

## **Athlete Stories**

**65-69**

### **Arnett, Elizabeth Williams**

Dancing has always been my thing. I started early with ballet lessons and I still dance wherever the music plays.

I played a little basketball in high school but I was never serious about practice or competing--that came much later. Cheerleading was also in there but that was very mild compared to what is expected of the cheerleaders today.

At 29, I bumped into tai chi. After one look, I was sold. I began lessons in Tulsa, Oklahoma and while living in San Francisco, I was a student of Master Choy Kam Mon. This has been a fifty- year practice, including teaching seniors until Covid hit.

In my mid-thirties, I carried building materials up a mountain path. I not only built myself a cabin in the woods, but also a stronger body. One year with the encouragement of my son, David, I trained, and when summer came I participated in three triathlons, placing 4th in the Hillcrest. I was about 46 then.

About ten years ago, I called up some high school girlfriends and my sister-in-law, Monika, and we started passing the basketball around, shooting a few baskets, and remembering our skills from long ago. Our first concern was falling. We're 70 now and have consciously or unconsciously accepted the warnings that go with aging. It wasn't but a few weeks of getting together that we forgot our fears and began fully enjoying our time on the court and each other.

Once we heard about the Senior Games we got serious and took five wonderful road trips for the Happy Hoopers to compete in the national games. We had lots of fun and made new friends. There were some disappointments, but there was an abundance of the joy of living.

About the same time basketball showed up, so did pickleball, which is a great sport for anybody and everybody. If you've never heard of it, check it out. I like to call it 'easy tennis' for seniors and kids.

In 2019, I was the oldest woman in the Tulsa Run, a 15K event, and I placed second in my age group. So here I am in 2021, looking forward to my eightieth birthday, and loving, thanking and enjoying this healthy body.

Well, it's time to go for my morning run after I do my push-ups and a bit of yoga. I now know, dancers are athletes too.

### **Donaldson, Rev. Robert**

When I entered the Oklahoma Senior Games in track and field in Shawnee, Oklahoma, I was blessed to be able to come and participate. I had to battle through sarcoidosis, which caused me to lose 30 percent use of my lungs and have a broken leg. God showed me that if I exercise, he'd be with me.

I knew I could overcome this so I started training and just trying to do the 50 and 100 meter. God blessed me to not only do those, but to also do the 400 meter disc, shot put, javelin, standing long, running long jump, and the high jump. I've been blessed to be able to go to competitions in Iowa where for two days, they have a football throwing contest, softball throwing contest, soccer contest, kicking field goals, and a washers contest. God blessed me to go to the Heart of Illinois Seniors games in Peoria, Illinois where I competed in 20 events in two days. I was able to win metals in 18 of those events, and in the course of doing it, since I turned 60 years old, I've even been to meets in Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, but Oklahoma seems to be the best.

Having a son and daughter graduate of Langston University in Langston, Oklahoma makes winning metals in Oklahoma special! With God, I plan to come to Oklahoma in 2021, and I'm praying for the staff of Oklahoma Seniors Games!

### **Etchison, Bruce**

*You're going to hurt yourself. You're sixty-six years old. You'd better stop this pole-vaulting nonsense. Are you crazy?* Those are just some of the comments by friends and relatives when informed of my Senior Games involvement. I've never been one of those who liked being told, "No, you can't do that." Actually, that just inspired me throughout my life to prove the naysayers wrong. People that knew me growing up in Indiana would tell others, "Bruce can do anything he puts his mind to." I think it takes that kind of stubbornness and resolve to achieve most anything in life.

I was relatively small in my youth and didn't have my last growth spurt until after high school. So, it was life-changing to find an event, pole-vaulting, at which I could excel. The bigger kids could not manage to get off the ground and swing their bodies up and over the bar. I stuck with it and got better each year and eventually got a scholarship to vault for Indiana State University in Terre Haute. Fifteen feet in a meet at Purdue was my personal best. After my last college meet, I thought, "Gee I'm going to miss this." But, starting a new career and seeing the country soon took my mind off the separation from something I enjoyed. Anyway, I needed to heal up from some injuries and aches and pains I had suffered from years of competition.

Forty-two years later, I was in Albuquerque and saw on-line that some Master's Vaulters were competing at a USATF track meet in the convention center. I went that evening and met a vaulter, also from Indiana, whom I had competed against in college. I got excited at the prospect of once again taking part in an event I truly enjoyed and also about getting into much better shape. I met another vaulter at the meet who lived in Albuquerque and had a vaulting pit. I just needed to commit to practicing and getting fit.

