



National Senior Games Association

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2015 Personal Best Athlete Profile

Della Works, 80

Casper, Wyoming

Of Mentors, Mountains and Marathons

At each phase of her life, Della Works hasn't begun to imagine what the next turn would bring. As a farm girl in Wisconsin, she never saw a mountain while growing up, yet she would find herself avidly hiking and climbing them after she married a man who loved the outdoors. You wouldn't have convinced her at age 48 that she would start running 10Ks the next year despite a heart condition. Nor that she would start competing in Senior Games a few years later, and then start running marathons at 59. That decision would take her around the country and (so far) to marathons on four continents, including ones at the Great Wall of China, the 100th Anniversary Olympic Marathon in Athens, Greece and frigid Antarctica. (Really?)

Yet, here she is, feeling much younger than the age on her driver's license and enjoying life in her simple mountain view home just outside Casper, Wyoming. She's competed in the Wyoming Senior Olympics for the past 25 years, and the 2015 National Senior Games Presented by Humana will be her 12th national games. Twice she's had the honor of carrying her state flag in the Celebration of Athletes. Della has become an icon and inspiration in her home state, whether serving on her state senior games board, joining in as many as a dozen local charity runs per year, ski racing, being named Parade Marshal for Casper's 2013 rodeo and fair, or just tooling around town in sub-freezing winter weather with her convertible top down. (Really?)



The mother of five considers it a gift to be healthy and still in competitive shape, and is flattered that people consider her a mentor and an inspiration. But from Della's perspective, all of her achievements came as a result of being guided by others. Her son prodded her to start running- and became a spiritual guide after his tragic death in a plane crash at age 26. A senior athlete acquaintance pushed her to try a half marathon and showed her how much more she was capable of doing. Her late husband instilled a love of the mountains and used quiet persuasion to goad her on to greater accomplishments.

For Della, it's not the medals, nor reaching the peaks, nor crossing the finish line after 26 miles. Her reward and inspiration comes from the people she meets and does these incredible things with. She says they are her mentors and challenge her to be better and to keep moving. We think it goes both ways, and that Della Works definitely has found her lifelong Personal Best attitude. Really.

Glad to finally catch up with you Della. All we had was this one number to reach you.

I don't have an email account or a computer. I can go to the library to look at the Internet. I don't even have a cell phone. When I travel and go places I just like not having any interruptions. My kids worry and think I should have one. But if I get a flat tire I'll start to fix it and a good looking man will stop to help me. So why do I need a cell phone? (Laughs)

Well, people in the West are usually very independent and self-reliant.

Actually, I never saw a mountain growing up. I was raised on a farm between Pippen and Stockholm in Wisconsin. It's about 60 miles from Minneapolis where the National Senior Games will be this year.

My father went into a mental hospital when I was six and Mother raised the five of us. We didn't have a car. But the farm life was good and the neighbors were kind and helped take care of us. We went to visit Dad on the bus. Later, as an adult, I was told I could take him out. My mother had never traveled, so I was blessed to be able to take both of them to visit grandkids in Vermont and New Hampshire. We drove through 16 states and Washington DC. He was 89 at the time and died the next year.

Did you play any sports as a kid?

I did tumbling and played basketball and volleyball when I was in high school and some volleyball in college. It was all intramural, no real girls' teams that went places to play. Then I had five children to raise. We didn't have much money but we went camping and hiking a lot. Both my husband Larry and I were savers. He always said in order to make money you have to save it. I've always been a penny pincher.

So how did you become a "mountain lady?"

Larry was a geologist and a big outdoor person. So he loved to go hunting and fishing and backpacking in the mountains. He got work up in Alaska and Montana which is where I climbed my first mountain in Bozeman. He loved the mountains and he taught me to love the mountains. I have climbed 22 of the 58 "14ers" as they call them in Colorado. The highest one in Wyoming is just over 13,000 feet. I do it for cross training and I enjoy it by doing it with friends. I also cross country ski and race in the winter games up here. I think the love of the mountains and the outdoors and being raised a farm girl is what has kept me healthy.

I'm blessed that I can still ski and run and do these things. I just did the local "Headlight 5K" ski event, that's where you ski down the mountain on a groomed trail three miles at night with a light fixed on your helmet. My light kept getting dimmer and dimmer but I did finish ahead of three others! (Chuckles)

You can't vegetate, you have to participate. I really learned that when I started competing in Wyoming Senior Olympics in 1987.

How were you inspired to begin running and competing in the middle of your life?

My son Robert liked to run and got me started at age 49. He came home from college and signed me up for an eight mile race held by the Central Wyoming Fair and Rodeo in Casper. I was slow and had a heart problem. I said "Are you kidding? I can't go eight miles!" He replied that I used to take them out for long hiking trips. I answered, "I did that so you kids would sleep in the afternoon!" Anyway, they said I could walk or run and that I'd be the oldest person in it. Well, I wore my cowboy hat and went out and finished it. I enjoyed seeing all the healthy people out there and just got addicted to it.

I've never gotten a medal in the National Senior Games, and I'm not there expecting to get glory and medals. They do give out ribbons up to 8th place and I've gotten some of those, but never a medal.

You've dominated your age groups and won many medals in Wyoming though. Is it frustrating to miss the medal stand at the National Senior Games?

