

Athlete Stories

80+

Dr. Allen, Tom

I Am a Pole Vaulter

Let me tell you how I became a pole vaulter. During my 6th through 9th grades I lived in the small southern Illinois town of Marissa where my father was the pastor of the First Baptist Church. At Marissa High School the only competitive sports were baseball and basketball. Coach Joe Budde led both sports. However, during my freshman year, a new teacher and coach came from Chicago and his name was Mr. Duncan Hanson. He announced, “Boys, we are going to have a track team!” About 15 of the boys showed up in the field far beyond the baseball diamond to mark out a quarter mile oval track, on grass of course, but it was pretty level and smooth.

After a few practices, we all lined up and Coach Hanson assigned events to us such as: high jump, long jump, sprints, shot put, etc. All events had been assigned, except the mile, and I was the only boy without an event. Coach said, “Allen, you will be our miler!” I had never run a mile—I played baseball and basketball, but I was now the miler.

Coach Hanson entered us in a couple of meets that year. I don’t remember much about those but I do remember a meet in Centralia where I saw pole vaulting for the first time. Bobby Joe Mason, who later became a Harlem Globetrotter, was vaulting. Wow, I’d like to try that, I thought. But we had neither a pit nor pole at Marissa.

Jump ahead a few weeks and we were at the district meet in East St. Louis. There for the first time we were to compete at night under lights. Now, these lights were aimed on the football field, not on the track surrounding the field, so that only patches of light shone on the track every twenty yards or so.

It was now time for my mile race. As I crossed the start/finish line after my second of four laps, suddenly the starter’s gun was fired, indicating the final lap for the lead runner who had just lapped me, and he now had one final lap and I still had two to go. As I was on the back stretch, running from dark to light, a man clapped his hands and said, “You can make it, Son,” as tears flowed down my cheeks. I finished dead last.

The next summer, Dad moved the family to Cicero, Illinois to take on a new pastorate. I entered my sophomore year in a new school, J. Sterling Morton High School with nearly 5,000 students! Basketball tryouts had just begun and although I lettered in basketball as a freshman in that small high school of 151 students in southern Illinois, I was cut quickly after a few tryouts. What to do? Indoor track had just begun practice so I thought I’d give that a try as I had been in track during my freshman year in Marissa.

When I showed up for practice, Coach Kudrnovsky said, “You are new here aren’t you, Son? What’s your name and what is your event?” I replied, “Tommy Allen and I am a pole-vaulter.” He looked at me with that ‘really?’ look but said, “Ok, let’s do some vaulting. Pick up a pole.” I think that my first jump was about three feet but *I was now a pole vaulter!* Coach stayed with me, taught me how to vault and during the following two years, I was the varsity vaulter.

I went on to vault in college at Ottawa University and later vaulted in the Masters Track and Field and placed third in the 1981, 1985 and 1987 National Masters Indoor Track and Field Championships. The 1987 meet was in Madison Wisconsin, where my hero and former Olympic Champion Bob Richards also competed. I vaulted 11’6 to Bob’s 11’0!

Because of shoulder surgery to repair an arthritic joint, I was unable to continue to pole vault but kept competing as a sprinter and I won the 100 meters at the 2009, 2012, and 2014 Oklahoma Senior Games. True to my moto that “Regular vigorous physical exercise is the cornerstone of health and a key to longevity,” I run three days a week and lift weights another three days.

What is this all about? Well, when I think of all the opportunities that I have had as a teacher, as a physician, a US Army surgeon, elected government official, medical leadership, choral conducting, and acting to which I said yes, it was my boyhood attitude that “I can do anything – I am a pole vaulter” that made all the difference.

Dr. Crynes, Billy

Why I Ran, Why I Ride

Running. It was July 1968 and I had just read a book by K. Cooper called Aerobics. It was the early beginning of what would be the 70s jogging-running boom. I started on July 18 to run Cooper’s 12 minute test. I worked on improving my distance. Sometime later I was running to explore increasing distances. Slowly I moved toward running the marathon of 26.21 miles. I attended races of all distances but my focus was the full marathon distance. The next natural step was to advance to increase speed. I wanted to run faster. But Long Slow Distance or LSD was the fad. Somewhere and at some time I became addicted to running long distances. I would run 20 or more miles on Saturdays, once doing a 33 mile-long Slow distance.

