



National Senior Games Association

Post Office Box 82059 ★ Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70884-2059
225-766-6800 ★ Fax 225-766-9115 ★ nsga@nsga.com

★ www.nsga.com



Personal Best Athlete Profile

Fran Allison, 80

Kinston, NC

Jackie Allison, 56

Youngsville, NC

Family Extended

Fran Allison's motor never stops, and the energy has rubbed off on her family and everyone else around her. She played what high school sports were available for females in the early '50s and her husband taught her to play tennis and golf, but raising four children put those activities on hold. Fran lived sports through her kids, especially cheering on her daughter Jackie who excelled in swimming and basketball, and who went on to letter on the women's basketball team at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

The empty nest opened up opportunities to volunteer in the community and return to former passions. When she heard about the North Carolina Senior Games, Fran picked up a tennis racquet at 55 and within a year was playing every sport she could fit into her schedule. It wasn't long until hubby was joining in, and both enjoyed the activity and opportunities to meet and become friends with others from around the state. When Fran entered her first National Senior Games, Jackie traveled with her to San Antonio and became her coach and cheerleader for 25 years for local, state and national games. The role reversal enriched both women, and this year Jackie finally realized her dream of qualifying and going to the 2013 National Senior Games Presented by Humana with her mother as a fellow senior athlete.

Both have become avid ambassadors for the Senior Games Movement, and Jackie was selected in 2012 to serve on the North Carolina Senior Games Board of Directors. Fran and Jackie's energy, enthusiasm and positive example to others earned them an invitation to carry their state flag in the Celebration of Athletes sponsored by AstraZeneca in Cleveland - and our first tandem recognition of Personal Best athletes with an intergenerational story.

The following conversation highlights that "family" also describes the relationships felt among all who participate in senior games.

It's obvious that your Mom got you hooked on senior games, Jackie. You've been active with sports your entire life, so what do they bring you that you don't find elsewhere?

Jackie: I love the interaction with the other participants and hearing their stories. I participate in Senior Games because I love to have fun and play. I can't imagine not staying active as I get older. I believe it will help me cope with the aging process in a more positive way. It is a legacy passed on to me from my parents and I cherish the times we have spent together at senior games.

It also provides me with goals to keep me motivated. I'm not the type that just likes exercise. Competition is something that keeps me going. Doing senior games gives you something to keep your focus. When you know you're going to get out and do it, you have to keep yourself in physical condition to do the things you want to do.



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Mom gave me the love of sports. She got me into swimming when I was six and I did that competitively for ten years. Then I met a basketball and got really involved in that in high school. When I went to the University of North Carolina in 1974 Title IX was not in force for another year and they did not offer scholarships. We were all walk ons. I was senior at UNC in Chapel Hill when the NCAA organized the first women's college basketball tournament.

After college I played rec basketball for a few years until I broke my finger and my team kinda disbanded. I played some tennis and racquetball, learned some golf and then got into running - 5Ks, 10Ks and a couple of half marathons, and then a friend got me to try the triathlon because of my early swimming experience.

What about you, Mom - were you always active in sports? How did you find out about senior games?

Fran: I've always been pretty active because I raised four children (laughs). I did play basketball and softball in high school. That was all they had for girls when I was that age. My husband Rufus taught me tennis and some golf but raising those kids took up most of my time when they came along. But when they left home I flew! (Both laugh)

A lady friend kept saying 'Come on down to the games' so I started local senior games playing tennis at 55. That's all I did the first year but then I saw all the other things people were doing and thought 'Golly, I can do all of this!' so the next year I signed up for everything I could work in. And I've continued to do as many as I can up to today. I've participated in 20 sports.

A lot of people stay with one sport, but I want to do it all. I'm not the best at it, but I love it all. I guess I've won 500 medals and ribbons at the local and regional level, and my softball team won a bronze at the National Senior Games in 2009. Jackie's been with me for just about every event I've been to these past 25 years. I've been to every Nationals except one since 1995 and Jackie's been my coach making sure I knew what to do and where to be. If it hadn't been for her pushing me on I might not have kept doing it. We've had a great time and it's a bonding that we'll never forget.

Jackie: I can't even describe the feelings I had watching her, especially in the running events where she was pretty good. I was trying to film, take pictures and cheer at the same time. It just meant the world to me to give back and do for her what she's always done for me. It was so emotional.

Fran: It's ALL been emotional. We have grown so close, I couldn't do without her now.

Jackie: So I've wanted to do this with Mom since she got involved. We were in Louisville in 2007 and mom says to me 'This might be my last Nationals.' I said 'Are you kidding me? I haven't even gotten old enough to go yet. This is NOT your last Nationals!' (Both laugh) But this year was my first time and it was so special for both of us to go to Cleveland and be in The Games.

