



2017 Personal Best Athlete Profile

Dottie Gray, 91

Saint Louis, Missouri

Go, Dottie, Go!

When Dottie Gray signed up for the first national sports competition for seniors in 1987, she had no idea how far the road ahead would stretch. In fact, before she was 54, the petite powerhouse had no idea she would even become a runner, or that her example would inspire many others to pursue fitness.

Dottie had no competitive sports history growing up, burning energy riding her bike all over south Saint Louis instead. She kept active with the task of raising six kids until she picked up tennis with the help of her husband at 44. Ten years later, she entered a local road race on a whim, training alone at a nearby junior high school track. She ran the race and went home. A friend called to tell her she had won her age group and to come back for the trophy. Dottie joined the St. Louis Track Club and never looked back.



The St. Louis Senior Olympics, one of the first of its kind in the country, captured her fancy, and in 1987 she eagerly entered the first National Senior Games (then called the National Senior Sports Classic) held in the Arch City. Dottie became one of eight athletes who have competed in all National Senior Games over three decades.

Dottie's love of running has been a year-round avocation. She's completed five marathons (including the 100th running of the Boston Marathon), 37 half marathons, and countless 5K road races. Whenever she travels, she always finds a race she can enter, from San Francisco's colorful "Run to The Far Side," to Tampa's balmy "Gasparilla Distance Classic." With a daughter in Maine, Dottie repeatedly ran in the Falmouth Road Race in Massachusetts, and made nearly every "Beach to Beacon 10K" race in Cape Elizabeth, Maine. She recalls at one point in the 1990s she ran five races, in four different states, over a two-week period. No wonder other runners swear she was the model for the Energizer Bunny!

2015 was a special year as Dottie turned 90 and had three different birthday parties thrown by her family, her senior living center and her track club. Family members also ran in a race with her to celebrate. The big sports moment came when she established a world record as the first 90-year-old woman to complete a 5,000-meter race, which was held at the Huntsman World Senior Games, NSGA's Utah qualifying games. CBS Sunday Morning captured her in action for a 2016 feature story. [Watch Here.](#)

For Dottie Gray, it's literally been a great run, and there's a lot more road ahead as she continues to pursue her Personal Best. We have no doubt she'll keep running, and inspiring others to keep moving, for many more years to come.

Dottie, what does it mean to you that your hometown was the birthplace of the National Senior Games?

I think it's great. I'm really proud that we did it here in St. Louis. But it's also been nice to go to different cities and states that I never would have gone to. I like that it's moved around.

How did you get into Senior Games?

I first read about it in the paper, and clipped out a form and filled it out. Then, at the bottom it said you must be 55 [the minimum age at that time] and I was 54 so I couldn't do that the first year. These were the local St. Louis Senior Olympics, put on by the Jewish Community Center. They're still going and they do such a fantastic job.

The next year, I played tennis in the morning and did my runs in the afternoon. After a year or two they scheduled both sports in the morning, so I've just been running since. I did the 100, 200, 400, 800 and 1500 races, plus the 5K and 10K. Of course, I entered the national event when it came about in 1987.

Every year I still go to the St. Louis games, and I've been to Columbia for the Missouri Senior Games. Also, every year I go to St. George, Utah for the Huntsman Senior Games and they are really well run. Of course, I've done the National games. Every one. I've always done a lot of other races. I've run five marathons and 37 half marathons. A lot of 5Ks too. I always try to find a race when I travel.

What makes National Senior Games different from your other running events?

Well, in many of my other road races now I have to run against women 20 years younger than me, because they just don't have any for my age group. I meet so many people at Nationals, and I think the athletes are kind of special. You go back every two years and get to see people you've met before. Of course, some of them aren't there anymore, but I enjoy going and always look forward to it.

Has any one of the National Senior Games been a favorite for you?

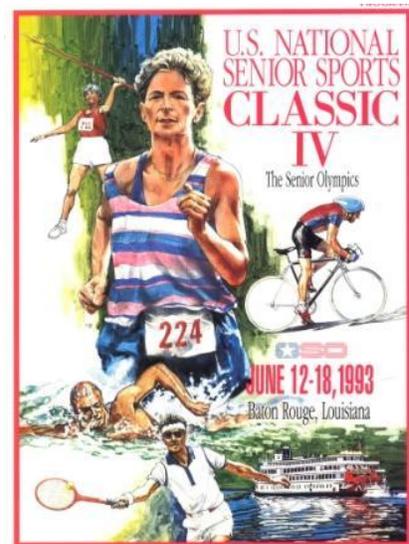
St. Louis was my favorite, but I thought Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1993 was one of the best. They did have it there a second time, probably because of the way it was run. I mean, everything just went great.

Also in 1993, they put me on poster for the Baton Rouge games. I didn't even know about it. I was very surprised, here I was on this poster. It turned out nice. Some of my children got one framed for me.

That's better than being on a Wheaties box!

It's so funny that you mention Wheaties. Last year, a dear friend took a Wheaties box and put a photo of me on it for my 90th birthday. I keep it in my kitchen, so every morning I see my Wheaties box with my picture on it. I never did eat the Wheaties. They're still in there!

[Laugh]



1993 Poster and Program Cover

It's clear that you are a running freak. When did you get hooked?

Not right away. I really didn't do too much formal exercise, but I had six children—three boys and three girls—and they kept me running. My late husband Ben started taking the older children over to the tennis court at Kirkwood park, which was only three miles away. So I would come over sometimes with a baby on my lap and watch them play.