I ended up starting 22 marathon races and completing 18. Four of these were in Boston. The four Did Not Finish (DNFs) were: 1. Stopping at 24 miles for fear of heat stroke, 2. leg injury, 3. ?, and 4. DNF’ed at 13 miles because I was not on record time. This fourth one was declared to be my last and so it was.

So, what was the motive, reason for so many years of running? What was the driving force to have a three-year interval of a 10 mile a day average? When I first started it was a drive for good health.

Next it was just a personal inquisitiveness to “go farther.” Pride came into the story early on: look at me, I am skinny and I run a lot.

What were the possible reasons for this addiction? What did I gain from this, and what drove me to such extremes? Well, there was a certain amount of **pride** just knowing I could run like this. I was in part driven to **test myself** to the limit: Me against myself, to find out myself. There really was an occasional **euphoria**, endorphins after a great run, new PR or just a run that seemed so easy, fluid, smooth, like those first footsteps in the morning snow. Then there was the **pleasure** in the act of running itself, the **comradery** of other runners also infected by this extreme, and a challenge to **discover** ways to improve. Maybe, too, it was a **need to be different** and a need to **rise above** the ordinary. It was also the **fear** of missing a day of training which could mean that I would be less fit, less fast, and less disciplined which could lead to the next excuse not to run, and the next excuse, and the next...

Taken all together these added to a powerful driving force, called a passion unreasonable, an addiction extreme, and an unbalance in life.

I often told my college students to try to find your balance in life. It is hard to do. You must find your balance between *faith, family, profession, community duties and your own personal interests*. This does not mean they will each be balanced or equal all the time. For instance, your job may demand intense time and effort for some period. I strongly believe one must protect some time for personal interests within reason and balance.

Now how about cycling?

Riding. Now on the bike. I started to ride after I stopped running in the middle of a marathon because I was not on target time, and I stopped abruptly. It turns out I am physiologically more adapted for cycling than for running.

Near the beginning of cycling it was great having Mary, my wife, with me to ride Freewheel in June. Two of our boys raced up to Cat 2 level U.S.C.F and even once Larry, our son, did a race. Family interest and participating in a common activity was a wonderful experience. But alas the boys all passed through this phase and Mary no longer had strength, energy or health to do any exercises. Note that she and her friend had a walking passion and once upon a time she walked five miles most days.

Bike racing started when David, our son, and I went to Tulsa and did a local time trail. I was hooked on another passion. I raced the Oklahoma Grand Prix series, Oklahoma Senior Games and got my USCF racing license. This led to racing State and USCF Nationals age group competition. I did well and certainly good enough to stay with at least racing time trials though age 82.

I learned something from running in that, apparently, I need some sort of strict discipline in my life. Actually, I believe this started after the Marine Corps when I began college. At Rose Polytechnic Institute I adopted almost a monastic like discipline.

So, again the question, what drives my cycling passion for over 40 years? Of course, **ego**. I admit to some degree of pride when someone asks how did you do it, or are you still racing, or how many days a week do you ride, or how fast or how far do you ride in this heat or cold or rain. The older I get and still keep riding then...I still **test myself** to see my limits as I age. It is self realization, and I do it for **health**. This factor is becoming more important, not the racing aspect but just to keep moving. The **euphoria** still lives after a great race or just a good club ride or an unusual training ride. I ride for **comradery**. Riding with a group with same interests, talking about bikes, the ride itself, the last or next race, the recent accident, some fool driving a vehicle, the weather, ...Just the **pleasure** of the ride itself: days when everything is working like the weather is beautiful, the countryside exquisite, no one's around, no traffic....And still, I cycle **to be different** or **out of the ordinary**. I guess this may be part pride and part ego. Some people abhor the word "average." **Fear** at this age is very affecting! There's fear of traffic or any accident that can be permanently debilitating, and the fear for excess stress to Mary. Again, fear for missing a day or two or club ride that makes it easier to miss the next ride and leads to a breach in discipline. Fear of getting too old to ride. When that day comes, and it will, I do need some sort of **discipline** in my life as stated above in the running part. Former Olympic marathoner, Frank Shorter, says to **learn** something, say, like how to ride faster or try at least to slow down less fast.