After two years, I have lost twenty pounds and feel lighter, tougher and faster. Of course, working out and vaulting generates soreness and aches that I haven't felt in years, but it's a good kind of soreness and the kind that lets you know you have some muscles that you just haven't used in awhile. Training also encourages you to eat right, at least not as many fattening things, drink more water and get some sound sleep. My doctors are encouraging and wish all their patients would lose unnecessary weight and get active and strengthen their hearts. My blood pressure is good, usually 120/80, and my annual exams show no problems with cancer, blood sugar and breathing. It probably helps that I've never smoked or drank excessively.

Aside from placing and getting a medal at a Senior Games meet, like the OK Sr. Games held in Shawnee, I think the most enjoyable part of competing is meeting like-minded folks who are just as excited and motivated to participate as I am. Men in their 50s and 60s tell me how much weight they have lost, how good they are feeling, who they are training with, and how invigorating it feels to be competing. And everyone I have met is supportive and cheers for one another when the bar is cleared. Maybe we have tapped into our own version of the fountain of youth, or at least we are delaying getting old by getting up and moving.

## **Noel, Dennis**

My name is Dennis Noel and I am 65 years old. On April 2, 2019 I was on my bike and had a massive heart attack.

I got to the Emergency Room and Dr. Martin was on call. He came in, ordered four to five tests, and took control. He had people doing what seemed like a 100 things at once. I could tell he knew what he was doing. He demanded the test, machines, and that the results be given and read at a very fast pace. He saved my life! In 20 minutes he had the test results and I was on a helicopter to Saint Louis. When I met my surgeon and his team, they knew Dr. Tim Martin and said many good things about him. This impressed me because I had never heard a team from a hospital brag on a doctor from a different hospital.

The first eight weeks after surgery were very hard. Dr. Martin ran many tests and explained everything to me. The early tests were not very positive. Dr. Martin worked with my medicine and I continued to improve. Five months after surgery I returned to racing (cycling). Dr. Martin knew my goals and helped me to get the best medication to return to "normal."

Five months after my surgery I won the 40k road race in Oklahoma. Seven months after surgery, I went to Louisiana and won the 5k, 10k and 20k cycling races. One year after my heart attack, in 2020, I continue to get better. I have won races in Nebraska and Oklahoma and I've beat guys who beat me before my heart attack.

Dr. Martin saved my life and gave me my life back. He had worked to adjust my medication to my lifestyle even though I am sure I have been a difficult patient. Thank you, Phelps Health and Dr. Tim Martin.

## **Nortz, Nancy**

I discovered the sport of pickleball in the mid 90s but rediscovered it a few years later when I competed in my first Oklahoma Senior Games Pickleball Tournament. Was I an athlete growing up? As the youngest of six and the only girl, I don't know that I had much choice. As a matter of fact, the only reason *I knew* I was a girl was because my mom insisted on frilling me up in lots of pink.

I swam, ran, threw, caught and cartwheeled through my youth until I hit high school where I discovered competitive gymnastics. Yeah, I know. You don't start gymnastics in high school but I was fortunate to have a mentor in PE teacher, Pat Rainey. Ms. Rainey encouraged us to challenge ourselves and so I ended up leaving Oklahoma to compete in collegiate gymnastics at Southeastern Louisiana University under one of the 1972 Olympic coaches, Vannie Edwards. When I returned home to finish school at Oklahoma University, I established the Oklahoma City Gymnastics Center in 1974 with my partner, Mary Welin.

While gymnastics isn't exactly a lifetime sport, I also enjoyed competing in volleyball, softball, disc golf and racquetball. Gymnastics, however, landed me a husband. You see, every college graduate in my family received a color TV. You can see by the term "color TV" that I am old. As I was preparing to graduate from the University of Oklahoma, the top gymnast at our club was training for the Montreal Olympic Games. When our own Kathy Howard ended up qualifying as the top member of the US Olympic gymnastics team, I was trying to figure out how to finance a trip to watch her compete. My mom asked if I wanted to trade in the TV for Montreal trip funding—a no-brainer, right? I met my husband of forty years in Montreal.

My husband's brother, Joe, introduced us to pickleball while on a visit to his home near Seattle in 1994. His father-in-law roomed with one of the sports' founders during college. We had a delightful game on his court at Whidbey Island. At least I did. My husband, Jack, lost miserably to his younger brother and as soon as we returned to Oklahoma, he ordered a full set of pickleball equipment from Pickleball, Inc. We had a net, balls, the original wood paddles, a rule book, and absolutely no place to play. As luck would have it, the ball bounced perfectly on our gymnastics spring floor so we chalked lines, lowered a balance beam that was just the right width, and hung a net on it. Friends were invited in on non-meet weekends to play. In 1997, we broke down and poured a court in our backyard, which is probably the oldest in Oklahoma now.

