



2017 Personal Best Athlete Profile

Jordan Wolle, 86

Las Cruces, New Mexico

“I guess I’m a creature of habit”

No one loves water more than Jordan Wolle. That could be the setup for a joke, given that he has lived most of his life in arid New Mexico. However, he is quick to state his opinion that there are more good swimmers per capita there than most other states. He is also proud to have represented The Land of Enchantment in every National Senior Games since the first in 1987.

Jordan is a keen observer who is never afraid to share his opinion. During our interview, he kept recalling all the little things he could have done better, or about aspects of his meets that could have been improved. His analytical character is likely responsible for his competitiveness and attention to detail in training. Certainly, he’s always found far more positives than negatives to keep showing up to enjoy all the rewards of being part of the Senior Games Movement.

As a teen, Jordan found he had an aptitude for swimming in high school and city meets around his hometown of Redwood City, near Palo Alto, California. When he signed up for military service, and then accepted a demanding work contract maintaining computers at the White Sands Missile Range near Las Cruces for several years, it seemed like he had raced his last lap. But as the old saying goes, “Children give you a second chance at life,” and as his four children were growing, Jordan started joining them in the pool for fun. At age 44, he was again racing with 10- to 12-year-old kids in USA Swimming meets, which brought back his own passion from youth.

Jordan has been a fixture in masters meets and in Senior Games since that time, and has traveled the world competing in international meets. His second wife was also a competitive swimmer for many years, but has now been sidelined by Alzheimer’s. Last year, he was also challenged with his first major medical issue, a congenital heart condition that required stents to be installed. True to his nature, the thing that irritated him most about this was that his swimming times have been affected. These challenges have not affected his desire to keep swimming and joining his friends in competition, which is proof that he will always strive for his Personal Best.

As he reveals in the following conversation, once Jordan Wolle finds something he likes, he keeps doing it. And he loves going to the National Senior Games.



Jordan, as you know, 2017 is the 30th Anniversary of National Senior Games, and you've managed to splash your way through all of them.

Yes, I'm afraid it will be. Then again, I don't look any different now than I did 30 years ago. [Pause] No, that's not true. [Laugh]

Are you a lifelong competitive swimmer?

I swam one year in high school and city meets. I was doing the breast stroke, and then the coach put me in the freestyle and I took fifth in the city meet in my first try. So, I decided I was more of a freestyle guy than anything else.

I was 44 when I started swimming again with my kids in 1976. I swam with the 10- to 12-year-old age groups in USA Swimming events. It gave me something to do after work to have fun. A lot of them were good swimmers, and I've had some come back to see me. One said, "Mr. Wolle, my biggest thrill was the first time I beat you in the 50 free." I think, "Gee, did that really make that much of a difference for them?" But it did. So, I just kept going as a master swimmer, and one thing led to another.

Have you just competed only as a freestyle swimmer in senior events?

I used to do butterfly and backstroke, but I like the freestyle. Of course, swimmers can change styles over time. I got to the point that if I don't like doing something, I'm not going to do it. So, I've been just doing free for about ten years. I still like the open water swims.

One thing I like about swimming is that it's one of the few sports where you can really take your frustrations out. You can just beat the hell out of the water and nobody knows about it. [Laugh]

Let's go back to fill the gap. Please recall for us what you did before swimming came back into your life.

You know, you're asking embarrassing questions of old people. If it wasn't yesterday, I'm not sure. [Smile]

I was born and raised in the San Francisco area of California – Redwood City and Palo Alto. In those days, you could go right out the door and steal peaches and apricots. Now, all you can steal is hubcaps because there's nothing but cars there now.

When I finished school, I entered the Marine Corps after World War II. Truthfully, I went into the Corps in 1946 to get the veterans benefits. Also, it was because a buddy of mine suggested we both go in. Guess who got accepted, and who didn't? [Laugh] I went to Guam, Saipan and China on the first tour, and got called back for the Korean War. I lucked out and didn't have to go there. I was sent to a special radar operation at Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi.

I went to work for IBM in 1952 and was with them for 45 years, servicing the old accounting machines and then into computers. The first three computers I worked on were at the White Sands Missile Range near Las Cruces, and they filled a whole big room. I lived on the base because I was on call 24 hours a day to service them. It was fun to live there, because you could go drive out looking for arrowheads on the weekends. You aren't allowed to do that anymore.

So that's how you came to live in Las Cruces, and you're still there, right?

I enjoy living in Las Cruces. I also bought some property up in the Gila area where I built a cabin. The closest town is 35 miles away. I'm not a hermit, but I do like the wide-open spaces. To each his own, you know.

You raised a family, so that proves you're no hermit.

Betty and I got married in 1961. She was a PE and music teacher. We had three kids, Brooks, Bruce and Bodwin. We named her Bodwin because Betty had a student by that name who was killed along with her mother in an automobile accident on a Christmas Eve. We liked the name and gave it to our daughter.

We stayed together 25 years and then parted. She wanted to do her things, and I wanted to do mine. Since then, we've been friends. Last week, we went up to the mountains with Bodwin, and we go out to dinner all the time.

