



National Senior Games Association

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## 2016 Personal Best Athlete Profile

### Eleanor Pendergraft, 80

Johnson City, Tennessee

#### Standing Up to MS

*Eight years ago, Eleanor Pendergraft pondered her fate. She had been disabled for 25 years with multiple sclerosis (MS), an autoimmune disease that affects the brain and spinal cord. A walker, wheelchair or motorized scooter was her only means of getting around. Her neurologist said she would never get any better.*

*Undaunted, Eleanor decided to join a nearby fitness club and started working out in a gym six days a week. What was there to lose? As she gradually gained core strength, her goals expanded. While using her walker on the indoor track she saw others flying on their feet and wanted to do that too. Slowly but surely, she went from supporting her legs on a walker to using two canes, then one, and finally taking steps on her own. Everyone celebrated her first triumphant lap jogging around the track.*



Photo: BCBS Tennessee

*What happened next takes this story from incredible to being nearly miraculous. A friend who ran in the Tennessee Senior Olympics and the National Senior Games, seeing her progress, suggested Eleanor try competing—if nothing else, for the fitness, fun and fellowship it affords all who participate in them. Eleanor thought she was crazy at first. After all, she had never done anything in athletics, and had been too busy raising six children and finishing college to be very active before MS struck her down.*

*Why not try it? Eleanor rode with her friends to the state games in Franklin, where she proceeded to not only compete, but earn some medals and qualify for the 2011 National Senior Games presented by Humana held in Houston. She made the trip and was excited to finish third in one of her races. The former invalid was now a National Senior Games bronze medalist.*

*To date, she has collected more than 300 trophies and medals from all of the running events she has entered in Senior Games and with a track club she joined. Many of them hang on the wall next to the motor scooter in her apartment to remind her just how far she has come. So far, she has only taken minimal medications since becoming active. There have been bumps in the road with small setbacks and the need for double knee replacements, but she hasn't stayed down for long. Recently, an auto accident put her back on a walker, but she is working with her doctor, orthopedist and coaches at the fitness club to get in shape to qualify to go to Birmingham for The Games in 2017.*

*Would you bet against her? We wouldn't either! Read on and take in our conversation with Eleanor Pendergraft to learn more about her amazing journey to now lead a busy life filled with running, working a part-time job and devoting volunteer time to visit and help others to pay forward the kindness she received when she was ill. Propelled by her faith, she advises others that there's always something people can do to improve the quality of their lives. Just take that first step and you never know where it may lead. This Personal Best athlete's example is a powerful testimony to this simple truth.*

**Eleanor, it's simply incredible that you have put something as debilitating as MS at bay through exercise and sports. Were you athletic as a youth or before you became ill?**

Never. When I was in high school we had a choice to do either music or phys ed. I chose music.

I had six children, a son and five daughters that ranged from two to 12 years old. I raised them as a single mom after the last one. I didn't have time to get out and do the kinds of things I would have liked to, or to really encourage the kids to be more active.

I was a music major in college back in the 50s. I went back to the same school [Campbell University] in 1979 after three of the kids had grown. I majored in business administration and graduated with honors and went right to work. So I was never athletic, never really active much until I recovered from MS eight years ago.

### **When did the disease overtake you? What was life like?**

I was diagnosed just over 30 years ago. After I received my degree, the First American Bank in Johnson City offered me a job as a trust officer. I wasn't interested in leaving North Carolina, but they asked me to just come look it over and meet with them. I agreed and made the move. But I was not able to work very long before the MS hit me full blast. I was dropping things and falling constantly. That's when I was tested and got the diagnosis.

I started out using a cane, and then two canes, and then a walker. I was having so many head injuries that the doctor told me I was going to have a very serious injury and to not to use a cane anymore. I was to either use a walker or a wheelchair. I couldn't drive a car without hand controls because I couldn't lift my feet to use the pedals.



So I was not totally wheelchair bound. I could use a walker for short distances and a wheelchair or motorized chair for longer distances. I still have that motorized chair sitting in my apartment and I have medals hanging over it. [Laugh] It reminds me every time I come in the door how blessed I have been.

There were weeks at a time I couldn't get out of my apartment, and I like to stay busy. I had always wanted to paint so I did a few landscapes. I wanted to do portraits of my grandchildren so I taught myself how to paint them. I also did portraits of some of the people who have been so good to me over the years. I also used to pass time by making furniture, both full size and miniature.

Now, since I've been able to get out and do all of these other things I haven't had time to paint and do crafts!

### **So, what happened to turn your life around?**

Eight years ago I was getting worse, and my neurologist didn't give me any hope of getting better. My next door neighbor told me about the Lifestyle Fitness Center near me so I went and looked it over. I joined and started working out every day. When I started, I had a brace on my foot and it was dragging. I could only make it a quarter of the way around the track on my walker.

Then I joined the Silver Sneakers fitness program for senior citizens and attended that three days a week. The other days I would walk the track and work on the machines in the gym. As I improved after about four months, I went back to my neurologist expecting him to be as pleased as I was. He said, "You know you are going to relapse." I replied, "Well, maybe I will, but let me enjoy this while I can." I didn't think that was much of a comment. I no longer see him. [Laugh]

I gradually improved, going from two canes to one cane to walking. I saw the other people running around the indoor track and thought "I'd sure love to be able to do that." So one day, when there weren't too many people in the gym watching, I picked up my cane and started running. I've been running ever since.

I later joined the State of Franklin Track Club. I've been racing most weekends for a good while now.

