



2017 Personal Best Athlete Profile

Hazel Hassen Bey, 93

Montclair, New Jersey

Still Rollin'

In sports, sometimes the story is about amazing feats of skill and glory. Other times, it is about how an athlete overcomes obstacles to persevere in an inspiring display of courage. Frequently, such challenges come off the field of play, as in the case of Hazel Hassen Bey.

Of eight athletes who have competed in every National Senior Games since 1987, Hazel is perhaps the most surprising to have achieved perfect attendance. The retired licensed practical nurse has been bowling since her late husband bought her "a real ball" over 60 years ago. She loved league play, and in 1984 started going to the US Bowling Congress (then called Women's International Bowling Congress) national tournament. She hasn't missed one since. She and her doubles partner then read a flyer about New Jersey Senior Olympics and the first national games for seniors being organized in St. Louis, and after trying them out both events became must-go competitions. In fact, Hazel has not missed any of the three events for more than three decades.



What is most remarkable about this achievement is that, since 1992, Hazel has had to manage chronic rheumatoid arthritis. She considers herself blessed that it affects her legs, feet and toes the worst, and that her hands and fingers have remained able to handle a bowling ball. Because of balance issues, she now stands at the line to deliver the ball. Every day is a battle, but Hazel does her leg exercises each morning to get out of bed and get on with her life. She refuses to let a little pain keep her from doing what she wants to do. The ball keeps rolling.

Further injuries from a car accident in 2014 almost ended Hazel's sporting career, but she has bounced back. The accident was not her fault, and she still drives herself to play in local leagues twice per week. As she looks forward to coming to Birmingham for the 2017 National Senior Games presented by Humana, her biggest concern is not about her health or getting herself there; it's about finding a doubles partner to go with her.

Hazel is the perfect example of a Personal Best athlete achieving optimum quality of life by never giving up. As you read through the following conversation, imagine a humble church-going lady, the type who never says a bad word but always speaks her mind. The type who uses faith and self-reliance to take on anything life hands to her.

Life handed Hazel Hassen Bey a bowling bowl, and by God, she's gonna roll it!

Hazel, first off we want to ask about your unique last name, Hassen Bey. Why is it two words?

My husband Mamode was from Mauritius in the East Indies. That was the family name. It's like McDonald or O'Conner, that's how I explain it to people. Mamode was a meteorologist in the Air Force. Unfortunately, he had diabetes and died in 1966.

Did you ever remarry?

Nooo! I couldn't find nobody like him. Nobody would treat me like he did. [Laugh]

What did you do for a career?

I was a licensed practical nurse. I went to a school in Pittsburgh. I worked with elderly patients at Preakness Hospital in New Jersey for 30 years. It's called something else now. Then I worked for the Daughters of Israel in West Orange part-time for 16 years. I retired around 2000 I think. I have trouble remembering things sometimes. I'm 93! [Laugh]



1952 wedding photo

Let's go to the beginning. When did you first start bowling?

I wasn't even a teenager yet. I'm from Pittsburgh, and I began with it there. I was from a big family. There were five girls and four boys. I was the first girl, and the fourth child. We lived outside of town, and we didn't have money to pay for stuff. So, we kids would run down to the bowling alley to watch, and this wasn't bowling using the big ball with the holes. The balls were smaller, and you rolled them by hand. After hanging around for a while, people would sometimes ask if we wanted to bowl a game.

Did you play any sports as a youth?

No, our high school was way out in the country. I was the oldest girl, so I had to be home after school to help take care of my brothers and sisters. I had to hang onto them and help everyone get fed. My mother had to get some rest sometime! [Laugh] But we did play basketball, and liked to go to the parks with church groups and hike around.

When did you begin to bowl regularly?

I didn't start really bowling until after I got married to in 1952, and I had my daughter Kismet in 1954. My husband found a job on Long Island and brought us up from Pittsburgh in February of 1955.

Mamode was from New Jersey, and so we moved to Patterson in 1957. Well, during that time he bought me a real bowling ball and said he wanted me to get in a league. I said, "Oh no, I'm not that good!" and he answered, "You don't have to be that good."

He taught me how to do a hook ball, because my ball was always going into the gutter. I kept on trying and trying, and finally got better.

You have been bowling for more than 60 years now. You've been in every National Senior Games over the past 30 years. What has motivated you to keep up the streak?

I like to take the trips! [Laugh] I look forward to going to bowl in the New Jersey Senior Olympics every year, and then traveling to the Nationals every two years.

I have also been going to the [U.S. Bowling Congress] women's national bowling tournament every year. In fact, I started going to those three years before the Senior Olympics started. And I've made every one of those, too!

Wow, perfect attendance for three decades in all those events! How did you first find out about Senior Games?

My league partner Elizabeth Cook and I always looked through whatever flyers they had at the bowling alley. I saw something about senior games, and I told her, "Hey, this is interesting. Let's try it." We did, and we just kept going. Elizabeth bowled with me until she couldn't bowl no more, which was when she was 90. The Games in Pittsburgh [2005] was her last time to go. I didn't quit when I turned 90. [Laugh] But I always go with someone.

I also played horseshoes at Nationals, but when they were scheduled at the same time as bowling one year, I stuck to the bowling.



Have you had a regular partner since then?

