



2017 Personal Best Athlete Profile

Lee Stadem, 89

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Spirited Competitor

You might say Leroy “Lee” Stadem has a reverence for sports and fitness. He believes that keeping active is a necessary component to living a full life mentally and spiritually, and he considers himself a humble example for others to follow. A big reason for this modesty is because Lee served as a Lutheran minister for more than six decades in and around his home state of South Dakota.

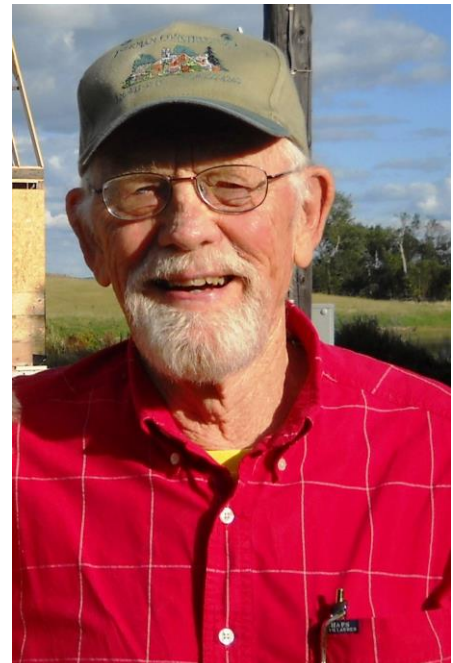
Lee played and competed in any sport that was available when he had a chance, which was somewhat challenging for a lad growing up on a rural farm. After military service and college, he discovered a love for tennis and table tennis. When he heard that his state’s department on aging wanted volunteers to help organize Senior Games, he and a friend traveled to the capital and became part of the founding board, and the first South Dakota Senior Games began in 1984.

When the inaugural “National Senior Sports Classic” was announced to be held in 1987, Lee signed up and traveled to St. Louis with his buddy to participate. Thirty years later, he hasn’t missed a single one of either his state games or National Senior Games. When Elisabeth, his wife of 62 years, tagged along for the 1991 Games in Syracuse to see what the fuss was all about, she decided she could compete too. She has also made every trip since then, first as a swimmer, and then finding her groove with shuffleboard and horseshoes. In our conversation with Lee that follows, he says her participation helped keep him going to National Senior Games, partially because he would have felt selfish doing it without her.

The soft-spoken man with a broad smile also likes the social aspect of sports, preferring those that involve partner play. After struggling early to find suitable partners to qualify and travel with him for national competition, Lee played against Royal Smart, who came to South Dakota from Illinois to qualify for the 1993 Games. They decided to pair up for the trip to Baton Rouge. Despite a family emergency that pulled Royal away in the middle of their first competition together, the men created a lasting bond and have remained playing partners to this day.

Lee has maintained good health as a senior, although a bum knee threatened to keep him off the field at one point. After a knee replacement, he hasn’t had any further problems. However, after taking his “re-retirement” last November, he had to deal with a shingles outbreak, and then recently found out that he has a cancerous tumor in his intestines. The good news is that it was not an aggressive type, and after surgery he feels good about being ready to play when the 2017 National Senior Games presented by Humana kick off in Birmingham. His surgeon also noted that Lee’s excellent physical condition greatly increased his body’s ability to bounce back.

In 2014, Lee wrote a guest column for his local newspaper entitled “Can God Bless Our Leisure?” In it, he made the following recollection: “60 years ago in our homiletics class at seminary, our guest lecturer for our senior class was a pastor of a mega congregation in Minneapolis. I won’t forget this part of his lecture when he said, ‘I’d rather burn out than rust out.’” Lee Stadem is still burning strong as he continues to pursue his Personal Best.



Let's start with where you live, Lee. Are you a native of South Dakota?

Yes. I grew up on a farm in Bryant. It's a small community, and I worked on the farm during the summer school breaks. I'm the youngest of nine children. I had seven great, wonderful sisters and one brother. I enjoyed being on the farm. Our folks were great people, and we enjoyed having them around for many years.

Working a farm will keep you in shape. Did you play sports growing up?

I love sports, and have always played sports. I attended a small private Christian high school so we played intermural sports. I played everything they had.

Then I went into the Navy. World War II ended in August of 1945, and I turned 18 in October. I wanted to be in the same branch of service as my brother. It was a two-year enlistment, and there wasn't much chance to play sports while I was in there. When I got out I ran the family farm for a short time, but I thought if I was going to be a farmer I didn't want to be a bachelor farmer, so I decided to go to college. I went to Augustana College in Sioux Falls. I went out for football and that was my biggest claim to fame there. Any time I had the chance, I did something in sports during my life.

How did you hear about Senior Games?

There was a notice in our hometown newspaper asking interested seniors 55 and over to come to the state capital in Pierre. There was a lady with the state Department on Aging who wanted to form a group to create Senior Games for the state. There was no organization but she took it upon herself to get it started. I went down there with Glen Peterson, whose main event was race walking. A small group of us met and formed a board to get things organized, and we had our first games in 1984.

When we heard about the first national games coming for 1987 Glen asked, "Why don't we go down to St. Louis and compete?" We did, and we enjoyed it very much, so we went back again two years later, and went on from there. Glen is now deceased.

What sports did you play?

Well, I entered various sports in the state games. It wasn't that I was very good at them, but there were so few of us that it wasn't tough to get qualified. I've always played table tennis, and have done that for Nationals all through the years. I picked up tennis and that's been my other sport. I just love playing them.



