



National Senior Games Association

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★ www.nsga.com



Personal Best Athlete Profile

Col. James "Jamie" Houston, 59

Ft. Jackson, South Carolina

Fit to serve

Col. James Houston, like most who make a career with the Army, maintains a fit profile. However, Jamie (as he prefers to be called) has been a self-professed fitness and sports fanatic for his entire life. To our knowledge, Jamie may be the only active duty military person who will compete in Cleveland for the 2013 National Senior Games presented by Humana. But that's not the main reason he was selected to be a Personal Best athlete. At one point he was a lonely athlete without playing partners, and what he did about it brought us to attention.

Jamie, who currently commands the dental unit at the massive Ft. Jackson training base near Columbia, South Carolina, found out about the senior games movement while on assignment to Iraq in 2003. Upon his return he was able to qualify and compete in the 2005 National Senior Games, and the experience was everything he hoped it would be. However, service came first and the next opportunity didn't come again until last year's South Carolina State Senior Games where he qualified to play tennis in Cleveland. Then came the lonely part: tennis players to practice against were hard to find in a military environment with so much transiency. For this man of action, the solution was simple...go find some. Through effort and persistence he started a Ft. Jackson tennis team and then found opportunities to interact with civilian teams from the surrounding area.



The commitment to fitness extends beyond his own competitive focus; it is rooted in a desire to maintain his optimum health and to demonstrate its benefits to others. Jamie is an outspoken advocate who challenges age peers who sometimes relax too much after retiring from the military, and he also inspires younger men by his example of healthy active aging. That is why we salute Col. Jamie Houston as a Personal Best athlete.

Have you always been active with sports?

Yes, I guess you can say I was an athletic prospect because I lettered in basketball and track at Bishop Hogan High School in Kansas City and got to play twice at Royals Stadium for the Amateur Baseball All-Star game. I had scholarship offers from over 70 colleges, many as combined offers to be in more than one sport. However, at the time my sister was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease and was not expected to make it. I accepted a basketball offer from a local junior college because I wanted to be close to home for support. She ultimately made a full recovery and entered medical school, but it was the right decision and I enjoyed my time at Longview Community College. My basketball team led the country in scoring, averaging 106 points per game my first year. And that was before the 3 point line existed!

How did you find your military path?

I was born at Travis Air Force Base, the son of an Air Force Navigator. I grew up mostly in Kansas City but moved around as most military families must do. With this background of service, I joined the Army and they paid my way through dental school at Oral Roberts School of Dentistry after attending ST Mary's University on a baseball scholarship. After college, I traded in my glove for a dental drill and it has been an 'exdrillerating' experience ever since. My Army career has been great, and I eventually commanded dental units in Ft. Hood Texas and Fort Polk, Louisiana. I am currently in



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command of the "DENTAC" unit at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. Ft Jackson's motto is "Victory Starts Here." Our dental motto is, "Preserve the Biting Strength."

Along the way I have done tours of duty all over the world, including Honduras, South Korea, Germany, Italy, Egypt and during wartime in Kuwait and Iraq. In Kuwait, I worked with their Ministry of Health to build a dental complex.

I've had some great experiences. I speak a little Arabic and while in Balad, Iraq I would recruit day laborers to work around our camp. We paid them a dollar a day plus an MRE and bottle of water. The ones we picked were grateful - the conditions for them were bad and even that little bit meant whether their family would eat or not. Eventually I fought for and got their daily pay increased to \$3, 2 MREs and 2 bottles of water and occasionally a pair of boots. Because of all of the roadside bombings many of the Americans did not trust any locals and avoided them. But I came to know many of them and they knew that I was the one that helped get them more pay. Because of my trying to teach them English and my minimal Arabic speaking skills, as well as trying to improve their daily existence, a delegation came to me asking if I would run for mayor of their town. They called me "habibi" (beloved friend or trusted one) and that touched me deeply.

What led you to Senior Games?

I learned about Senior Games while serving in Iraq in 2003. I was playing basketball three to four nights a week to prevent boredom and the young guys constantly challenged me. Playing against a bunch of 18 year olds really helped me get my shot back. But they all thought the commander was pretty good, so when I returned to Ft. Hood later that year I really wanted to go to the National Senior Games. I found a basketball team in Dallas that needed a guard and we qualified. Then I joined a softball team from San Antonio and we won the state games and got in. I also qualified in tennis but decided to compete in basketball and softball in Pittsburgh in 2005. Everything about that experience was a blast and I looked forward to continuing with senior games.

Unfortunately, with tours of duty in Italy and other complications I couldn't make it work to qualify for the next three Nationals but I was determined to go again. Once I was stationed in South Carolina, I was able to qualify in tennis and I'm excited to be going to Cleveland this summer. Look out because here I come!

What really motivates you?

Three things motivate me. My goals are to stay fit and competitive, inspire younger folks to be like me, and most importantly trying to get more people of my age to know about Senior Games and get involved.

I'm always trying to motivate others. I just started a Ft. Jackson tennis team with six members ranging from 29 to 59. Personally, I really needed other players to practice with to prepare for competition. But what really got me is that we have these beautiful courts on base and nobody was using them! I thought that was crazy. So I put on my recruiter hat and spread the word around. Soon I found we had personnel who had played before and wanted to be on a team.

I can't believe how competitive we are and how much fun we're having. We're playing against the locals so folks from the surrounding community can come and see Ft. Jackson - visit the local museum, fish at our lake, stuff like that. The younger guys challenge me, and I challenge them in return. I hope they keep up their fitness and one day will follow my lead and get involved with Senior Games.



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You are obviously a source of inspiration to others. Who inspired you when you were young?

My father, Jim Houston was a 145 lb "scat back" at UC Berkeley and loved sports. We didn't have paid coaches in my Catholic schools so my dad volunteered and was my coach in four sports for ten years. He was my role model and inspiration for my involvement in sports. He was very competitive so that's where I got it from. We still played one-on-one basketball until he was 66 when I started to always get the upper hand on him.

The Army has probably made more Americans physically fit than any other organization. Is that a factor that appealed to you when you made the decision to pursue a military career?

Yes. In the military you live in a culture of fitness. Ft. Jackson represents the apex of that culture. Last year over 44,000 young recruits came here for basic training, and we are also proud that the Army's Master Fitness Trainers Course program is based here. We train the trainers. My commander, Brigadier General Bryan Roberts, is the only guy I know who is a bigger fitness freak than me. He was a running back in college and has been knocking down walls so to speak ever since. I guess that's why they put him in charge here.

The Army requires fitness tests twice a year doing push-ups, sit-ups and a two mile run. I made it a personal goal to keep up the standards for 18 year-olds. I'm still pretty competitive in the running part so I feel good for my age. In fact for the past 20 years, anyone in my unit who beats my two mile time (14:30 currently) gets rewarded with Olive Garden gift cards.

It's expected that those of us in medical services should be in better shape and we can actually earn a four-day pass if we score a 300 maximum. I have received 2 passes annually for 26 years, which is over 200 days off just for staying in shape. I tell my troops to 'get fit and don't quit.' It is a no-brainer.

As a unit commander, are you now a full time administrator or are you still seeing patients?

I still do some procedures, fillings and oral surgery. Maybe twice a week, and in one way I wish I could do more. I enjoy doing it and I also need to keep my skill level up.

Just like keeping your fitness level up.

There you go. Exactly. (Laughs)

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