



Personal Best Athlete Profile

Leurene Hildenbrand, 81

Hartville, Ohio

The Art (and Science) of a Successful Life

This is the story of an Ohio farm girl who dreamed of being a research scientist and persisted until she reached her goal. Leurene Hildenbrand overcame the prevailing bias of her time against women pursuing science careers and became the first female to manage a laboratory in her company. But that's just the beginning of the story.

Wonder Woman (W2), as her friends affectionately call her, filled her adult life with raising a family and helping her husband run their Ohio cattle farm when she wasn't studying new uses for polymers at work. When they retired and became "snowbirds" to winter in Florida, the inquisitive senior found out about local senior games and one thing led to another. Leurene drew upon her childhood memories of running, ice skating and bicycling and brought them back to life through senior sports - after thoroughly researching them, of course. She will compete in table tennis and cycling at the 2013 National Senior Games Presented By Humana in Cleveland.



Every year since then Leurene has competed and served as a valued volunteer in local and State senior games in Canton and Akron and tends her summer home on 25 acres in Hartville. Then, for six months she plays and serves in local games in Pinellas Park and a few other Florida locales. She also stays busy teaching aerobics classes, hosting Bible studies and keeps up her musical skills playing violin in the community orchestra. She's made such an impact with her "winter family" that her table tennis club took up a petition to urge her to stay there all year, and over 1000 people signed it. Even though she lost her husband of 56 years during a difficult year in 2012, she's still back in Ohio cutting acres of grass and tending vegetable and flower gardens on her own. That's where we caught up with "Wonder Woman" to do a little more research on her.

You compete in so many sports now and win a lot of medals. Have you always played sports?

No. I was raised on a farm and went to a very small high school that only offered girls basketball in the winter and baseball in the summer. We had no competitions to speak of. We didn't have that Title IX rule and I when I meet these younger girls I always tell them to go for it, you're fortunate because I didn't have those opportunities back then.

Anyway, after school I was too busy with work and my family. I worked full time, and my husband also worked for Goodyear televising big sports events from the Goodyear Blimp. We also did farming in our spare time and built several boats and houses. We



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had about 100 acres and raised registered Black Angus cattle. So there was no time for sports until after I retired.

We bought an RV and went down to Florida and that's where I saw an ad about the Senior Games. I was pretty good with table tennis so I thought I would try it out and it went pretty well. I researched it more and realized there was more to life than just table tennis with all the sports they offered.

I loved to ice skate on the ponds in winter when I was a girl, so I decided to try rollerblading. I loved it. Then while I was out on the trail I saw these cyclists flying over the overpass of the road and thought "Boy that sure looks like fun." They were going faster than I could on skates and I wanted to go faster too. I also did a lot of running on the farm so I wanted to try track and field events too. Little by little I found out all of these things I could do - volleyball, archery, basketball, pickleball, shuffleboard, horseshoes. I compete in 17 different sports. I like billiards and bocce ball because there's a little bit of physics in playing that.

Physics? You look at sports that way?

Oh yes. I worked at Goodyear Research for 37 years. I started out as a draftswoman. It was during the war and they didn't have enough guys so there was my opportunity. I worked at Goodyear Aerospace for a time where they had a contract to build Nike Rocket cases. After training and testing I was chosen to be in charge of the spectroscopy lab. I made a little bit of history there, being a woman and so young. Our work over the years was much more than dealing with tires. We did more research with polymers than rubber, finding new applications and such.

In a way, it seems that you approach your entire life as a research project.

Oh yes, I do that all the time. I've always been known for my research ability, and that's what I do in everything. When I went to buy my bicycle I wanted one that was just right. I hadn't been on a bike since I was a kid and I had to share one with the whole family. There's so many qualities that go into a bike, so I went to the library and got a lot of information. I found the bike that fits me and I love it. I'm the one flying along now too. Same with my field events. I went to a boot camp in Florida and learn how to throw the discus and the hammer, but I still went to the internet to get more information to make myself better.

You managed to qualify for the National Senior Games in spite of some difficulties. What happened?

I went through some trying times last year. First I broke my wrist playing pickleball. My foot stuck on the court and I went down. I got back up and finished the game, and even though it hurt I played another game. Yeah, it felt bad but I didn't realize it was broken. When you want to play you play (laughs). Afterwards it swelled up like you wouldn't believe.

After that, my husband's health had been failing and he passed away last year. I also needed cataract surgery so I had to deal with that too, as the cataract surgery caused severe cornea problems just before going to the International Senior Games in St George Utah. I did come home with a Silver and a Bronze in table tennis!



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Did those setbacks make you think you might need to slow down?

Oh no, I never think that. If anything I might change direction a bit. But you have to expect that. Life is a journey that's filled with hopes and dreams and challenges and setbacks and goodbyes. All of that. You have to make the best of it no matter what. You don't have to stay on the same road, there's lots of paths to travel on that journey. I love the challenges, that's what keeps me going.

One important thing is that God is in my life. He controls my feelings and I never allow myself to get so discouraged that I can't do anything. Never, ever. There's always a bright side you can look at.

There are a lot of people who are inspired by your outlook on life.

I don't mean to be bragging, but people ask me all the time "How do you do all of this Leurene?" Last year down in Florida a woman who beat me in cycling who came up to me and said she was inspired by me. I said "Phyllis...you beat me in the race." She said "I know. You don't have to be the winner to be an inspiration."

I want to be an example for others. For people who don't think they can do it or are not good enough to be in it, I'd like to talk to them and tell them "I was there. I felt that same way. But I found out I am good enough, once I did my research and started practicing and following what others do. You can do it."

You are playing the violin in your photo. You obviously have more than sports that interest you.

I enjoy playing my violin in the 52 piece Pinellas Park Civic Orchestra when I'm in Florida. I've been playing it since I was young. I was self taught on the violin, but finally got lessons when I went to the University of Akron, and that's actually an interesting story.

I wanted to be a scientist so I took all of the math, chemistry, physics, everything related to science. I only took the classes that I was interested in and wanted to take, so I didn't take any of the introductory courses. When it came time to graduate, the Dean said "This is all highly unlikely, we have a problem." He explained that for science majors to graduate you have to take ROTC, but as a woman I was not allowed to take that. So after he paced the floor and thought about it, he handed me the next semester's course book and gave me the option of choosing any other course to make it up. So I substituted violin lessons for ROTC, can you believe that? It was so cool." (laughs)

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