



## 2017 Personal Best Athlete Profile

### George Freeman, 86

Foley, Alabama

#### Both Feet on the Floor



*There are just some people in the world that catch you by surprise. When you first meet George Freeman, he doesn't strike you as an outgoing, gregarious person. He possesses an unassuming and good-natured personality that puts people at ease, and he is a good listener. However, once he starts talking, joking, and telling stories, he has the ability to light up a room without really trying. He also possesses a quiet determination that matches with his love of distance running, and he has covered a lot of ground by competing in every National Senior Games with no end in sight.*

*As you will learn in the following conversation, the native of Buffalo, New York believes his competitiveness comes from being raised in a large family during the Depression. He loved athletics in school, and after college became a high school health and physical education teacher and coach. He and his wife also maintained a sizable cattle ranch and raised four children. As busy as his life was, George always found time to run for fitness. At age 41, after seeing Frank Shorter win the Olympic Marathon in 1972, he dreamed of doing the Boston Marathon. He attained that goal six times, and ran a total of 26 over the next two decades.*

*A friend told him about the first National Senior Games coming to St. Louis in 1987, and his marathon run as a senior athlete began. He's enjoyed competing in numerous sports in New York and at well over a dozen other state games. He's earned plenty of gold at the state level, but it would take him until 2009 to win his lone gold medal in national competition. He cherishes the memory of that 1500-meter run, and appreciates the opportunity to travel and make friends during his competitive ventures.*

*After the passing of his wife a few years ago, George decided to make a fresh start, sold his farm and bought a retirement home in south Alabama where he had been wintering and visiting in-laws. This afforded new friends, new experiences, and new games to play in the surrounding region. He is looking forward to representing his new home state at the 2017 National Senior Games presented by Humana in Birmingham.*

*George considers himself lucky to have made it to all of The Games, but also credits his dedication to fitness and healthy habits for his longevity and being able to ward off the maladies suffered by other family members. He's particularly proud that he has inspired many of his former students, and his own family, to engage in active lifestyles. That's what happens when you pursue your own Personal Best!*

**George, take us back to the beginning and tell us about where and how you grew up.**

Interesting story: I came from a strict Roman Catholic family. The oldest boy would always go into the priesthood in the old days. Well, Walter Freeman went to Niagara University. First year, grades were great. Second year, they were OK, but the third year they weren't good at all. Well, Walter didn't have the guts to go home right away, so he went to work on a peanut farm in Virginia. He eventually told his parents he didn't have the vocational skills to be a priest.

[Pause] Well, thank God for that, or I wouldn't be here today!

**Oh...so Walter Freeman was *your* father. O-K. [Laugh]**

Yep! [Laugh] So, I was born in Buffalo, but grew up in South Byron, a little rural town between Buffalo and Rochester. It was during the Depression. I was one of seven children - five boys and two girls. You can see how I became so competitive with four brothers around. [Laugh] I was always trying to figure out how to stay one step ahead of the others.

I was always athletic. My school was small, so it wasn't very difficult to make a team. I played baseball and basketball, and I've always been a runner. I went to the University of New York at Brockport where I got my degree in health and physical education. I was on the track team and I did play one game of basketball - I scored two points and they cut me! [Laugh]

**What was your career?**

I taught health and physical education and coached a lot of sports - football, wrestling, baseball, track and field, boys and girls basketball, you know, all of them. But of all the sports, cross country was my favorite because those kids were most like me - running all the time. I loved distance running.

I also had a 200-acre Angus farm in New York for 45 years. My wife Helen was a farmer's daughter and was great working it, birthing cows and so on.

**When did you start running competitively after you became an adult?**

It was the year after Frank Shorter won a gold medal in the Olympic Marathon in 1972. Plus, Dr. Ken Cooper had his step test and promoted the aerobics concept, and I fell right into it. My goal was to run the Boston Marathon. I've run 26 marathons, and six were the Boston Marathon. The last one was in 2002.

