



2019 Personal Best Athlete Profile

Hope Casias, 76

San Antonio, Texas

Family Matters

Sports offers the individual many rewards through setting goals, training and competition. It provides exercise with a purpose, and brings the added benefit of camaraderie among athletes who share the same experiences. Team sports provide an even deeper connection and the added satisfaction that comes from working together. For Hope Casias, playing volleyball is even more than a group experience – it's a family matter.

Growing up in San Antonio in a family with nine siblings, Hope was ideally suited to thrive in a team environment, although she never thought about playing sports in her youth due to her inexperience and smaller stature. She was happy contributing to school spirit as a member of the pep squad through middle school until she moved to a new high school and joined in more games during physical education periods. One of her PE coaches recognized Hope's natural talent with the game of volleyball and convinced her to try out for the school team. Hope is eternally grateful that the coach saw something in her that she didn't recognize, and she has been playing ever since, only pausing for a few years to raise five young children to school age.



Courtesy Humana/Coyne PR

As you follow our conversation below, it becomes clear that it's all about family for Hope Casias. She is now the matriarch of a family with 15 grandchildren and one great-grandson. She considers she has two volleyball families: her local Women in Volleyball league where she regularly practices and plays, and her Alamo Stars travel team that competes in major tournaments. Hope vividly recalls traveling to Orlando in 1999 for her first National Senior Games and being awestruck to see so many other seniors playing her game. Hope found she belonged to another new family – the Senior Games Movement, where everyone pursues their Personal Best lifestyle through participation in sports. Now, she considers each trip back to be one big family reunion. Our Presenting Sponsor also recognized her passion by naming her a 2015 Humana Game Changer.

Hope has reaped the rewards from keeping herself active and fit and did not encounter any physical problems until she approached the age of 70. She matter-of-factly discusses her bout with breast cancer and needing two knee replacements as things that she simply had to get through, and she envisions a future that includes many more volleyball games. Her positive attitude and enthusiasm is infectious, and it's no surprise when you think about it. Hope Casias has the support of many families to help her succeed, and she wishes for everyone to keep moving and find their own fitness family.



Courtesy Humana/Coyne PR

Your team is the Alamo Stars. Are you a native Texan?

I was born and raised here in San Antonio. I've lived here all of my life. My grandma was from Mexico, so that makes me third generation here.

We had a big family. I had six brothers and three sisters. Now, I have 4 sons and one daughter, and I have 15 grandchildren. One of my sons also married a woman who already had children, and one of them has a son. So that does make me a great grandma! [Laugh]

Being from a big family might have attracted you to team sports. When did you fall in love with volleyball?

I didn't play sports at first. I was always on the pep squad through middle school. I moved to another high school in my sophomore year and it gave me a chance to try new things. I started using my name Hope. [Laugh]

Hope is not your given name?

In a way, yes it is. It's Esperanza, but everybody had trouble pronouncing it. I went to school wondering what people at school would call me today – Espanza? Esparsa? Your name is important, and when it is unusual, or people can't pronounce it some will make fun of it. You know how kids can be.

So when we moved to the new school I registered myself as Hope, which is what my name means in Spanish. I figured I was just translating it for them. I didn't even tell my parents. After that day, it seemed like a new beginning because everyone could remember my name.

So the move to a new school led you to get into sports?

Yes. I played all kinds of sports there during PE, like basketball, softball, and volleyball. I thought I had a knack for volleyball. I remember the first time I received a serve I was scared thinking, "Oh, my God, that's gonna hurt!" because the ball was coming high and hard right to me. But once I learned the techniques I really liked the game.

There was this one PE coach that told me I should go out for girls sports. Coach Kerbal explained that I would come in the morning and play volleyball before my classes, and then stay after school and play some more. I told her if I stayed after school my mother would think I got into trouble. She said, "Well, come in the morning then." She wouldn't let go and tried every way to get me interested. I said, "OK, I'll try out."



Family portrait as a young adult. Hope is on far right



High school volleyball team. (Hope is above, far right)

I went through the tryouts, and they said they would post who made the team on the door of the gym. As I was going to check out the results I saw girls coming back crying because they didn't make it. When I looked at the list I found my name. I thought, "Wow- I didn't think I had it in me!" and then I thanked God that somebody else did. I will love and remember Coach Kerbal forever because she saw something in me that I didn't even see.

