconcile. I remember responding, “But I can catch and throw better than him.”

The passage of Title IX occurred during my high school years and most likely that legislation is responsible for the organization of a girls’ track and field team at my high school. There was a tennis team also but my focus was on high jump (qualified to compete at state) and hurdles. Being a part of a sports team again was fun, great exercise, and rewarding.

In college, I enjoyed playing intramural basketball and touch football at Oklahoma State University. As an adult, playing on different women’s and co-ed softball teams was fun. In time, my activities shifted to spending time and getting exercise with my family, which was almost a repeat of my younger years of throwing or kicking a ball, running, and I’d worry for my daughter as she climbed trees. We also rode bikes as we enjoyed the outdoors in Oklahoma. These days, I am enjoying doing those same activities now with my two young grandchildren. I do love these precious family times and am so grateful that retirement allows me more time.

Retirement has also allowed me time to expand...I have rediscovered my love of playing basketball and of competing in track and field events. I have been pleasantly reminded of the wonderful companionship and support of other female athletes, of the common goals of developing skills and developing coordinated team play, and of the mutual desire to maintain our health and improve our fitness. What we senior athletes have lost in agility and stamina from our younger years has been replaced by increased determination and by a fresh appreciation of what is important in our lives: supporting and nurturing our teammates, friends, family members and ourselves. Whether competing or cheering on other senior athletes, we are energized and inspired by each other.

I currently live in the Tulsa, Oklahoma area and play on the Oklahoma Hot Shots, a senior women’s basketball team for ages 60-69. I also practice with the Happy Hoopers senior women’s basketball team. Most of the women will be turning 80 next year. Sherrill and I competed in the 2020 Oklahoma Senior Games Track meet and qualified in our events to compete at the National Senior Games in November 2021. My sister, Dawn, is a resident of New Mexico but competed in the 2020 Oklahoma Senior Games Swim Meet and qualified in her events to compete at the National Senior Games in November 2021.