Like in running, all these items are not equal in the holding of power or influence. Again, all these excuses (I do not like this word) combined to create a powerful drive to keep me riding for years. Time is fleeting and my cycling is less fleeting almost daily. I see some day in the future when my mind says "do it" but my body just cannot. When?

In the words of Brad Stulberg and Steve Magness, a "passion is a powerful emotion rooted in our biology and psychology..." Still, that said, captive passion can be bad, very bad.

Grove, Elmer

Sports is the epitome of ageism in America. Every child is encouraged to participate in sports in some way. Upon reaching high school, ageism first rears its head as tryouts only allow the best in the school to play for their teams, even when separating those players into J.V. and Varsity teams. Moving on to college, we see that it is again the best of that age group playing for the school, with major colleges recruiting top high school players from all over the world. The only step up from college is professional sports. Even if you end up in "minor" league, it is still professional. Once you are beyond your peak, professional sports seldom want to keep athletes around as they age. After that, there is no path of advancement or any real way to still be an "athlete" in your chosen sport...or is there?

Elementary School, six to 12 years old: I was born in Texas in 1939 and my family moved to Grant County in northern Oklahoma. My father was a wheat farmer and cattleman. My brother, my sister, and I all were taught to help with the work. Organized sports were a rarity. However, once we started grade school we started getting competitive with foot races and games like Red Rover, Red Rover.

Junior High and High School, between 12 and 18 years old: When we entered junior high we had the opportunity to play basketball, run track and field, and play baseball (we didn't have football because the school was too small—there were only ten students in my class). I did play basketball, baseball, and run track my freshman through junior years. In my senior year our school was consolidated with another school. I played football in the fall that year which was a new experience.

College years, 18 to 24 years old: Not being talented enough for college sports was probably a blessing, as I needed a lot of study time. The good news is that I was able to interact with others from all over the US and other parts of the world. I finally graduated in 1964 after serving in the Army for three years. Most of my army time was spent in Paris, France working for Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe. I was in communications and in attendance at high level meetings and conferences comprised of most of the commanders from all the countries of the allied powers (NATO). I had the opportunity to improve my people interaction skills, oh yeah! But, take note: Up to this point in my life I did not play very many sports outside of my first three years of high school.

Then, the professional years, 24 to 50 years young: Before I graduated from college with a degree in Business Administration I had taken the FSEE (Federal Service Entrance Exam) and somehow made a high score so job offers started coming in. I chose to go to work for Defense Logistics Agency and spent the next 30 years first as a Contracting Officer and later as Chief of Purchasing for the European Theater. Our primary job at DLA was to furnish food for our military, worldwide. My sports activities were relegated to an occasional softball game or round of golf with fellow government employees. REVERSE AGEISM KICKS IN: I had already retired from my Civil Service job and was working for the 129 Air Sea Rescue Unit out of Moffitt Field, California. That turned out to be an ignition to my sports activities. Each day after work I stopped At Fremont or Hayward for a game of softball on my way home. Most were younger players than myself.

And now, retirement, 50 to 81 years really young: In 2002, our family had the opportunity to move back to Oklahoma when I accepted a job at Tinker Air Force Base and worked there for three years. One of the first things I did after arriving back in my home state was to start the very first softball teams for our new church. I coached and played on both the coed and men's church teams for some eight or nine years. These teams were for 16 years and older. Our oldest player was 75 and we had high numbers (40s 50s and 60s) so truthfully here was a swipe at ageism. I then joined the local senior men's softball league here and played softball in the area six nights a week. Two of those nights six of us carpooled two hours to Tulsa twice a week and two hours home after the games.

Ageism was put in its place in 2012 and remains there today. One of my teammates and I decided to start our own league because we were the victims of ageism. We were playing younger teams that were tournament teams. We were getting beat badly on a regular basis. We started with close to 20 players from our old league and we only had two teams our first year. Several people

said we would not be able to get enough players and would fail. Surprise, surprise! Just over eight years later we are still in business and growing. As of the day I am writing this piece, we are 110 players strong and all are over the age of 60, including a few over 80. We will field seven teams and possibly eight for the 2021 year. Our league is founded with the standards of equality regarding talent among all our teams, and we redraft each team at the beginning of every year. The result is that all games end with close scores and all teams have similar won/loss records at the end of the year. We also provide a venue that we can comfortably bring our families to. We have prayer before our games and we are against foul language and cursing. Further, we have several family-friendly activities during the year, which includes an annual picnic, Ladies Night at The Ballpark, and others). We are not aware of a league anywhere with higher standards, nor with an equal rate of growth. This is one big happy family. I have been President of the league for the entire eight years and my founding partner has been our Vice President.