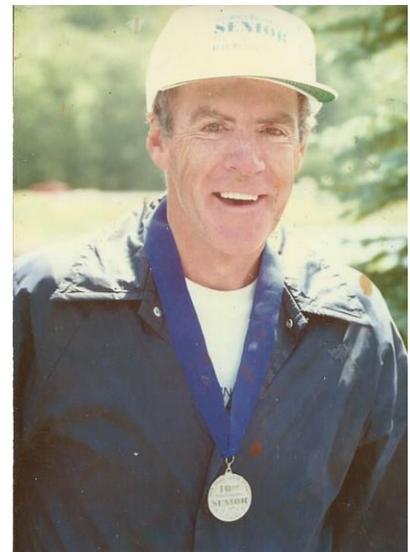
**That's one for each mile in a marathon. Was that your goal too?**

No, it just turned out that way. But I'll tell you this for sure: I've run 26 marathons, and I was tired after every single one! [Laugh]

**How did you learn about the first national games in St. Louis?**

A friend of mine told me about them. He said, "You want to get into this now. It's going to be big!" I went to St. Louis and I think they had 2,500 or so athletes. Back then you had to be 55 to compete, it's 50 now.

I was really impressed with that St. Louis Arch and the Museum of Westward Expansion. I recall seeing Charles Lindbergh's flying license. I try to take in stuff like this when I go to The Games. My wife always enjoyed going to new places with me.



*George Freeman in 1989*

**Were any of The Games your favorites?**

San Antonio [1995] was my favorite to go look around and see things. But I guess my favorite was Palo Alto [2009]. I have only one gold medal in the National Senior Games, and I got it there. I was 78 years old and ran the 1500 meters in 6:56. There were six runners in it, and I had a good idea I would win when I had quite a lead at the end of the first lap. I got to thinking about how many times I'd been to these national games and never won a gold medal. I ran my guts out on the last lap. I was happier than a bug in a rug when I won. [Laugh]

**You have won many other medals along the way though, right?**

Oh yeah, including all colors at the state games. I had 'em all over the place in my house. My daughter teaches second grade, and when I moved down here to Alabama she kept a lot of them. What she does is give a kid a medal for character. She makes them write a thank you letter to me before they can get it. It's a great way to get rid of those medals. I just think that's great! She's still got a lot of them, and she has three more years before retirement.

**What sports have you competed in at National Senior Games?**

I started with track, but I've bowled, golfed, and been in the triathlon, 5Ks, 10Ks, and cycling. The last time I just bowled – singles, doubles and mixed doubles. We came within four pins of a bronze in the mixed doubles. That's the way it goes!

**You didn't run in 2015?**

My left knee developed a touch of arthritis. It happened just before the games. I got some shots and a knee brace. I qualified for the 400, 800, and 1500 events, but I think I'm going to concentrate on bowling only again in Birmingham. Maybe I'll feel competitive in 2019 to run and keep it going. I'd like nothing better than to be 90 and run the 100-meter dash.



*Celebrating Gold in 2009*

**What do you do for exercise and to keep active now?**

I still do a lot of jogging and biking. I run on the golf course, early in the morning. I also bowl and golf quite a bit. In fact, last week I scored a hole-in-one in a local tournament - it's actually the third one of my life. It was on a 125-yard hole. The average golfer would use a 6-iron or 7-iron, but I used a 3 wood. I guess that gives you an indication of my age! [Laugh] Our group has this rule that you have to treat everybody else to a beer afterwards. That's pretty bad, they should be treating you, right? [Laugh] But I did get a cash prize for the hole-in-one, and still got \$40 back after we celebrated. [Chuckle]

**How do you keep motivated?**

The key motivation for me every day comes right when I get up. I sit up, put both feet on the floor and ask myself, "Is there any reason why I can't run or bike today?" And I always say, "No!" So, I get up and I'm gone. I go out for an hour, and I feel good about it when I come back in.

**So you are your own coach?**

Yes, I am my own coach.

