



## 2017 Personal Best Athlete Profile

### Ann McGowan, 92

Providence, Rhode Island

#### Running in Style



Photo: Greta Rybus

*It's always good to look your best. For Ann McGowan, it's essential, even when she's competing as a senior athlete. That's because Ann was a hairdresser, cosmetology instructor and salon owner for more than 40 years. As a youngster, she discovered her love and aptitude for hair styling when she was inspired by glamorous stars in the movies and then begged her sister to let her replicate the designs she saw. While not at it full-time anymore, she still styles her own hair and has her tools at the ready to help others.*

*If we had to describe Ann in one word, it would be "survivor." Through the course of our conversation with her below, she describes family crises going back to early childhood, and later with the untimely death of her husband while she was still raising her children. Everything she achieved came through patience, persistence and hard work. After starting a family, she successfully obtained her GED and attended trade colleges, where her career path opened.*

*The same passion and determination that drove her to succeed also brought the love of sports back to her in midlife. She started running again, largely as an activity to work through the loss of her husband and the stress of adjusting to a new life. When she heard there were games for people her age, she immediately signed up and a long journey commenced.*

*Ann McGowan is grateful to be one of a handful of people who have managed to compete in every National Senior Games. Besides the health benefits she has gained, Ann most enjoys meeting people and the longtime friendships and camaraderie that*

*people find when they participate. Many have been inspired by her journey and example, including her granddaughter, who knew Ann had dreamed of running the Boston Marathon and did it herself to raise money for charity in Ann's name. That's the beauty of pursuing your Personal Best, because your journey has a positive impact on others to do the same for themselves.*

#### **Ann, you are from the smallest state, and yet among only eight people who have been to every National Senior Games.**

I've lived in Providence all my life. I'm the oldest original homeowner in this neighborhood. That could be due to some stubbornness. [Laugh] Looking back now, I can't imagine how I made it to all of those games. There were all the things I had to do to get by-paying bills, working, keeping up with my children. Lo and behold, we've gone all these years, and here we are!

#### **Sounds like you've had your share of challenges.**

As a youngster, I learned how to survive. My mother passed away when I was five, and two years later we had a step-mother who came in with her own three children. I became an independent person from that time on to get along and move along.

My husband Bill died when I was 49 - he had angina and didn't make it through the bypass operation. At the time, my daughter was finishing college and my son was still in high school. It was untimely, and a very difficult situation because we were a very close family and my kids were still dependent on their dad. I had two choices- to sit in the corner and end it all, or get up and keep going. I had to survive and learn what to do to cope with my responsibilities. I can talk about it now at the ripe old age of 92.

### **How did you become such a sports nut?**

I've played many sports in Senior Games, but also when I was growing up. We played on a community playground. That was where we were sent to keep us out of the kitchen. I played hardball baseball with the boys in the neighborhood whenever they would allow. That was usually when they didn't have enough players.

I learned to swim in the *Woonasquatucket River* near my house. You either swam or you got swept away. I got interested in competing in sports in high school. They never encouraged girls to pursue the world of sports back then, but I did all the sports they would allow me to do. Gymnastics was one of my favorites.

My husband played many sports like football and baseball in school. We were an active family and went skiing, ice skating, and roller-skating - things like that.



*Ann (right) takes on competitors*

### **Were you a stay at home mother?**

I did not finish high school or go to college at first. I had to take a job to help the family to pay expenses. There were six children in the house by then. After I was married, I decided I should go to college. I went at night to get my GED, and then studied industrial education at Rhode Island College. I then did well in cosmetology school and became an instructor. I taught senior classes in hairdressing and became the manager of the beauty school for the owner.



*Back in the day...*

In 1981, one of my students encouraged me to look at a beauty salon that was up for sale. I took my daughter with me to the bank to get a loan. Remember, I was a widow and in those days, you had to have the husband who supported you go to the bank with you. The lady we met with was nice enough to hear my story and told me, "I'm going to gamble and give you the loan." I got the salon!

I still taught at the beauty school early in the day and go to my salon and stay until 10:30 at night, then get up and do it again the next day. I did that for ten years until we had a devastating fire in the complex that had five businesses in it including mine. The whole thing burned to the ground. That ended my beauty salon, but I still taught and did hairdressing out of my home.

Later on, I needed to have gall bladder surgery and took some time off. I visited the Cherry Hill nursing home five minutes from the house, and they offered a job assisting the nurses. So, I got my white dress and shoes and helped out. After some months, they told me they could use another person in their beauty salon. I stayed there for 27 years. The families all wanted their loved ones to look and feel good, so I made the ladies and men look their best.

### **Are you retired now?**

People ask when I'm going to retire and my answer is, "The time I retire is when I go to bed and don't get up." After I left the nursing home, I haven't done it much, but I still do it for shut-in people, those who are home bound. I still cut, tint and style my own hair. I'm 93, and I'm available. Have scissors, will travel! [Laugh]

### **When did you find the opportunity to return to sports?**

After Bill died, I started running. Early on Sundays, I would go up to the college nearby with my pocket radio and walk around that track all morning long. I'd do a little running too. That helped me to cope with what I was going through.