1992 feature in Sioux Falls Argus Leader



Lee and Royal Smart at 2009 Games in Palo Alto

Now, those are both partner sports, and it was a problem at first to get partners lined up for Nationals. I'd qualify with people here, and we're playing pretty good, and for one reason or another they would bow out from going. It was a discouraging thing to try to find a good partner, being in a small state like this. So, I changed my philosophy and didn't think about winning a gold medal, but just to go and enjoy competing.

I did finally find a partner to play both tennis and table tennis with. His name is Royal Smart, and he lives near Chicago. I've just been to the South Dakota games, but he goes to several Senior Games around him. I competed against him in tennis in South Dakota, and we decided to be partners and went to Baton Rouge in 1993. That first time we were doing really well, but Royal had a family emergency and had to leave to take care of both his wife and his mother. That was a downer, but we didn't give up on one another and have been partners ever since. We did get some medals over the years, but the best part is that we can depend on each other to always be there.

Speaking of always being there, you are among a group of only eight athletes who have gone to all of The Games.

That's interesting that the number is that small now. We had a gathering in Louisville in 2007 where they brought everyone who had been to all them onto the stage. We had a whole bunch there at that time.

That just means you're going to get that much more love this time in Birmingham.

Well, my wife Elisabeth and I are sure looking forward to it. Some of my relatives are coming. One has volunteered to drive us there, and another lives in Atlanta and told us to come over and stay when we have a couple days off.

So, your wife competes too?

Yes. When Glen and I went to Syracuse in 1991, she was too young to be in it, but she wanted to go with us. She wanted to see Niagara Falls which wasn't far away. She saw what was going on at The Games and on the way home she said, "I can do those things."

Liz has competed in swimming, but likes shuffleboard and does well in it. She also plays horseshoes, and hasn't missed any Games since she began.

We've been married for 62 years, one less year than I've been pastoring. She's been a very supportive part in all of this. It's been a big encouragement for me that she does the sports too. If I was just doing this by myself I might have felt quite selfish. We've made a lot of friendships, especially in our state.



Lee and Elisabeth at 2013 Games in Cleveland

Let's go back for a moment. You were a pastor for your career?

Yes. I majored in sociology and philosophy at Augustana, and before I graduated one of the professors asked me, "Have you ever thought about entering the ministry?" I really hadn't. He said, "I think you should." I qualified to start at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. I had three years of study and one year of internship.

When I retired at 65, I was asked if I was interested to be on call for my parish. I continued as an interim visiting pastor. I went to a lot of places around South Dakota until I retired for good, and I really enjoyed it. I worked with St. John American Lutheran Church for quite some time, and they gave me a nice party in November and presented me with a cake that said "Happy Retirement." [Chuckle]

I'm now looking forward to doing some special things. In 2018, our family is going to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the year my parents bought the family farm. One of my sons grew up enjoying selecting devotionals. He wants to put together a booklet of them, with one for each day in the year. He's given me the assignment to write up one devotional for each week, so I have to prepare 52 of those. I'll get started when I get over these medical things that have come up.



We know our interview was delayed because you had a bout with shingles over the holidays.

Yes, and it's still bugging me. I had the vaccine shot back in '08, but I still got it. I've got pain on the back of my head and on my right side, and frankly it's disgusting! [Laugh] But it'll pass, and I'll hang in there. I did have to drop out of tennis during this time, but I've talked with all the fellas and I plan to get back to it. We have a good place to play, and I'll just need to get my legs back in shape.

I also just recently had something else to deal with. They found a tumor where the small intestine joins with the large. It was the size of a tennis ball and a form of cancer, but the doctor said I shouldn't worry because it's not the type that moves quickly and it just needed to be removed soon. I've had the procedure and things are looking good now.

When I went in for the PET scan and got my news, the doctor told me, "I can sure see that you've been very active. I don't think there's going to be any problems with your heart and for your body to be able to recover." He knows about how important the Senior Games is for me, and he thought I'd heal in time. I am feeling good now, I think it's good news.

You have been fortunate to have good health all of those years.

Yes. I did use a brace on my knee for several years. Every step got to be painful. A man saw me hobbling after a competition and showed me the scar on his knee. He said, "You should look into having a knee replacement." I did get that done, and I haven't had a speck of pain since then. It's been miraculous, really.

You've spent a lifetime ministering to souls. Do you see physical activity and sports as also helping with a person's mental and spiritual well-being?

I think they are closely related. You should do what glorifies yourself, but there are more important goals than just winning. We all love to compete and win those medals, but I tell everyone I play that we are all winners. Faith in the Lord makes us a winner already. My wife and I feel that way.

It's certainly in our Scripture. We are commissioned to work in the Kingdom, and we're expected to take care of our bodies. I believe I have been an example to show the importance to do that. For the people who go to Nationals from my state, I like to remind that we represent South Dakota and we should do the very best we can. It's great to march in together to do that.

Of course, staying healthy is always the goal.

It has been my goal. I play tennis three times a week, and table tennis two or three times a week. I also like to hunt, and have done it in some tough places in the mountains and south of the Tetons. My conditioning with sports has surely helped, and I don't imbibe in smoking or drinking. Liz has been very helpful for me, being involved too. She regularly bowls and does water aerobics.

It seems logical that your sporting activity has contributed to your longevity.

Oh, I think it has. It surely hasn't hindered my health in any way. My mother died with she was 98, and my father lived to be 79. I've already outlived him, so that's for sure.



Even though winning is not the main reason to stay active, if we're going to compete, we need to stay in shape. Regular exercise is very important in our lives. When Liz and I go to a church event and they're having a volleyball game, we don't get all stiff and can enjoy participating.

Does it surprise the younger ones when you can get out there and knock the ball around?

I think they really are surprised. People say it's great that we can still do all of this. I believe we are setting an example. Everyone doing this is setting an example.

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DMoon@NSGA.com