Fran: I said I would do this until I was 80. Well now I'm 80 and I want to go until I'm 85. (Laughs)

This summer North Carolina selected you two to carry the state's flag in our Celebration of Athletes. What did that honor mean for you?

Fran: I've been fortunate to carry the flag twice before. But it was awesome to carry it as a mother-daughter team.

Jackie: This was to be our first Nationals both as athletes and it was so exciting. I know there are other parents and their kids in senior games. For me, I had to wait over 20 years to start, but I've been going and supporting Mom all along and it gave me a new appreciation of what's out there and available for you as a senior.

Carrying the flag was special in another way. Three weeks before the Games I tore my ACL and was not able to compete with my basketball team. I got rid of my crutches the day I left for Cleveland and it meant the world to me to be able to walk with her carrying our state flag in the Celebration of Athletes. After the disappointment of not playing, to be able to do that was one of the most special moments of my life.

We're betting you will be back in 2015. Fran, have you had any obstacles to overcome?

Fran: In 2009 I had breast cancer but I wasn't going to let it beat me. I had a lumpectomy and when they started treatment the state softball tournament was coming up. Well I would get my radiation, get in the car, drive to Raleigh and play softball and drive back to Kinston. I did that every day. I just wasn't going to quit. People were just amazed that I would keep going like that. I've helped a lot of people, talking to them about not feeling sorry for themselves and to get back on the horse and keep on riding.

Jackie: I wasn't surprised that she fought back. I remember being with her when the doctor told her about the cancer being malignant. Well, her softball team was getting ready to go to the Nationals and her first question was 'Well, can I still go to California to play with my softball team?' He looked at her like she was crazy. But three weeks after her lumpectomy she did! But that exemplifies her spirit. I've said many times if I could bottle her enthusiasm and love of life I would be a billionaire many times over.

You can't stop things from happening to you in life. Mom also has diabetes, some high blood pressure and cholesterol. But she exercises and eats well and does these sports. If she didn't do that, those problems would definitely have already impacted her quality of life and longevity.

Fran: I keep my blood sugar down without any medication. I know the exercise and eating right has helped.

Sounds like there's few excuses for not "getting into the game."

Jackie: North Carolina has a huge senior games system with local games all over. From the people I've met over the years I would guess that 65% of them never did what they are doing now in the games. The opportunity was presented and they tried it and liked it. They may not be the best but they're having fun and enjoying the social activity.

I'm preaching it everywhere I go. You don't have to stop being active. If you keep going you will realize there's so much you can gain from it. I'm just getting started. I recruited my team and wouldn't have gotten to know many of them if not for this. We've all become such great friends. You know we all go through things -people lose spouses, parents, they go through health crises. It's just another level of support you are able to give each other as you get older. We've all chosen to be more powerful than to sit back and be pitiful.

Fran: And it keeps you happy. And as long as you're happy it rubs off on others. I'm just really enjoying what I'm doing. I truly do not know what I would do without senior games, it is such a large part of my life. I preach it to everybody. I've gotten a lot of people into this and it's fun to see them involved. And it's wonderful to see the same people at Nationals time after time.

It sounds like senior games participants are something of an extended family.

Jackie: It's like mom always says. You may only see people once a year at finals or every two years at Nationals, but you learn their stories you become very good friends and they become like another level of family to you. That's what's so special about it. I've met people from all over the country. This year some were my competitors but they showed real concern about my injury, and some know my mom competes and wanted to go see her play. There is so much camaraderie we've found through common experiences.

Many people are inspired by your example. Who are your biggest inspirations?

Fran: My husband Rufus is 86 and has been a jewel all through this time. He's been like my sponsor. He never went with me until he retired and then he tried it and liked it. We play badminton doubles together. He's not as competitive or athletic as I am but he enjoys doing what he can do. It's like I tell people: if you try it, you'll be hooked.

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Jackie: He loves seeing all the people he's come to know too. For me, the inspiration is Mom of course. She was at every swim meet, every tennis match, every basketball game through high school, and even when I went to Chapel Hill for college she would almost always come watch us play. She was always there for me. I saw that not everybody has someone like that who is there and supports you whether you do good or bad.

Fran: There's another special one for me. My granddaughter wrote a book when she was in the fifth grade. It was a collection of short stories. On the last page she wrote 'Let me tell you something about my grandmother' and told about my sports and medals I've won. She then wrote 'Do you know anybody who can do what she can do at 76 years old? I do: ME when I get to be her age!'

I get cards from friends about how proud they are about me and how they wish they could do it. I tell them they can do it, there's something in senior games for everybody. Don't say you can't do it until you try!

So...How far did Jackie's acorn fall from your tree?

Fran: It didn't fall far! (Both laugh)

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For more information:

Del Moon, NSGA Communications and Media

DMoon@NSGA.com

225.202.5719