One day, I heard on the radio about Senior Games going on at Brown University for people who were 50 or older. I signed up for the race walking and the 100-meter race. That's how it all began. I made a lifetime friend, Virginia O'Connor, at those first games. There were other games in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine. So, we got around to all of those. Virginia and I heard about the national games and decided to go together in 1987. Oh, my gosh. It was a new world of wonder for both of us. There were more men than women at first. I enjoyed competing with all the other women, and we would look forward to seeing who would come back for the next ones.



Ann with 1987 "Silver Fox" mascot souvenir

#### **What sports have you played in national competition?**

I ran the 100, 200 and 400 meter races. At that time, there was this girl Pat Peterson who was a college coach and the fastest runner in my group. I was always just a step behind. Always the bridesmaid, never the bride! Also, I watched the field events, and decided to take them on to go along with my track running.

Someone who knew I played softball in high school asked me to join The Golden Girls, a team from Colorado. I was put in as a catcher and substitute base runner- they knew I was a good runner! We won a silver medal at the second games in St. Louis in 1989.

There weren't any basketball teams in Rhode Island, so Virginia and I got on with a team in Connecticut and played with them at Nationals for a few years. It was fun. We also competed in volleyball in for the National Senior Games in Syracuse in 1991 and came in second. I made one shot that went up into the rafters and wouldn't come down! [Laugh]

I stopped doing team sports at Nationals after Orlando in 1999. I kept running, and had picked up the long jump, javelin, discus and hammer throw. In the early Senior Games, only the men did the hammer. I went out and bought a hammer and asked to do it at the local games so I could qualify to do it at Nationals. There was only myself and another woman who threw hammer when they offered it the first time at the San Antonio games in 1995.

#### **Looking back now, what are your feelings about your experiences?**

I've had such a glorious time with this. It helped me survive through my troubles in the beginning. I've made so many friends, both women and men. There's a group of us from New England who stayed in the same hotels, worked out transportation and went sightseeing together. Through the years, we got to be like a family. The camaraderie is wonderful. Some are retired or home bound now, but there's about eight of us still doing local games, and a few still go to Nationals. Because of my work, I've been able to continue to pay my way.

I'm grateful and fortunate. The aging process is fine. Getting older is just a number. I try to help people in any way I can help them. For me, to be around to assist other people is the name of my game.

#### **Have you had health challenges?**

In 1991, I developed a lump in my left breast. The doctor told me what I expected, that it was cancer. I had a mastectomy and was left with one breast. I asked my physician if he would remove the other one. He said, "I can't do that, you're not having a problem with it." I said, "Well, I'm asking you to please do it, because I don't want to be back in here in another year or two to have this done all over." To my thinking, it wasn't so much worrying about the cancer returning, it was how it would affect my sports! [Laugh] I didn't want to wear the prosthesis. It would be an extra weight I'd have to carry when I ran. The operation was in April and I managed to get to The Games that summer, and I had a good time.



Then, in the past few years, I started having back and spine problems that made it hard for me to run. I had cortisone shots for the pain a couple of weeks before I would compete. I was told I needed to replace some disks with a rod to support my back. It's not easy to get back surgery like that at my age. But the surgeon said, "Mrs. McGowan, because of the lifestyle you've had, your body is in good enough shape that I think we can do it, if you're game." I came through with flying colors.

The surgeon said it would take a year, if not more, for me to be completely healed. He wanted me to keep up with physical activity, but advised against competing in The Games. I was very cautious, but I knew my body and made it my games in the New England states.

The Games made me appreciate what life has to offer. You get to meet new people who are interested in the same things. It has motivated me to keep going. It passes on to generations of children. My granddaughters are into track and running, and I am so proud of them!

The way I feel right now I think I can do the events I've qualified for. But even if I can only do one event I'll go. I want to keep up with my friends. My granddaughter Liz says she will chaperone me.



*Ann with granddaughter Liz Vinci in 2015*

**Liz told us that you always wanted to do a marathon, so she ran in the Boston Marathon and raised money for charity in your name.**

I've only done one 5K, back in 1999. My longest race is the 400. I was so proud that Elizabeth would tackle something like that. She worked very hard to raise that money for charity. That was quite an accomplishment.

My other granddaughters, Annie and Bonnie McGowan (Annie was named for me) went on to be track stars of their high school in Virginia. Both girls helped their team win in both indoor and outdoor track at the state level. They were both on the same relay team for national competition. I so much enjoyed going to their track meets to cheer them.

**Since you are a hairdresser, we suppose you've never at a loss for words. What do you tell people about fitness?**

Yes, I'm a talker. I think that's my problem! [Laugh] I enjoy talking with people. I like to hear what they have to say, and I enjoy the camaraderie.

I found through my years of experience that people don't like to be told what to do. However, if you suggest it in a storytelling way they are more accepting. I talk about my experiences to encourage them.

**What movie star would you want to make yourself look like for the next National Senior Games?**

[Laugh] Well, I always wanted to be [Olympic figure skater and film star] Sonja Henie and look like the movie stars when I was young. I would study their hair when I went to the theater, and talked my sister into letting me style her hair in the way I saw in the movie.

Maybe Marilyn Monroe. I used to have a red dress like she wore in that movie [*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*]. But I do my style to fit my own facial features. I want to look like Ann McGowan, so my friends will recognize me! [Laugh]

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