### **Well, exercise is one thing, but how did you make that big step to become a competitive runner?**

That was not my idea. Barbara Bogart, a woman who does swimming, cycling and triathlons, came to me after class one day and said "You should be in the Tennessee Senior Olympics." I said, "You've got to be kidding me! I've never been athletic and have been disabled all these years." She said "Try it, you'll enjoy it." She was absolutely right. This is one of the best things I've ever done.

### **Did you qualify your first time at the Tennessee games? When was your first National Senior Games?**

I did. And I took home some medals, which surprised me to no end. Some of my friends were going to compete in the Houston games in 2011 and it sounded like a lot of fun. We had gone together to the state games and I made so many friends. They encouraged me to go, so I did. I've won several ribbons at Nationals, but my one and only national medal so far came in Houston. That same year I ran my first half marathon.

**Wait, a half marathon? Amazing. So, how many medals do you now have after eight years of competition?**

Oh, I don't know. I guess including the races, with trophies and medals, it must be close to 300.

**You must feel thankful you can even run, but has your new athletic passion given you medal fever?**

Well, I love to win the medals, but I also love to participate and push myself to see what I can do now at age 80. If anybody had told me 10 years ago I would be doing all the things I'm doing now I would have told them they were crazy. What the medals mean to me is how far I've come since 2008.

I have such a busy life overall these days. I was really shocked last December when I went to the Lifestyle Center and they offered me a job. It's a part time position helping to promote their Silver Sneakers program and walking club. I never thought that would happen at my age.

I also do a lot of volunteer work. I cook and feed a lot of people in the building where I live. These are apartments for the elderly and disabled. I've lived in this facility for almost 23 years now. A lot of my friends are now in nursing homes so I try to visit them on a regular basis.

**For you to now be active and ambulatory, doing that must feel like you are paying it forward.**

Absolutely! People were so good to me through all the years I was disabled. They visited, and sent cards, and kept in touch during the times I couldn't get out. That meant a lot to me, so I try to do the same for others.



*Eleanor (left) powers through the rain during 5K road race at the 2015 National Senior Games presented by Humana in Minnesota. (photo: Cody Phan)*

**Back to your incredible triumph over MS, have you been in remission all this time since you shed the walker?**

There have been a few setbacks. In fact, I had a little setback the year I went to Houston and came back and did the half marathon. I didn't give my body a chance to recover. I had to step up medication and rest to get back on track. And I have had a couple of smaller setbacks along the way, but nothing major. I'm on the very minimum medication and only step it up when the little setbacks happen.

**Do you believe your athletic pursuits are helping keep it at bay?**

Oh, I think so. After the first year I improved, my doctor told me "Whatever you're doing, keep it up." I asked him what research has been done about the effects of exercise on MS, and he said "Oh, we've always known it helps." I thought, "Well man, why didn't you tell me this years ago?" I will say my orthopedist is very different. He has been very supportive of all of my activities.

**To say you are an inspiration is an understatement. Has anyone else inspired you?**

Not one individual. But I get a lot from the friends that I've made going to these events, seeing the same people from year to year. That's the best part of the whole thing. It's like old home week every time you go back and renew your friendships.

There is this one athlete at the Tennessee Senior Olympics that I follow. This little man walks around with a crooked body. He can barely walk, but he finishes his race and falls into arms of the people at the finish line. There's another man, I think he's like 90 years old, who does a 5K with his walker.

**Della Works told us about you in the interview for her 2014 Personal Best profile. You compete against each other, but she is so inspired by you.**

Della is funny. She beats me in every race, but last summer I stayed right behind her in one of them, and just before the end I passed her and finished ahead in the race. She wasn't used to that. She was flabbergasted! [Laugh]

**Well, are you still friends?**

[Laugh] Of course.

**What events do you compete in?**

I do all of the track races except the race walk. At district and state games I do field events too. However, I needed to have my knees replaced three years ago. Before that, I did all the jumps. Since then, it's just been long jump and triple jump. Last summer at Nationals I just did the javelin.

**But you keep going! You won't have to travel far from where you live to get to the 2017 Games in Birmingham.**

Well, this year it's a little different when I go to the state games. I had an auto accident-not my fault-and broke one of my knee implants last December. I had to go back to using the walker, and I was very disappointed when I thought I might not get to go to the state games this year. But my doctor is working with me on it. I'm postponing surgery to repair the bad knee until July, and before I go compete he is going to give me a double strength injection in my knee so I can at least do as best as I can to qualify for the Nationals in some events. After the surgery, I should have time to get back in shape for Birmingham.



**It must be so gratifying to look back and see how you've climbed out of this dark place and can enjoy a new life.**  
God has been mighty good to me.

**What role has faith played in your process?**

Everything! If I were not a Christian, I probably would have given up years ago. There's no doubt about it.

**What advice can you offer people to avoid the problems a sedentary life brings?**

In most cases, everybody can do something to stay active. It may not be running and jumping, but just get out and walk around your building or up and down your hall. In my building I see people sitting and staring out the window all day. I don't know how they can stand it, and I try to encourage people to do something. Whatever I can do to help others, I'll do it.

I've often said if I can influence one person to get out and do something it will all be worth it. We have a man here who is in his 30s and is a paraplegic. He was a doctor in the military. He knows I do the Senior Olympics and he stopped me yesterday and said, "You know, you have encouraged me to get out and try Paralympics. I've started exercising more and have talked to someone about doing it."

I've been so blessed for the past few years.

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