My new school had a really good volleyball team at the time. These girls had been playing together since middle school, and they were city champs and state champs. As a senior, you automatically get bumped up to varsity, but I asked my coach if it was OK if I just stayed on the B team. I didn't want any fame. I just wanted to learn the game, and I was having a really good time with the team that I was playing with.

Did you go to college and continue to play volleyball?

I went to junior college for a while, but I started working because I was the oldest of ten children and my stepfather was the only one who worked. In my mind I thought he needed help, so I would get any kind of job I could. One of my first ones was at a store like a Woolworth's, you know? I was scared but I talked myself into it because my family needed it.

Given that, you had no time for volleyball?

I did play volleyball a bit in some church groups after school, but when my children came I got too busy to play.

Life does often sidelines people for a time in their adulthood. When did you play again?

How I got back to it happened by total accident. When I was around 35 years old I had five children of my own, from preschool to middle school age. When they all got into school I started getting a little time for myself. I was a typical school mother, bringing in cupcakes or whatever the teachers needed. It kept me close to my kids. One of my kids' teachers said, "You know what, I've got something for you for all the help you've given this year." It was gift membership to an exercise program at the city recreation center.

That program was awesome. After we finished our exercise, we all had to sit on the floor, relax and close our eyes. The coach wanted us to cool down before we dashed out of the gym. One time, I didn't have to leave to get the kids yet so I sat on the bleachers and watched this coed team play volleyball during their lunch hour. I thought about how much fun I used to have playing it. Well, the ball rolls over to me so I pick it up and "set it" with my fingers back to them. One of them yelled, "You play volleyball?" When I told them I did in high school, they asked if I had time to join them. I played with them for seven years! [Laugh] That's how I got back to volleyball.

I actually have two volleyball families I play with. There's my Alamo Stars tournament team, but I also belong to the local Women in Volleyball League here in San Antonio that has been going on for about 40 years. I play with them once a week, rain or shine, and I learn a lot from them.

The 55 plus team from the local group just won a gold medal at the Huntsman Games in Utah. Playing with this group of ladies, we are just like a big family. We're learning from the young ones. And they get impressed with us because we can still be on the court and hold our own.



Hope's Women in Volleyball family

We hear people often say that "playing down" with younger age athletes can really help with your game.

Yes, it's really good practice. It's hard to put a whole team together locally in my age group. My Alamo Stars tournament team has me and another from San Antonio, plus one from Austin, so that's three from Texas. We also have two from Arizona and one each from California, Nevada, and Washington state. They're all like my family, too.



Hope with 2017 Alamo Stars family

Does everyone feel the same about it being a big family?

Oh yes. If somebody's sick we get together to send a card and offer help. When someone's loved one passes we show support. And if somebody has a special occasion like an anniversary or something, we go party with them. Every year we always get together in October for cancer awareness. We're really close knit.

Who has been on the Alamo Stars with you the longest?

The old Alamo Stars team I used to be on at the beginning got shuffled up, and I've been on this Alamo Stars for 13 years. Mary Elsa Centeno is the captain who put it back together, and I've been playing with her and Shirley Houston since then.

We have to practice on our own where we live, but every year we get together before the big tournaments like National Senior Games and practice. Everybody is kinda getting used to each other at first, and then it all comes back and starts clicking. That happens for most teams, because you have to go outside of your own area to find players.

What's your playing position?

I used to be a setter in my younger years, but now I'm a hitter, and really a great back row player. That first touch on the serve is very important. The other team serves to the back and wants to make you work for the ball, so it has to be a good bump from the back for the setter. That's my speciality. I also have a consistent serve, so that's very good.



1999 Alamo Stars family

You must really enjoy being on a team.

Yes. I love being part of a team. Coach Kerbal always taught us that it takes a team to win. You can have one really fantastic player, but that one fantastic player alone won't win the game for you. It has to be a team effort.

Where did you go for your first National Senior Games?

It was 1999 in Orlando. It was my first and still my favorite. I remember it vividly. I was just in awe seeing so many teams in one big tournament! I had been to the little town tournaments around Texas, but that was my first one out-of-state. My husband Andres and my daughter came along with me, and she had one child with her and was expecting another. So I say two grandchildren came with her!