With average athletic abilities, I have turned into an active sports junkie in the final quadrant of my life. I have been to Senior Olympics in Louisville, Kentucky in 2007 to compete in horseshoes, and in Houston, Texas in 2011 as a member of a softball team. In 2019, we put together an 80+ team to compete in the National Senior Games at Albuquerque. It was the final softball games that some of the members would play and it was quite rewarding to 15 guys that had played on the same team or opposing teams for over 20 years. I have participated in numerous State Senior Games to include California in 1996 where I received first place in the softball throw. The softball throw gold medal is my claim to fame. Other Gold Medal recipients and I were presented our medals in a pregame ceremony for the Oakland Athletics by none other than Art Howe, who was Manager of the A's. At that time, I participated in State Senior Games including Kansas around 2017 in the javelin and long jump events. Several times in Oklahoma Games between 2002 and present day, I competed in javelin, shot put, basketball, softball, 50, 100, and 200 meter dashes, broad jump, horseshoes, washer toss, cornhole, pickleball, shuffleboard and others. Recently, my friend David Hodgson and I won the Oklahoma State Championship for horseshoe doubles in the Elder's class.

McFadden, Jim (James)

My athletic odyssey may be a bit different than others. It is a tale of longevity rather than drama. I started running 65 years ago as a 15-year-old high school freshman. I won my first mile race and have been going ever since. I have averaged 25 races a year for 65 years—that's 1,700 races! I have won open or masters races in 33 states. I have also had the fun of racing in Canada, Mexico, England, France, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. In all of these years I have never had an injury or lost a season.

During this time I have been a married man of four children. I have worked as a high school track coach, a high school and college teacher, and a high school and college administrator. My highlights have included being state champion miler in high school, becoming an All-American in college cross country, winning the Army 10K Championship, and running the Olympic Trials Marathon. I set a state record for the marathon (2:26) and 32 years later set the state Master's record for the distance (2:41). In between I won nine marathons and finished in the top three in five others. After I turned 40yrs old I set every Oklahoma masters running record

from the mile (4:32) to the marathon (2:41) and medaled in several national track championships (indoors and outdoors) when they were easy driving distance from Oklahoma.

At 81 I am still running well. I have won 21 races this year. I plan on running as long as possible and winning in a few more states. I have won Senior Games Races in Oklahoma, Kansas, Arkansas, Missouri, Wyoming and Colorado.

Phillips, Don 90-94

One day, about 35 years ago, my neighbor returned from his doctor appointment and said his doctor told him to change his diet and get some exercise. This man's knees were bad, he was overweight, *and* was diabetic. I was thinking that the doctor's advice was good, but that it was too late for him and I wondered, what would it be like if a person started living a healthy lifestyle while they are still healthy? I started reading some diet-related books and began walking two to three miles a day, four to five days a week. Then I started a walk/ jog routine and shortly after, at age 57, for the first time in my life I ran a mile without walking.

That fall I read the results of the South Dakota State Senior Games in the Argus Leader paper and decided that I would participate next year. I had never been on a track or even seen a track meet at this time, so this was a learning experience. I ran the running events (50 to 1500 meters) and was amazed by how fast some of these men could run. I subscribed to a couple running magazines to learn more about running and training as well as changed my diet, which limited processed foods, fats, and sugar. We lived in a small community so my running was done on country roads. I ran four to five days a week, starting at two to three miles, then I increased to four to five miles, and then again to up to six to eight miles a day over the next few years. I was also doing 5K and 10K road races, and I continued doing Senior Games in South Dakota and surrounding states, participating in all the runs from 50 to 1500 meters. I also started jumping rope, doing the alternate foot instead of the hop, which further simulated my running footwork.

