



Personal Best Athlete Profile

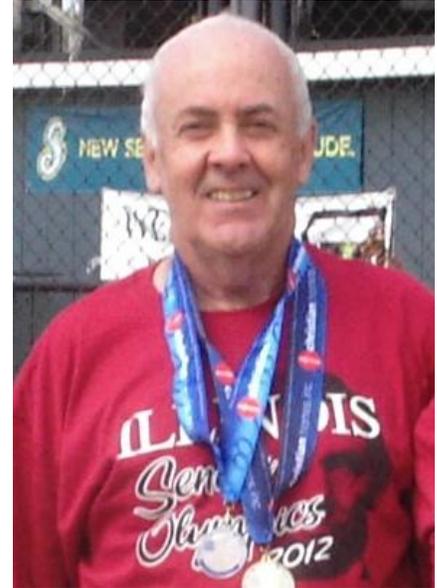
Bob O'Connor, 67

River Forest, Illinois

Psyched!

Bob O'Connor was always a good runner and made the most of it. He earned a track scholarship to Loyola- Chicago and set some school records. He journeyed to Mexico City for the 1968 Olympic Games and was inspired by Bob Beamon's superhuman long jump. One year later he was part of a University of Chicago Track Club relay team that set an indoor two mile world record. Then, in 1981 the same four athletes reunited and set a masters world record in the same event.

His competition career expanded to include everything from 100 meters to marathons. 2001 looked like another banner year for the senior runner as he made it to the National Senior Games and completed the Chicago Marathon. But it all came to an abrupt halt when Bob suffered a catastrophic Achilles tear while at a local track with his son. Recovery after surgery was complicated by infection and a wound that persisted for nearly two years. He literally had to learn to walk again from being on crutches for so long. The surgeon told him to hang up his competition shoes. That doctor didn't know who he was dealing with.



You see, Bob is a psychologist whose entire career has been devoted to helping people find ways to overcome obstacles and setbacks in life - mental, emotional and physical. It was in both his Personal Best nature and his professional training to refuse to accept "can't" and he has worked his way back to doing what he loves. He returned to the National Senior Games Presented By Humana in 2007, and has won the 800 meter event for the past six years at the Illinois State Senior Olympics in Springfield.

Competition will always motivate him, but these days Bob O'Connor is psyched just to be among others who share his love of the sport and staying as fit and healthy as they can be.

You still keep a busy schedule with work, sports and family pursuits. You must not have time to think about retirement.

I enjoy my practice. Mostly I'm a clinician handling people with depression, marital problems, substance abuse issues, all the typical life issues. But I also have a sub-specialty in sport psychology and have had both professional and amateur clients. I help them with their athletic performance. But it's really a small part of my practice that I'd like to do more of. I enjoy helping people. I have a friend I've advised who has run marathons in every state and on every continent. He just got back from Antarctica! I also teach psychology part time at Dominican University, and I enjoy coaching grade school kids and volunteering to be an official starter at local track meets. It's a good feeling to pay it forward!

The commonality is this: whatever your issues, tell me what you want to do and I'll help you figure out a way to do it.



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So it's safe to say "it's all in your mind" in your view?

I love Yogi Berra and one of my favorite expressions of his is "90 percent of the game is half mental." A lot of times we limit ourselves by saying "I could never do that." In that case, you won't. I speak occasionally to high school students and I call my talk "Running Stupid." Some of the best races I ever ran I didn't even know what I was doing. The first time I try something athletic is sometimes the best I've done because I don't know my limitations. We need to talk to ourselves positively and not be caught in self-limiting beliefs.

Here's an example: There's a woman I saw who had depression and an obesity issue. She was 5' 2" and 250 pounds. One of the things I offer clients is to walk and talk instead of sitting in my office for 45 minutes. So I got her to walk, and then suggested she buy some walking shoes. A year later she ran her first 5K, and did a half marathon a year after that. She's lost probably 100 pounds and just got married. She was just telling herself "I'm a fat lady, I can't do that."