I would go play in the mornings and be finished by 1 or 2 O'clock, then watch some of the other ladies play, and then in the evenings we all really enjoyed going to Disney World. I got to see the parade at night. I was so excited you would think I was a teenager!

In the beginning, we tried to go to all of the activities and events at Nationals as a team. As the years went on, often the team didn't all come at the same times, and we spent most of our time practicing and playing. So, we don't get to as many of the functions now. In 2011, the team bought red, white and blue caps and shirts and we marched together in the Parade of Athletes. That was wonderful.



The Matriarch with her own big, happy family

It's nice that some of your family came to watch you play.

My husband Andres always travels with me to every tournament I've ever been in, and he passes along the scores and the family texts me with messages like "Go Mom!" and "Yea, Alamo Stars!"

When I played in Minneapolis in 2015, two of my grandchildren and my son surprised me by coming to see me play. Last November two of my other sons came to see me at the Huntsman World Senior Games. They surprised me at the medal ceremony, that was awesome. I have the support of my whole family. They come watch when they can.

I have one granddaughter who plays volleyball that I'm going to go watch play today. She started one year ago at ten years old, and her two older sisters also played volleyball. I like to claim they have grandma's genes!

It's clear that family is important for you on many levels. We bet you consider all of the other teams you see in Senior Games as family, too.

Yes. It's like a family reunion when we see each other again at tournaments. We're so happy to see each other again, especially for the teams who depend on out-of-state players. It's a reunion of our whole volleyball family.

What else do you do to stay healthy and fit?

We do healthy things as a family, like hike and swim. We love good food, but we eat in moderation. I've always been around 135 pounds, more like 143 now. I always keep within a range. I attribute that to going to Silver Sneakers three times a week.

I used to walk every morning until I had knee problems, and I couldn't play like I used to. I had a knee replacement in 2012. Since then, I've been kinda trying to keep up, it's been one thing after another, after another.



Courtesy Humana/Coyne PR

You haven't mentioned injuries or setbacks until now. What other challenges have you overcome since the knee replacement?

I had to go through a lot in 2016. Three big things happened to me that year. Late in 2015 I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had surgery in January of 2016, and then had to have all the radiation. That really takes it out of you. It attacks your immune system. It took me a whole year to get my strength back.

During this time my right knee replacement became very swollen. I could barely walk, so I had a knee revision in July of 2016. It was supposed to be an in-and-out surgery, but I had to stay in the hospital for four days because my immune system wasn't strong enough.

Then, after I finished physical therapy, I decided to go back to my fitness program, and on my way there I was rear ended in the brand new car my family had given to me. That set me back too.



Wow. It came in threes for you that year!

Yeah, and I've had more. Last year, I didn't think I could go to the Huntsman Games because my knees were not helping and I was in a lot of pain. So I made a little special gift to give to my teammates that was almost like a going away present.

In 2018, I needed to have my other knee replaced. I had a good surgeon and got through all of the physical therapy and I'm back to playing again. I feel like a new woman now! [Laugh] I'm ready for another 20 years! [Laughs again]

That's a lot to get through, and you're still going. People must be inspired by your perseverance and positive spirit, Hope.

People come up to me when I'm exercising and say "Oh, you're so slim, you don't even need to do this." I always answer "No, that's why I AM slim." I practice what I preach.

There is an old saying that anything worth something takes effort. Sometimes I have a headache but I push myself to play. Once I get out on the court, the headache is gone. Being physically active helps you both physically and mentally. It's all good and it pays off.

I want to encourage people to continue to move. That's my thing. I tell people to start walking and build up. That's what I did. You can do anything, like go to the gym and do the bicycle or treadmill. You just have to move.

Also, I always kept great faith in God that He put me in this world, and He's the one that's going to take me out. In the meantime, I have to give it all I can. Every morning when I woke up, I thank Him for being stronger today than I was yesterday. That was my mantra every single morning and that has kept me going.

If I can survive these things and still play volleyball, I can truly say I am abundantly blessed by the love of my family and the people I play with. I love volleyball, it's helped me through so much. I'm like that little Energizer Bunny. I just keep going and going.

Let's call it the "Esperanza Bunny" after you!

[Laugh] Yes, but everybody in volleyball now only knows me as Hope!

I'm so grateful for every single day. God is good.



Ziplining in Cancun, January 2019

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