In 1993, at age 63, I went to my first National Senior Games at Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I ran the 400, 800, and 1500 meters. My goal was to get a tenth place finish in one of the events. I finished tenth in the 400 meter, which still did not make the finals, but it was definitely an eye-opening learning experience. In 1995, I went to the next National event in San Antonio, Texas in the 65 to 69 age group. In my opinion, the sixties are the most competitive ages. Most are retired, have the time, and are still active enough to train and compete. Many were previously elite athletes. All I remember at this time is that I did not do well in any of the same three runs.

In 1997, the Nationals were in Tucson, Arizona. I had been running about ten years now and even though I was older, my times were getting better. I placed fourth in the 800 meter at 2:22.46, so this is the first time I had made it to the awards stand.

Orlando, Florida hosted the Nationals in 1999 at the Disney Sports Complex. We were waiting in the boarding area at the airport when I received a call from my sister in Seattle that our mother had died that morning at the age of 95. My sister, brother, and his wife in California planned to join us in Orlando. After considering what we felt would have been our mother's wishes, we did as planned. I placed fourth in the 400 (1:10.23) and seventh in the 1500

(5:51.86). In the 800 we appeared to be tied for third and fourth place. When the results were posted, I learned that my time was (2:40.24) and his time was (2:40.25), so I won a bronze medal by .01 of a second. This was my first National medal and a special remembrance of my mother.

The Nationals were back in Baton Rouge, Louisiana for the second time in 2001. I still did the same three runs, and I placed second in the 400 (1:09.38), second in the 800 (2:51) and fourth in the 1500 (6:26). I was 71 (70-74) and felt there was some age advantage as I moved into the next age group.

For the next ten years I did only State and local Senior Games while dealing with a series of medical issues. During this time I had endoscopy and injections in both knees, rotator cuff surgery on both shoulders, an extended bout with pneumonia one summer, and was hospitalized a week with cellulitis in one leg. Exercise was limited and sporadic. Now, at age 80, my times are getting slower. In 2011, I went to the Nationals at Houston, Texas to do the same three runs. I placed 3rd in the 400 (1:22.78), 2nd in the 800 (3:32.97), 3rd in the 1500 (7:29.02), and 2nd in the 4x100 relay. I felt encouraged by winning some medals after a ten- year hiatus.

In 2013 the Nationals were in Cleveland, Ohio. In addition to the three runs I entered the long jump. I placed 2nd in the 400 (1:29.91), 2nd in the 800 (3:35.71), and 5th in the 1500 (8:18.93). The long jump was totally different. There were eight in the finals and I was in 9th place, so this was another learning experience. In 2015, I would be 85 in the 85 to 89 age bracket with the Nationals being held in Minneapolis/St Paul, Minnesota. I decided to add the 50,100, and 200 and drop the 1500 as I had been doing these all locally for many years. At this time I had never won a gold medal at Nationals, so my goal was to win at least one gold medal this time. The results were 50 (9.41), 100 (18.47), 200 (39.18), 400 (1:42.54), 800 (4:05.16), and 4x100 (1:58.03). These were all first place wins so I went home with six gold medals. Unbelievable!

In 2017 I went to Birmingham, Alabama and entered the same six events. The number one rule going to a National event is to be as healthy and injury-free as you can be. I had done some inner thigh exercises so my groin muscles were a bit sore. The last thing to do with a sore groin is a 50 run, but that is how we started. I took Ibuprofen and kept running. The results were 4th in 50 (10.10), 3rd in 100 (19.62), 2nd in 200 (40.68), 1st in 400 (1:54.64), 2nd in 800 (4:28.13), and 1st in 4x100 (1:35.10). A week after I got home, the inside of my thighs was black and blue down to my knees. I didn't realize I was doing this much damage.

Albuquerque, New Mexico was the site of the 2019 Nationals and I entered the same events. The first day was the 50 and 400 prelims. I was .07 of a second behind 3rd place but was sure I could up it to a bronze medal in the finals. I got the bronze but injured a groin muscle. I thought I was done competing. A man at the hotel was using CBD ointment on his back and said it really helped him. I used it for two days then ran the 200 prelims in 2nd place. The next day, at the 200 finals, I thought: this is my only chance for a gold medal so I am going all out. My time was 37.55, which was .04 second off the record and I got 2nd in 4x100 (1:39.09).