Not really. It was always Elizabeth and I, and now I go to the Nationals with others from here. There's a big group of bowlers from East Orange that go. I also had two others that have been my partner for the New Jersey Senior Olympics, and that was Susie Wilkerson and Pauline Dzanewicz. Pauline bowled with her mother in them before her mom died.

Now, I've bowled doubles with Martha White from New Jersey quite a bit. She's younger, like 77 or 78, so I have to play in her age group. I only play in my own age group when I do singles. But we usually come out with a medal at Nationals.

Do you feel like you're Martha's legal guardian, playing down three levels in age like that?

I feel like I'm legal guardian to ALL of them in our bowling leagues now! [Laugh] Actually, there's a husband and wife who are around 95 and still bowl in my league in Bergen County.

I'm not the best bowler. My score has gone up over 150 at times. But after my car accident in 2014 I can't seem to get anywhere near that anymore.

Oh my, what happened to you?

A bus hit me on the driver's side of my car. It wasn't my fault. I didn't bowl for many months. The worst injury was to my left shoulder. It still hurts at times, and they keep wanting to push needles into me. I told them, "I don't need the needles, I'll just do my exercise." I don't know how long I'm gonna live, so I'm gonna do what I want to do! [Laugh] But, I took my time and didn't take chances trying come back too soon and having a relapse. I'm doing pretty good now in my league-but maybe that's because everyone else is all bad at it, too! [Laugh]



Hazel and longtime partner Elizabeth Cook, 2004

Have you had any other challenges like that?

Oh, yes. In 1992, I started having arthritis. I put my feet down off the bed one day and hit the floor so hard I could hardly see. I thought I was going to die. I couldn't even walk. I pulled the phone over by the cord and called my daughter Kismet. She didn't have a key for the door, so I dragged myself across the floor and fell asleep on the door until she came.

Are you still dealing with arthritis?

Yes, it's rheumatoid arthritis. You know, my hands aren't crooked up at all, but my toes and my feet give me aches and pains all the time. You need those feet to walk. This morning, I didn't even know if I could get out the door. But I told myself, if my feet can push those pedals on the car, I'm going bowling. And I did! Now, I don't drive at night anymore, but I can when it's light out.

Well, you need those feet to make your bowling approach too.

No, no, no. I walk up to the line with the ball. If I do that three-step thing I'd fall on my face with my balance problem. I can't walk straight without a cane.



It's amazing how you are overcoming all of that to be able to keep doing what you love.

I try. Hey, the good Lord knows what He wants for His children.

If I see I can't do something right now, I give it a rest and try again. If my foot gives me trouble, I just think it needs some exercise. If I feel so bad I can't go out for my league, I'll call and tell them I don't feel good and when I feel better I'll let them know. I don't want people checking in all the time to see how I'm feeling. Let ME tell you how I feel.

You get big credit just for showing up, Hazel. It's helping to keep you fit and healthy.

That's right, I'm gettin' my exercise, because that's what I need. If this was just about getting medals I wouldn't be there!

What do you tell others about staying active?

You know, there's a lot of things to do out there. Get up from your television. You can walk to the library or to your church. Do what keeps you going.

How often do you bowl now, and how do you keep your body in shape?

I bowl twice a week, on Thursday morning here in Essex County with all women, and Friday at noon in Bergen County. That one is senior men and women.

I do exercises with my legs in the morning and at night. I have to do it in the bed before I get up in the morning, because otherwise I know I'll have trouble with my knees and my feet, and I'll be falling all over the place. I make sure if I'm going to fall that I can grab onto something to where I don't break anything. Knock on wood, I haven't had a bad fall yet. [Laugh]

I do things other things to get out. I've taken up knitting with a crafting class at Trinity Presbyterian Church. I make hats, and I'm trying to learn quilting, although I'm not that good at that yet.



Hazel in 1989

It's great that you find the strength to fight it. How hard has it been to pull everything else together to get to all of your games, including the travel expense?

I'll tell you about me. Every time money comes in, a piece goes on the side. I never have to worry about finding money to travel to these games. People say, "My money's gone already!" and I keep telling them it doesn't have to be gone. If you put one dollar down, fifty cents even, that's more than you had before you saved it.



NSGA CEO Marc T. Riker visits with Hazel at the 2014 New Jersey Senior Olympics in Woodbridge Township.

You are quite an inspiration, Hazel.

People do say, "You're an inspiration. You go bowling and go to church and get around. Most people your age are in the hospital." It's OK. In my family, we were brought up being told, "What is going to be is going to be." My parents taught us that we weren't greater or bigger than anybody, and we weren't lower than anybody. They told me to do what I can do, but not to make it like, "I'm the queen." So I just do what I can do, and it's OK if people think I'm an inspiration.

So, how long are you going to keep bowling?

I'm gonna tell you just like I told my doctor. He asked me, "Hazel, how long are you going to continue to bowl?" I told him, "Until I walk up to that line, they hand me a ball and I drop it, and it goes where it wants to go." He said, "You're kidding!" I said, "No I'm not. If I can get to that bowling alley and get up to that line, I'll roll that ball."

What is it that inspires or motivates you to keep trying, and to keep that ball rolling?

Life itself. [Pause] What's the alternative? What you gonna do?

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