When we realized we were old enough to compete in Senior Games, we checked a catalogue to find something we could enter. On a lark, I had entered women's low hurdles at the Sooner State Games when I was in my 40s. I had never run hurdles before but I actually earned a gold medal. Of course it was only because no one else running was in my age group. Go figure. I decided that if I could survive that, I could certainly run a 50-meter dash at the Senior Games, so I entered. My husband Jack was even more optimistic. He entered 50-meter dash, high jump, long jump, and javelin throw. When I pointed out that he'd never thrown, let alone owned a javelin, he admitted that he was hoping someone there would loan him one. Since he pulled a hammy on the triple jump to start out, we will never know if he can throw a javelin but I earned a gold in my one event.

The next year, we noticed that they had added pickleball as an event. At this point, we had our own court, which sat empty most of the time because of our busy schedule. My encounter with seniors at the previous year's event convinced me that, as a fit woman in her fifties with a court in her backyard, I would make short work of the women who entered in pickleball. I figured that they would be doing the same thing I'd done the year before and look through the lineup for something they could survive. I could hear them saying, "Pickleball? Don't know what that is but it sounds like fun!"

During the first day of play, I got a call from my middle daughter asking if I was kicking butt. I had to tell her that I lost miserably to a woman 10 years older than me. Turns out that these retired women played pickleball EVERY DAY and many played tournaments on a regular basis. It was time to really learn to play this amazing

new sport. Shortly thereafter, we were invited to join the Greater Oklahoma City Pickleball Club. Don Stanek, Ron Barnes, and Vicky Noakes have been instrumental in building the club from the small handful of players we joined, to the nearly 1,000 members it enjoys today.

Both of us retired this year. Perfect timing, huh? How about you retire then quarantine yourselves for months? To be honest, we feel very lucky that we are able to continue to play on outdoor courts for as long as the weather allows. Crazy Oklahoma weather sprinkles in some 60 and 70 degree days even in the dead of winter. Our court had seven inches of snow a couple of days ago but it will be 60 degrees on Tuesday. Pickleball time!

When Jack and I were deciding what to do for our 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary last January, we talked about a cruise or a beach vacation then opted for a pickleball clinic in Florida with Lucy Kitcher's Zero Zero Stay. It was the best anniversary ever!

The guidelines given to those writing these stories asked us to address how we deal with ageism as elderly athletes. My answer is that in pickleball, we don't. The wonderful thing about this great sport with the weird name is that people of all ages play head-to-head, and youth is often countered by experience and strategy. If you haven't tried it...what are you waiting for?

## **Stockwell, Brent**

Seven years ago, I didn't know you could catch a virus that could attack your heart. I just knew I felt fatigued and short of breath. Well guess what, when you walk into an Emergency Room at 60 years of age and tell them you're short of breath and feel fatigued, they usher you right to the front of the line.

Once they ran a few tests they informed me that my heart was only beating at 15% of what it should be. They recommended a pacemaker. I asked if there were other options, as I had no desire to add any spare parts to my body at this point. My doctor said we could try treating it medicinally and see if I responded to it and I said, "Sold!"

They fitted me with a Zoll Life Vest and told me I had to wear it 24/7 except to shower. This vest held a 500 joule charge if set off, to zap me back to life should my heart stop for any reason. It contained a Fanny pack with two buttons, which had to be pressed at the same time if the alarm sounded. If I wasn't able to press the two buttons, it would shock me with the full 500 joules.

The alarm sounded several times during the 90 days I wore this jacket, but I was always able to press the buttons so it never shocked me. I've spoken to several people since then who weren't quite so lucky. They all agreed, 500 joules hurts!

After taking my medication for about 18 months, my heart came back to 44%. My doctor explained that the left side of the heart communicates with the brain while the right side communicates with the lungs. Given that I had shortness of breath he knew that my problems were on the right side of my heart, which could be reached from my groin—a much easier procedure than cracking my chest like an open-heart surgery.

My doctor warned me I would either wake up well or with an implanted pacemaker. I told him I had complete faith in his abilities and I planned to sleep in my own bed that night. It turned out I was absolutely right. The surgery lasted six hours, and even involved my doctor spending one hour injecting adrenaline into my heart in an attempt to make my heart race. It did not race and when I awoke in the recovery room, I was completely WELL! I had no fatigue, no shortness of breath—I was completely healed. It was like not being able to see and then one day, putting on glasses.

I began power walking and lifting weights three to five times a week at our YMCA. After a couple of years, I found I was bored with this routine. It was then that we were introduced to pickleball. We fell in love with the game immediately and began playing three to four hours a day. We were logging 15 to 20,000 steps a day on our fitbits. We both lost 20 pounds and felt better than we had in years.

A friend invited me to partner with him for the Senior Sooner State games. We won gold in our division and qualified for the Nationals next November in Ft Lauderdale, Florida. Needless to say, we are thrilled to have found the sport of pickleball, and look forward to playing for years to come.