In 2019, at the South Dakota State Games, I decided to do field events so for the first time ever, I did the shot, discus, hammer, triple jump, high jump, and pole vault. This year, 2020, at age 90, I wanted to qualify in these events for the National next year in Ft Lauderdale, Florida. Due to the pandemic, all Senior Games events were cancelled in South Dakota, but

Nebraska held the Games in August and I qualified in four track and five field events. Oklahoma Senior Games were in October and had three events: hammer, high jump, and pole vault, which Nebraska did not have. I went to Shawnee, Oklahoma and qualified in these three events. South Dakota keeps records for each age group in each event. These records are what I consider my competition. My goal is to post record numbers that will be there 20 to 30 years after I am dead. This year I set new 90 to 94 South Dakota records in 13 Track and Field events.

I had never thought of myself as an athlete. Basketball was my only sport in high school. I have never followed team sports, but focused more on individual performance sports such track and field, golf, hunting, fishing, and rodeo. For me, the Senior Games has provided camaraderie, competition, and the challenge to perform better for the next event. There are also health benefits, and without prescriptions.

After high school I attended college for a year then taught country school for a year. In June 1951, I was drafted into the Army and spent 13 months in Tokyo at a Counter Intelligence Corp Det. I received a BS degree from NDSU in 1956 and a DVM degree from ISU in 1960. I then practiced Veterinary Medicine for 35 years. I held a private pilot license for 30 years. Every day I thank God for this experience and for being blessed that I am still capable of being an athlete.

Stewart, Kenny

It all started with playing football in high school, where I was captain of the team. I also did track and field, and played baseball and volleyball. I received my undergraduate degree from Ohio University and master's degree from Miami University. I also completed additional hours from the University of Wisconsin, University of Cincinnati, and Xavier University. I teamed up with a partner in canoeing in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana. I also competed in 5K races every weekend in Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. Now that I'm getting older I have turned to Senior Olympics, which I entered in Cincinnati.

At present, I have competed in 30 states and earned 980 medals, ribbons, and trophies. Through the years I have met many great athletes from all over the United States. Everyone is so friendly and kind. We would compete and then go to dinner in some places. My goal is to win 1,000 medals!

Not only did I compete, but I coached some of the other athletes in track and field where I have been officiating for 52 years. Some of my other activities include 45 years with the fire department, Clermont County Park Commissioner for 50 years, and teaching and coaching for 30 years. More recently, I've been slowed down by the "virus," two knee replacements, rotator cuff surgery, and a torn ACL.

I entered Senior Olympics for the competition. I've competed in the following sports in Senior Olympics: track and field, swimming, badminton, pickleball, horseshoes, basketball, shuffleboard, ping-pong, cycling and tennis. Sports is my life! I love it! I'm also in four Hall of Fames in Ohio.

Stringer, Pel

Senior Athlete Story

The Senior Olympic Games began in every state in the early nineties. At that time it was for all seniors 55 years and older; now it's for people over 30 years old. The games covered every sport imaginable from horseshoes, washer throw, tennis, basketball, softball, volleyball, racquetball, pickleball, lawn bowling, badminton, cycling, golf, track and field, photography, creative writing, archery, race walking, bowling, swimming, road races, and weight lifting.

I entered the games in 1993. I only did three events then. By 2004, I increased the number of events and the number of games. I won 83 medals. I entered in 10 different Senior Games, which involved three states: Oklahoma (Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Bartlesville, Stillwater); Texas (Dallas and Temple); and Arkansas (Hot Springs).

My total Senior Games Medals from 1993 to 2020 (age 83) are 376. God be praised! There were a few other Senior Games outside of the usual Senior Olympic games that my father and I participated in. Linda, my wife, won a total of at least 30 medals from the time she began to the time she retired. She won the All-American Track and Field Award in 2005 in the High Jump and in 2010, she won the All-American Track and Field Award in the Hammer Throw. My father always won three gold medals: discus, javelin, and shot put.

My father, Linda and I qualified and went to Nationals in 1997, which is held every two years. We won ribbons.

What is interesting is my father did not start in the games until he was 82 and had to stop at age 90. I will probably have to stop after this year, at age 84, competing in just the field events such as discus, shot put, javelin, hammer throw, long jump, standing long jump, and high jump.