One day he came home and said, “Oh Dottie, they are starting a women’s league.” I had never even had a racquet in my hand, but we went over there and I signed up. There were four other women who had never played before, so we started together. My husband would also hit with me for practice. So I played tennis in the spring, summer, and fall. I progressed up the levels and really enjoyed it. I made some good friends.

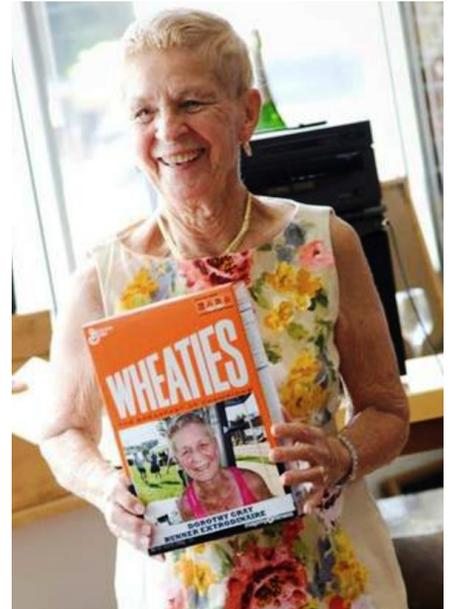
Ten years later, when I was 54, Kirkwood started a Green Tree Festival and they set up a two-mile and a five-mile run. I lived a block and a half from the junior high which had a track, so I started going over there every day to train. When I finally got around the track nine times I thought I could do the two-miler, so the first year I did that. Everything went well and I went home. Well, the phone rang and my friend Jillian said, “Dottie, come back to the community center, you won in your age group!” So I went back and got my trophy, and I still have it. That did it for me.

There were runs almost every week around St. Louis, so I would enter every chance I got. Then I started going over to Illinois and doing runs over there.

Your husband played tennis with you, did he run with you too?

The only thing Ben got up early for was golf. He thought all runners were crazy, that a group of people out running around on the streets, sometimes in the rain, was outrageous.

When I had my first marathon, he saw me “hit the wall” at the 20-mile mark. I finished, but after that he said, “No more marathons.” Well, I ran four more after that, but I never told him I was doing them. He’d ask what I’m training for and I’d say, “Oh, just a run.” “How long, Dottie?” “Well, longer than usual.” [Laugh] He did support me emotionally, but he just didn’t let it on to anyone else.



Dottie with 1984 Olympic Marathon Gold Medalist Joan Benoit Samuelson at the Beach to Beacon 10K.

How often do you run now?

I still run a couple of miles several days a week. It’s always nice to get out. I moved to a senior living community in Kirkwood called Aberdeen Heights a few years ago. I do exercise classes there three times a week. In the winter, I’m not crazy about going out, so I’m happy that I can stay inside and run around a certain area of the building, and it’s like a mile and a half.

I usually run at least three 5Ks a month. I enjoy it so much that I just keep running, you know. Every year I go to Cape Elizabeth, Maine for the Beach to Beacon 10K that the Olympian Joan Benoit Samuelson started. My daughter Mary lives there and we both know Joanie well. In 2009, it was scheduled at the same time as the National Senior Games. At the time, I was a “streaker,” a runner who had done every race. So, I had to make a choice of which one to give up, and I went to Palo Alto for Nationals instead. It still gives me a little anxiety. [Laugh]

This year, Aberdeen sponsored me in the local Jingle Bell Run. They made it Dottie Gray Day and brought out a group of residents in a bus to watch me run. They gave everybody long sleeve shirts that said "Ho! Ho! Ho! Go Dottie Go!" I was even on the news on two TV stations that day.

Another fun thing was that 13 of my family members wore the shirts and ran with me, too. I think it's because I've slowed down now and they can finally keep up with me. [Laugh]

Speaking of TV, NSGA lined you up to be part of a CBS Sunday Morning feature about senior athletes in 2015. What was it like seeing yourself on a major TV program?

Yes, it was awesome. I never dreamed I would be on national television. I didn't realize until you told me that I would be the first 90-year-old woman to ever officially finish a 5,000-meter race. I wasn't all that fast, but It's fun to think that I didn't break a record...I made the record.

You've inspired many personally, and now you've inspired a lot more people you don't even know.

I think I'm healthy because of my running. My kids and everybody else thinks so too. I do encourage people to exercise or run. A lot of people, even some men, tell me they have started running because of me. I feel really good about that.



Dottie with her medals and awards

I just think that running is so great for you. its good exercise. And it's easy to do. You can just put on your shoes and go out the door, you don't need a racquet or any equipment. You don't have to jump up and run. Just start walking, and every day try to go a little farther and a little faster. Pretty soon, you'll be doing a 5K. You have to practice, and it's really important to have good running shoes.

So, I keep active and I have no health problems. I never have taken a prescription, except once for some allergy and it went away. In fact, I've never had a headache. I had seven siblings, and none of them are with us now. A lot of them developed osteoporosis as they got older. There's been cancer and some dementia too. Compared to them, I've been healthier. I guess this has helped me.

Our last question is a dumb one. You don't have any plans to stop running, do you?

It's something to look forward to doing every day. I'm 91 now. I always thought as I was getting older, "I'd like to compete until I'm 90." Well since I got there I now say "No, I'll just compete as long as I can run."

I always told my kids I'm not competitive and they'd say, "Oh yeah, you're not competitive." I have to admit now I always was. [Laugh]

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