Then there's an 85 year old guy with some health issues who didn't think he could be active. He couldn't make it up the 23 steps to my office, so I made home visits to start. I got him to go to physical therapy. Now he's getting stronger and he was able to come up the stairs to see me this morning.

I'm not a preacher or anything like that, but I've helped a lot of people help themselves to be less sedentary. It's never too late. That's what you're trying to tell people too, right? You can become more physically fit at any age.

Tell us about your injury and road to recovery.

My younger son and I were running at the local track together and he asked me what the sand pit was for. I said it's the triple jump pit and decided I would just show him what it looked like to do. Big mistake. I hadn't tried that in a long time. Wham! It was a full Achilles tear. My calf muscle rolled up my leg like a window shade. I knew immediately what it was.

The surgery went OK but I developed an infection as sometimes happens. I had a pretty awful wound and was on crutches for two years. I couldn't bike, swim, anything. I was going crazy until I got a hand bike, you know, the type used in disabled racing, and I took long rides and entered a couple of races to stay in competitive shape and spirit. That kept me sane and in aerobic shape.

Did you think you wouldn't get back to competing?

I've always had good persistence. I've often said, "Don't tell me I can't do that." After the surgery the doctor told me "You'll never run again. You're 55 years old, your competitive days are over." My reply was "I don't think so!" He didn't get it. So I found a new doctor (laughs).

I went to Dr. Terry Nicola, who is a marathon runner and renowned physiatrist, which is a rehabilitation physician. He knew how important it was to me and was very encouraging. He said it was a terrible wound but once it healed with some work I would be OK. I had to learn how to walk again because all my leg muscles had deteriorated after two years of doing nothing. But I made it back and I've learned to listen to my body and prepare better. I was raised in an era where stretching was something that dancers did, but now I stretch



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before and after running. I've had no real problems since I recovered. You take a risk in living, and also in competing. I'm willing to take the risk.

I'm not as competitive as I was before, but the 65 to 69 age group I'm in has a lot of amazing athletes. I still win or place in some road races but haven't medaled against the top talent. Last year I made the finals in the 800 at the USA Track and Field Championships held here and ended up 20 seconds behind the lead. But the senior games movement has inspired me to "keep on keepin' on" and I enjoy being involved in them.

What other things motivate or inspire you?

I was able to go to the Olympics in Mexico City in 1968. In fact, I narrowly missed making the US Olympic team in the 800. But I was rewarded because I saw Bob Beamon's incredible long jump. Talk about an inspiration. He later became an accomplished graphic artist and my wife bought me one of Beamon's works that he signed for me. It's on display in my office and it starts a lot of conversations.

A lot of these other senior athletes truly inspire me. I go down to the Illinois State Senior Olympics every year and I recall the last time there was this 95 year old gent who won the gold in five events. I'm standing in the medal line awed at this guy - he looked so buff and sharp in his singlet and spikes. Honest to God his legs looked like my 21 year old daughter's. I hope I can be having this conversation with you when I'm 95. I'm honored that you want to recognize me, but I'm just one example. You could have chosen any one of a thousand senior athletes and they would have a good story to tell.

I have another inspiration now too. My 9 year old grandson Patrick Cadiz and I run together as often as possible. Last weekend we ran in two 5Ks. He always beats me at the end. We'll get to the last tenth of a mile and he'll say "Now Grandpa?" and then take off. We are a source of inspiration to each other.

You said you've always been a runner. Do you do anything else now?

That's really my thing. I'm basically an 800 meter guy, that's been my event since high school but I've tried other things. I've done 7 marathons. I normally run five days a week, but I also bike to and from work every day. I go skiing in winter with my son who lives in Colorado. And I'm working towards triathlon. I could always bike and run but never swam. Two years ago I learned how to swim so that's a fun thing to do now too.

I'm doing a lot right now, getting in some speed work to get ready for the 800 meters at the National Senior Games in July. But I haven't done a full marathon since before my injury and I've made a commitment to run one in November.

I'll always do something. I share a saying with others that I apply to myself: "Do what you can, love what you have, and be who you are."

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For more information:

Del Moon, NSGA Communications and Media
DMoon@NSGA.com
225.202.5719

