



National Senior Games Association

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★ www.nsga.com



Personal Best Athlete Profile

Jackie Stephens, 76

Fairfax Station, Virginia

A team dream come true

When Jackie Stephens was young she lived with her grandfather who was the Baptist minister for the African American community in a small town not far from Philadelphia. She would sit enraptured at the end of the long mahogany dinner table at Sunday dinners in her grandparent's house, soaking in stories from missionaries and church guests from afar. Those tales spawned a dream to travel and see the world.

After earning her education degree from Cheyney College, Jackie rejected the popular notion that proper single women shouldn't venture until they were married and landed a teaching job in Hawaii. Two years later she went to Europe on contract with the Department of Defense, where she met her husband. Teaching, traveling and raising a family enriched her adult years.

Jackie considers herself blessed to have had the opportunity to see and do as much as she has, but there was still an aching to pursue an unfulfilled dream. She is now on a personal best journey with new friends that is bringing that dream to life.

You have such a passion for basketball. Why is it that you only started playing as a senior?

I wanted to play but I couldn't. My mother died from heart disease when I was 4 and my dad went off with the Navy, so I lived with my grandparents in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. My grandfather thought that they would not allow me to participate in sports to keep me healthy. Well, I grew to be 6 feet tall and my PE teacher and basketball coach came to my grandparents and asked if I could play. They said no. We lived in a small town where there were just three streets where African Americans lived and medical services were not good for us. We had one old doctor for everyone. They were just trying to look out for me.

I've always looked like a basketball player and I've had people say over and over through my life "You must have played basketball." I think all of us have a place in our lives for fitness and sports but our engagement depends on circumstances. Mine certainly has been that way. So my personal best now is reaching to accomplish my early dream that I wasn't allowed to follow when I was young.

When did you finally get onto a team?

I got my chance when my husband retired from 34 years in the military and we moved from Virginia to Michigan where he had found a job. I read an article in the newspaper about the local senior games in Detroit so I signed up and played basketball. From there I found out about the Michigan Spirits senior women's team and I went with them to play at the 1999 National Senior Games in Orlando, Florida.





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In 2001, I moved back to Northern Virginia. In 2003, I found four other senior players and formed a mixed ages team (the youngest was 50 and I was the oldest at 66 years) and competed in the 2003 Northern Virginia Senior Olympics. In 2005, we formed the NOVA United Senior Women's Basketball Association. We now have senior teams in five different age groups. Four of us are still deeply involved and we have a marvelous time growing the association.

So here I had a dream that I thought was long since gone and had told myself, "Forget about it Jackie, move on." But I did take advantage of this wonderful opportunity. The exciting thing for me is that I get to meet and play and exercise with a group of ladies that I can also have a social relationship with. It goes well beyond basketball. We are taking this journey through our lives together now.

Where does your NOVA United team play?

We play in senior basketball tournaments in Virginia and other states. We also play exhibition games during the half-time of women's collegiate games (e.g., Georgetown, George Washington University, the Naval Academy, and UVa) and WNBA Washington Mystics games. We've even played during the half-time of NCAA women's basketball tournament games. On one end of the court, our younger players (50s and early 60s) will play and on the other end, our older ladies (60s and 70s) will play.

My team has won a lot of medals in tournaments, but not at Nationals yet. That's a dream come true hopefully. We all work so hard to win a medal at Nationals.

That must be an added motivation for the team this year.

Absolutely. Being on a 70+ team, we all have our health issues and you start to wonder how much longer you're going to be able to do this.

I had arthroscopic surgery on my knee last year and I haven't bounced back like I thought I would. My knee still swells and gets sore when I play. So I'm very guarded about how much I participate right now in exhibitions or tournaments until I go to the Nationals because I want to do my best in Cleveland.

How important has it been to fulfill your dream to participate in sports?

It's natural to think about what could have been if you had the opportunity. I have been so sad about the fact that I didn't get to have that team experience when I was young. I think a team experience prepares you for life. I was a teacher and counselor in elementary education for 41 years and nothing excites me more in teaching than being a part of a school team. Wherever I taught was the best school in the world, and I worked for the best principal who was like our coach. And there I was, a part of the team at this wonderful school that kids absolutely loved to come to and that parents admired us for the job we did. The feeling of being a part of a super fantastic team with a real strong mission in educating children is so special.

I love having that same feeling about being part of a basketball team where we all have our jobs to do, we do it to the very best of our ability, and where each one has played a role in that wonderful opportunity of standing together and being awarded a medal or a ribbon. I so long for that day to come at Nationals. Maybe Cleveland will be it.

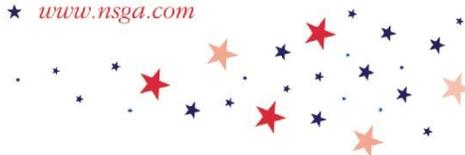
I look at sports as a gift. God has given us all our gifts, and some gifts are greater than others. Some people are more developed in sports. So to not use your gifts is a little bit sad. Now that I am having this opportunity with sports and to be rewarded for just doing something that I love...it just means more than I can tell you.



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Something tells us that you will always find something to keep yourself going.

I am just an active person. I think back about my grandparents and their process of aging, and like many in that time they didn't do anything. Aging was reading the newspaper and going to the grocery store. I can't just sit.

That's not who I am. I don't want to be in that realm. I look forward and see myself as aging actively. I want to experience, I want to do, I want to see, I want to be a part of as many active things as I possibly can. I have a curiosity about me, always have.

I want to be a part of the "now generation" of aging persons who don't sit and rock. We're out there trying to accomplish goals that were never thought of before. People are living longer, and I think my personal take on it is because they are active and being role models for their children to carry on.

What does your family think about your sports involvement?

We are a sports family. Definitely. My husband, Bill Stephens, was All American in basketball and track at Eastern Michigan University as well as being a distinguished military graduate. He even coached my team for a time. We just celebrated our 50th anniversary. Our two daughters are both very active with exercise and sports. They are very excited about what I'm doing. We believe in fitness, we believe in eating properly and taking care of ourselves and we work hard at it.

Now that you've discovered you can participate in senior basketball, do you share the opportunity with others?

I do it all the time. I've been the greatest marketer for our basketball program. It's nothing for me to approach someone in line at the market who looks like an active person or might have been athletic and ask, "Excuse me, do you play basketball?" I usually get the strangest look...here's this older stranger asking something like that. But I often get a reply that they used to do it in college or high school and I then ask "Do you know you can still play?" and I get that startled look again. "Well, we have a senior team and you can play." And sometimes they ask me to tell them more. There are so many people who don't even know they can play senior basketball. So I'm the person in our association who encourages senior women to check out our program and get back in the game.

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For more information:

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