



National Senior Games Association

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★ www.nsga.com



Personal Best Athlete Profile

John Tatum, 94

Washington, DC

Tending his garden

When John Tatum received our call to interview, he was doing what he likes best - working in his yard. He had just finished cutting nearly an acre of grass with a push mower and talked about being behind with his gardening.

Between keeping up his home and a country retreat, earned from a 34 year career working up from laborer to software programmer for the Navy, it's no wonder swimming three times a week is more like relaxation.

John and his brother Bradford have become admired fixtures in DC and National Senior Games pools for over 15 years, and were among featured athletes in the 2010 independent documentary Age of Champions. But things are different now, and John carries a heavy heart to Cleveland this summer. As you will see from our conversation, John has overcome many obstacles and witnessed many changes in his life, and his personal best attitude will keep him moving on.



Is this a good time to talk? We don't want to keep you from your yard work.

Oh yes, this is fine, I just finished mowing. I felt like stopping a few times but I kept on going. That's what you do in the pool too. Coach doesn't want you hanging on the wall and tells you to keep going.

OK. So how long have you been swimming?

I swam as a kid but it was tough to find a place to swim. We had a swim team in high school but no pool and no real instructor.

It wasn't until the late '70s that I got with the Takoma Aquatic Club and I've been swimming regularly with them ever since. My brother Bradford and I started going to the DC games here about 15 years ago and in 2003 we went to our first National Senior Games in Virginia Beach.

You've had quite a bit of adversity lately. How are you preparing for the next National Senior Games?

I had a sore on leg last year that kept me from swimming for over a month. My brother used to swim with me all the time and I lost him in January to colon cancer. That took a little starch out of me and I didn't really feel like swimming any more. Then my sister passed away this month and I'm working my way out of the doldrums again to get back to my swimming.

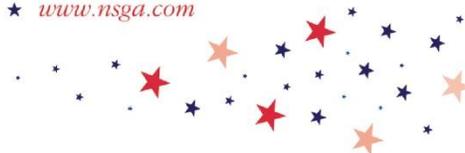
Got to bow up and keep going and get ready to go to Ohio for the national meet. The thing I have to deal with now is my stamina but I'm finally getting back up to full force. You always got to do your best.



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John Tatum Personal Best Profile

Page 2

Was your brother the inspiration to enter swimming competitions?

I like to swim for exercise mostly but it's been fun to do these races too. So yes, Bradford was the really competitive one and he brought me along. He would do six events but I'm more of a sprint swimmer so I stick to the 50 and 100 meter freestyle and the 50 meter breaststroke.

He was two years younger so we often swam in the same age group against each other. But it was alright because sometimes I won and sometimes he did. I've done well and won three gold medals in each of the last two National Senior Games.

So I'm moving on now. I'll just swim against the other 90's men that show up. The competition's always there, and I guess it's good I won't have to worry about how well my brother is feeling. There's always a challenge. Your heart is heavy, but you have to keep moving. That's what it's all about.

I also have to say my coach Rodger McCoy has been keeping me going for all these years too. He's the one that made me think I can do this and compete. He badgers me the way coaches do to swim a little more and keep going. I don't try to be like the big swimmers like Michael Phelps, it's my coach and the people around me that give me my inspiration now.

Do you have others around you for support now?

Oh, my daughter (Joyce Wilkinson Brown) keeps me going. She makes all the travel arrangements, gets me registered and gets all of my family out to watch. We'll have probably ten people from the family -nieces, aunts and all - all going to Cleveland.

My Water Wizards teammates and my coach are really good about helping me out. There's no barriers among us with age or ethnicity or how good we are. There is a lot of camaraderie with us.

So swimming and gardening are what you've done most since you retired. Is there anything in common about those activities for you?

I've been gardening for probably fifty years now. I guess when things are good they both go well. Lately with all the funerals and such I've been slow to get back to my swimming routine. And I'm a little late getting the garden going. I just mowed over the weeds and haven't turned over the soil yet. I've been out of rhythm and it's been a pain on my heart. But I'm picking up.

Both of them have stamina involved, and that's my challenge. In gardening when you're out there in the sun digging and weeding, making the rows clean and straight, it's a challenge to keep it going. They talk about how hard it is to do 500 meters in swimming. Let 'em come turn this soil all morning and see which is the hardest to do. But it does teach you to keep going, keep up your stamina.

So you might say it's taught you to tend to your own body like you tend your garden.

Yes. Exactly right.

Obesity is a big problem in this country. What do you tell people about how to stay fit and enjoy a long life as you have done?

I'm seeing this obesity creeping up. I see it all over. I was just working in my garden and thinking I don't see how these construction workers can toil all day and still have a big belly. I guess it's probably what they eat. Maybe too much beer.



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JohnTatum Personal Best Profile

Page 3

I have a little pouch myself right now, not a lot but it's more than I'd like for it to be. I'm sure it's because of the layoff from all of the things that have been happening with losing my brother and sister and all. I try to keep my swimming regimen up but it's been hard lately. I just want to get back to where I was and my time to be as good as it's been.

What I tell people first is to take care of your body. Go to the doctor and get a complete examination. A lot of men don't want to go through the tests and invasive examinations. But when they go they usually find something they didn't know about - high cholesterol, blood sugar, hypertension and the like. You gotta catch that. Also I tell people to exercise, keep going. My doctor always asks if I'm still swimming and tells me to keep it up. So that's what I'm going to do.

Do people tell you that you are an inspiration to them?

Oh my goodness, yes. All the time. "I want to be like you when I grow up" they say, things like that. Even some of the guys in their '70s. It does make you feel good. People always want to know what I eat and how I exercise and such. But I don't think I do much different than others, I just do ordinary things, no special diet or regimen, just common sense. Swimming three times a week and all of the house work and gardening is enough to keep me going.

But it's more than just about swimming. You've lived through great changes in our country. Did you imagine as a kid that you would ever see an African American become President?

No. When I was a young kid in Foggy Bottom I didn't even have a pool I could swim in. There weren't many places for blacks to go back then. We would swim in the reflecting pool at the National Mall. It was like ankle deep so it was more like splashing around. We'd sometimes swim in the canal or in the Potomac River. In 1928 Francis Junior High School opened a pool for us and every black kid in Georgetown went there and learned to swim even with no instructor there. That was quite a thing - there was a pool for us and we could swim all summer.

All the schools were segregated and there wasn't an opportunity to get on a team, get coached and enter competitions. Now we have a couple a black swimmers on the Olympic team. That's something I wouldn't have imagined when I was doing the dog paddle back then.

On the subject of kids and swimming, you were the Honoree for the 27th Annual Black History Invitational Swim Meet held in the nation's capital this past February. What was that experience like?

It was really phenomenal. All these kids, hundreds of them, coming here from all over the country for the swim meet. I didn't know the extent of it. They put me on the cover of the program and wanted to bring me up and show me off. It was really something to be around all those youngsters with all their energy.

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