**Your fellow athletes certainly appreciate that you have managed to stay healthy and compete in every National Senior Games going back 30 years. How did you do it?**

Well, I just hit it lucky, no doubt about it. I came from a big family, and there have been a lot of weddings and funerals and such that might have conflicted with it. And keep in mind that you must get in shape for the state games. You have to be good enough to qualify to have the right to go to Nationals.

I was 55 when I started the whole thing, and I'll be pushing 87 in Birmingham, which is right up the road from where I live now. My running and Senior Games has kept me healthy for a long time. It is great for your psyche. Maybe the world is going to hell, but you're not ready to go with it. [Laugh]

**Did "good family genes" help with your healthy endurance?**

Of the seven children in my family, there are only three of us left. The youngest died early as an alcoholic. One sister died from emphysema, one died from heart problems, and another died from a melanoma. And my remaining brother and sister are all crippled up with arthritis and rheumatism. They are in very bad shape. I don't have any of that. They all could have done better and lived longer. I was the only one who stayed athletic. I've taken one pill regularly, it's a blood thinner.

**Other than your knee problem in 2015, you've avoided serious injury?**

Pretty much. I had a spill not too long ago when I was biking around here in Foley. So I'm riding along the golf course, and all of the sudden this dog comes up beside me. It was a Golden Retriever, the friendliest dog known to man. He didn't bark or anything, just going along with me. Well, I hit a curve and fell. The first thing I'm thinking on my way down to the cement is, "How is this going to affect my bowling tonight?" [Laugh] Anyway, the dog is all over me, licking my face. His master came out. This must have been a wealthy dog because he yelled at the dog, "Go to your room!" [Laugh]

**Do you believe you've been a role model for others around you?**

I don't know how much of an impact I'm having with the seniors now around me, but back when I was teaching I think I made a big impact on the student body. I've had many kids tell me that after they graduated they got into jogging and running to keep fit.

I also have four kids, and they're all unbelievable. One daughter runs marathons, and the other two are bigtime into Zumba, you know, exercise dancing. That's great exercise. And a lot of the grandchildren do sports. We had a tragedy and lost our son in an auto accident right after he finished college. He wasn't even driving.

I lost my wife a few years ago, and I met Suzie after moving here to Foley, and she's been a great companion. She's an Alabama native.

**With the Southern accents all around you, does she serve as your interpreter?**

Yeah, sometimes! [Laugh] The people around here are very nice. Southern hospitality is a real thing to me.

**Why did you decide to retire to Alabama?**

The reason is that my wife and almost all my friends in New York had passed on. I was out in a rural area and getting older, and I was reminded of an expression, "Don't die as an obscure person. Go out in a blaze of glory." There really wasn't anything there to hold me. So, I decided to mix things up a bit. I sold the farm to my daughter and son-in-law. My son-in-law's father lives in Foley. I had gone there as a snow bird for eight years, so I bought a place here. There are a lot of things to do.

**And now, the National Senior Games are following you to Alabama!**

I think it's just great. I couldn't believe it the first time I heard they were coming to Birmingham. They have all the facilities there, and I'm sure visitors will be treated to the same hospitality I have found here.

**You must be grateful to have persevered and be where you are today.**

I think so. There's a story that relates to that. I was an amateur pilot when I lived in New York. I did it into my 80s. Just before I moved south, I was coming back from a flight and the radio beacon wasn't working at my home airport. I was lost and getting very low on fuel. I had to find a landing area. I said, "God, this is going to be all over the papers. Help me!" I looked down and there was an airport right underneath me, imagine that! Well, I landed alright. After that, I decided that God wasn't ready to get rid of me yet. And I'm grateful about that. I also decided it was time to quit flying. I hadn't killed anybody, and I don't think you get more than one chance like that.

**Well, you won't kill anybody running, or bowling, or playing golf.**

I won't kill myself either! [Laugh]

[MORE PERSONAL BEST PROFILES - CLICK HERE](#)