Oh no. In my heart I want to run and compete, but I keep going because of the people in these games. It's a wonderful community of people, and we all love the camaraderie. There's this one woman my age from Kentucky-Maureen Tarpey-who does the 5K and 10K. She always comes in last but she just loves meeting the people. And I do too. There's another one, Eleanor Pendergraft from Tennessee, who got MS [multiple sclerosis] when she was 40 and was told she would never walk again. Well, she started swimming and exercising and coming to senior games. She's still out there running. To be up out of her wheelchair is unreal. Those are the people I like to meet. People that keep trying and doing really help guide and motivate me.

Like me, none of them have won a national medal. What I hope to do this year is to get those two and another athlete to join us to do the 400 relay. Last time they had an 85-89 age women's team but not in the 80-84, so that's something I want to do. Hey, we might win a medal!

OK, let's talk about your endurance running. How did you become a marathoner?

A mentor talked me into doing it. I was in Arizona for at a meeting with Native Americans as a national board member of Church Women United. I had a free Saturday and the Arizona Senior Olympics was going on nearby so I entered their games. This woman about my age-I think I was 56-befriended me and said she had done more than 50 marathons and that I ought to do it. I said "No Way!" I was happy doing the senior track and the road races. But she kept after me, and it took three years, but she convinced me to come do a half marathon with her. Well, I actually came in ahead of her. (Laughs) It takes someone to mentor you, to say that "You can do this."

I started running marathons in 1994. The first one was in Lincoln, Nebraska. 12 of us went together from Casper in a motor home. I got a plaque because I was the oldest one running at 59 and won my age group. I was so excited and was hugging everybody. I even met a man from Alaska there who remembered the plane crash that took my son.

I ran with Robert before he got killed at age 26 in a plane crash in Alaska. But he left us this gift of running that got me going with competing in track and field and road race as well as the marathons. And it became contagious. My daughters have done marathons and now I've got grandchildren running in them too. All of my grandchildren are active in some kind of sports. Whenever we run together we do it in Robert's honor for his great gift that keeps us healthy. In fact, last summer three of my children and my granddaughter went up for the Alaska Marathon to see that beautiful country and to share happy thoughts about him. He mentored all of us.

My life is so blessed by people that I just...get tears. (Pauses) You just keep on going. They say I'm inspiring but it's the people I meet that inspire my soul. They help keep me motivated.

You've run marathons everywhere it seems, even along the Great Wall in China. Which has been your favorite?

Maybe the Antarctica Marathon. I can't really say it was my favorite marathon because they are all different and enjoyable.

Antarctica? Really?

(Laughs) Well, my husband was reading about it in the Wall Street Journal and started laughing. He said "One day you're going to do this." Well, here's that mentor again. I said I wasn't going all the way to Antarctica without him and that was it. A couple years after he died I got some information about it. Every two years they allow a limited number of people to go down there on a Russian research ship for a marathon. I was 69 when I went there.

It's so pristine and beautiful. It's the only continent that hasn't had a war. There's only one church, this Russian Orthodox church that was where we started and finished. I was the oldest one there at 69. Everybody else spent \$500 on their outfits. I got a hooded windbreaker at church thrift shop for \$2. I had purple Ralph Lauren tights that I wore for skiing. (Chuckles)



But they've all been special. I even ran in one commemorating the 100th anniversary of the first Olympic marathon in Greece. They invited a runner from each U.S. state and asked me to represent Wyoming. I first said no because my husband didn't want to go with me. He didn't like waiting around for me to come to the finish line. (Laughs) Well, they paid for my flight, lodging and my entry so I went to Athens. To run into that Olympic stadium with the people cheering...it was unbelievable.

Clearly, you are not afraid of taking on challenges and just keep moving on.

I have a favorite expression that I heard astronaut Neal Armstrong say as a guest speaker at the 1991 National Senior Games. He said "It doesn't matter how your finish, or if you even finish. The main thing is getting to the starting line!" People always ask when I'm going to quit and I never could say when. I'm turning 80 but at the Senior Games you just move up to the 80 to 84 group. Most people don't like to tell their age but it doesn't bother me at all. I just feel so good and so thankful. You never know what tomorrow will bring.

You know, you just don't give up. I've had a heart condition and some breathing problems since the '70s so I don't talk with others while I'm running. And I broke my ankle in 1999, the same year that my husband died. I got 15 screws in my ankle and people said 'Oh Della you'll never be able to run again.' It was rough and I did take a lot of time off from running the next three years.

Then in Houston at the 2011 national games my knee buckled and I fell down with a hamstring pull in my first track event. Another of my favorite sayings is "Pain can last a moment or a day, but memories last forever." I got up and hobbled in terrific pain and the people cheered me to finish. With icing and Ibuprofen I hobbled all the way through the week to start and finish my track events and 5k and 10k road races. Everybody called me "Hopalong Cassidy." (Laugh)

I just finished my 32nd marathon at 79. (Pause) 32 in 16 years, that's not bad. I did four last year in fact. I don't actually run that much in the marathons anymore, I jog and power walk up the hills. But I do it.

I have been very blessed. And it's wonderful to see my kids and grandkids are all active. So it passes from one generation to the next. You know, somebody has to be your mentor.

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