I got married again in 1989. You'll love this: Marion and I met at the first Games in St. Louis. She was a swimmer, and wanted to know who that good-looking guy in the red Zoot Suit was. We saw each other again at the Huntsman Games in St. George, Utah and it went from there.

The only problem in our marriage, ironically, was the swimming. She did 200 flys and 400 IMs, and I swam all the freestyle stuff. So, at every meet we had to be there from the first thing in the morning until the last event. But we swam in Senior Games and did masters and some world events together. The first we did was in Rio de Janeiro. I can look back on it now of the countries I've seen – New Zealand, Fiji, Samoa, Australia, Canada, Italy, Morocco, all over the place.

Does Marion still compete in Senior Games?

No, she has Alzheimer's now. She's hanging on, doing alright. I've been getting help with her since early 2016 because I had some heart problems to deal with and couldn't take care of her anymore, like lifting her to get out of bed.



Jordan and Marion in 2013

How did you hear about the 1987 Games?

I probably got a letter sent out to masters swimmers, and I thought I might as well go try it out. And I enjoyed it. I believe there were 85 athletes that went to St. Louis from New Mexico.

There were a lot of things wrong with it those first couple of games, but that's neither here nor there. The wheels figured out that they didn't have to reinvent it every two years, which is what it seemed like to me. They also got ahold of people that dealt in specific sports to help officiate events, which brought a lot of good change. I think it's run much better now.

Any favorite stops at Nationals along the way?

You know, I remember things, but can't always recall when they happened unless I get my memory jogged and it brings up something. One thing that always seems the same is that the registration line for the "S" through "Z" names is always the longest. [Smile] It seems that sometimes all you can remember is the things that went wrong. But I guess that's human nature. I've always been pretty good about pointing out problems.

I'd say the first two games in St. Louis were good because almost all of the events were right on the university campus. A lot of people liked Tucson [1997] because everything was close the same way. I really liked the games at Palo Alto [2009]. The facilities at Stanford were good, and I grew up in that area so that made it memorable too.

Whatever the event, whether local, national or world, there's a lot of camaraderie, going to see your friends again. I'm not real vocal at meets, but sometimes you make a fool of yourself cheering people on.

We watched you qualify at the New Mexico Senior Olympics. A lot of people know you.

We have a lot of good swimmers in New Mexico percentage-wise to the size of the state. There's a guy from Las Cruces, Phil Djang, who is only 62 but he has just about every record in his swims.

You've met a lot of swimmers through all of the masters and world meets you've gone to as well.

You have an overall better grade of swimmers in those international events, of course. But I think the National Senior Games was never set up to be just for the best swimmers. It's a nice mix, and that's what makes it fun. If you had a swim meet and only the "gods" as I call them show up, you wouldn't have much of a meet. It's the same with track and field and the others. I have talked a lot of the fancy swimmers to come to Nationals.

You've had your moments as well, Jordan. Do you have a favorite among those "gods" who have also been to National Senior Games?

Well, there's the old reliable Graham Johnston. We've done some idiotic things together. [Laugh] We've done open water swims at the world meets, but I haven't swam the Straits of Gibraltar in my seventies like he has done.

Graham was a 1956 Olympian and holds a lot of records. You often had to compete with him in the same age group. That must have been daunting.

Well, you get going and get used to it. Graham's is a fast rut, and mine is a slow one, so... [Laugh] As I said, people like him are not the ones who really make the National Senior Games what it is-it's the athletes in the trenches who keep coming whether they come in first, second or last. There's all levels of competitiveness in these games.

The only thing I've ever done like that was to swim from Alcatraz to San Francisco. But that wasn't much different or harder from the 5K and 8K swims in other places. Doing that was a glory kind of thing because of where it was.

So, what is it that has driven you to come to every National Senior Games? Only seven other people have accomplished that.

I guess I'm a creature of habit. If I start something, I tend to keep doing it. For example, I also started going to the Huntsman World Senior Games in Utah every year, and I've been to all of them too except the first, because they didn't offer swimming their first year.

The National Senior Games also appeal because they've been held in different parts of the United States. They're fun to go to. And my health has been good enough over the years.

Being a longtime competitive swimmer has had to help keep you in shape to make it 30 years, too.

Well, I never had any problems with health until last year. I was getting winded when I walked, and it turned out to be a congenital heart problem. It wasn't the heart itself, it was getting the blood to it. So, they put stents in. There's one thing that all the doctors say as I leave the office that irritates me: "You're doing fine for a man of your age." [Chuckle] I say "Whattaya mean by that?" No two people in one age do the same. But on the health thing, who knows? For all I know, if I hadn't been swimming all this time I might be dead now.

What would you say to someone who is just turning 50 and new to The Games?

Any sport is good for you. I would tell them to look for a sport in their area they are interested in and join a group. If it's swimming, join masters swimming. If it's track, join a track team. Senior Games happen once a year in states. Between Arizona, Texas and New Mexico, for example, there's probably 15 masters swim meets a year they can go to. It's better to get involved in clubs. They have coaches that will work with you.

You know, you can always find an excuse not to do something, doesn't matter what that is. In my case, there were always more reasons to go than not to. Might as well go make an ass of yourself in these games as any place! [Laugh]



Jordan (in his red "Zoot Suit") celebrates his bronze medal earned at the 1989 Games.

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