



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 "Class of 2013" Athlete

Mark Ballenger, 59

Cleveland, Ohio

No Retreat No Surrender

Mark Ballenger enjoyed an active life as an elite skater and cyclist. He was such a fierce competitor that he was called "Mark the Shark." All that changed when he suffered a massive stroke at 43. He could have easily given up, but Mark fought back and found he still could be an athlete, competing in both able bodied and disabled cycling events.

The 2013 National Senior Games Presented by Humana will be his first at this level, and he will be competing in his hometown of Cleveland. But he doesn't feel any special pressure. Mark's goals have changed as much as his daily life has changed. But read on and follow his story each month through July and you will find that the fire continues to burn in the heart of a competitor.



History

When did you have the stroke and how has it affected you?

It was May 14, 1997. I fell down and that was the end of it. The doctors expected me to die. I was flat on my back. I couldn't move anything. I just didn't want to go like that. With some great rehab and my wife pulling me through for weeks on end I came back. But everything changed. I was a different person.

My left side was hit by the stroke. My left hand has no sensation. There's no coordination or dexterity to it all. My left arm is maybe 40% as strong as the right. I'd say the left leg is maybe 50% of the right one. I can't walk very good - I'm always just a little off balance. But riding a bike is different somehow. Once I get up on it and get going everything just clicks. Then I ride for two hours and I feel pretty good after that. The bike's the easiest thing to do and I've worked up to become competitive again.

I have a lot of problems that most people don't even think about, like just getting dressed. It's so much trouble to put on riding tights, and more trouble to get them off. So I just ride in shorts, even in 30 degree weather. It takes me a half hour to put on my clothes without assistance. Sometimes it takes an hour. It just gets you sometimes, you know? But then I go out and ride 40 miles in two hours. It's crazy. Since the stroke I've put down over 5,000 miles a year average, so it's probably got to be over 65,000 miles total since 1999.

When did you decide you could make a comeback and take on the physical challenges after the stroke?

When I was laying flat on my back in the hospital I heard this Bruce Springsteen song that repeated the phrase "no retreat, no surrender." I thought, 'Man, that's me. No retreat, no surrender' and I made the decision to fight back. It was so bad at that time - I hated the therapy. But I told myself I'm going to do this and the athlete in me came out.'



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



Mark Ballenger Personal Best Profile

Page 2

How did you get back to competition shape after such a serious setback?

For me it's like a PhD going back to Kindergarten. I used to do this really good but I've had to go back and relearn all of this stuff because of the injury. I've had my bumps and scrapes but this stroke was the injury to end all injuries. It's not just that you can't do certain things. Brain injury changes you as a person. It changed my whole life.

I first tried to go back to inline and ice skating but I found out pretty quick I couldn't maintain my balance because you are constantly shifting your weight from side to side. But I found out right off the bat I could ride a bike so I focused on getting better at that.

I couldn't work hand brakes, so I went and got one of those heavy Schwinn Hollywood bikes with the coaster brakes. It had the basket and the bell just like you'd have as a kid. But I got up to riding several miles at a time within a month and switched over to a long bike, and within two years I moved up to a road bike that was adapted so I could work it with my right hand.

When I first got back into competition I couldn't keep up with anyone. But I kept getting better and better and didn't stop.

How have you done in competition in the decade you've come back to racing?

I've been to two CP World Games. CP events are for people with Cerebral Palsy, traumatic brain injury, amputees, and stroke victims like me. I won a bronze in the time trial in England in 2000. There are regional disabled races I regularly go to. The Michigan Victory Games is a CP event I go to every year, and I've won in my category 12 straight years. 20K, 10K, 5K time trial on the road and a 1500 and 3000 meter time trial in a parking lot setting. I've won them all.

I've won quite a few medals in state senior games around the country. I qualified for the National Senior Games in Virginia where I came in third in all of the events. I also went to Michigan and finished the same there too.

This is my first time to make the National Senior Games. It's nice to think about winning, but I don't really think I have a chance against these other great guys. I ride to keep myself sharp and healthy and everything else is a bonus. Besides, I'm not the risk taker I used to be. I don't do it like 'Mark the Shark' as they used to call me. But that's okay with me. I'm not taking it for granted. To see where I started after that stroke and how far I have come...I never thought I would get this far for sure.

Motivation & Inspiration

Who inspires you to be your personal best?

I have two inspirations – my wife Mary Beth and my team manager Tony Smith.

Mary Beth is a cyclist too. That's how we met. She used to be a great competitor and still rides but doesn't race anymore. She qualified for the 2011 games but didn't go because things got too





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



Mark Ballenger Personal Best Profile

Page 3

hectic and she couldn't keep up with training. It's enough that I'm so involved in it, and she supports me in more ways than I can say. She helped carry me through all of my recovery and rehab. I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for her.

Tony Smith is the manager of the Pista Elite Racing Team I am part of, and I wouldn't be doing any of this without him. He got my bike all tricked out to meet my needs. All of the shifting and braking controls are on the right side because I can't do anything with my left hand. This is the best equipment, all carbon, really good stuff. Tony also helps me with my special training needs. I could not perform at this level without him.

Are you an inspiration for anyone around you?

My kids say I'm a big inspiration to them. They've learned how to overcome things by watching me. Other than that, I think most people just think I'm crazy.

What would you say to people who aren't staying active and taking care of themselves?

Get up and do it! It doesn't have to be cycling. Walking, anything. You gotta get up and move. And never give up!

Training and Preparation for Competition

How do you train and get ready for competition?

I usually train 2 1/2 hours every day and I fit it in around my part time job. I do some light work with weights and then do a half hour of cycling. Then I do another session on the bike late morning, and then go work on machines at the gym. Some days I spend more time out on the bike. I'll go two hours sometimes. It feels good when I see I can go 40 miles in that time. How I train also goes by how I'm feeling because of my disability.

In the winter I do crazy intense work on the indoor trainer bike. I do some high speed pedaling to help my left leg coordination and it seems to work. I go furiously and get it up over 70 miles an hour sometimes. There's more resistance when I work outdoors of course but it helps my leg work right and with building up road speed.



During the competition season between late April and October I get out on the road more. As I get closer to a race I will cut down the road work some and concentrate a little more on the speed work. That goes pretty good. I have the horsepower to do well on time trials but my main problem is working in the field of riders in a race. I have to check what my left hand is doing and also watch the wheels of others in front and next to me. That's difficult especially going into turns and I get caught sometimes because of it. You have to make split second decisions and not keep looking back. The manager of my Pista Elite Team, Tony Smith, practices with me by riding up and doing some bumps and moves on turns to help me prepare for what happens in a race. That's what I concentrate on most a couple of weeks before the event.

I usually take my last ride about three days before so I'll be rested and have some energy.



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



Mark Ballenger Personal Best Profile

Page 4

Do you train with others?

I am part of the Pista Elite Racing Team. The guys are from all over and practice opportunities are limited, but we get together for several races a year. A bunch of us were in the Virginia and Michigan Senior Games. Quite a few of them qualified and will be racing in the National Senior Games. The only other one that is disabled is Bruce Gordon, an amputee from Indiana. He was a national champion in his Paralympic class at one time and he's a heckuva racer.

My manager Tony is the only one who I get to spend more time with in training. He is the reason I am doing what I'm doing.

What are you looking forward to about attending the National Senior Games in Cleveland?

Well, I don't have to drive a long way to get there! Seriously, being in my town means my kids get to come watch me so that's the best thing about it. I also want my team to do well.

My goal is very simple. I want to finish these races, every one of them, without incident. I don't have any illusions about the competition – there's a lot of great riders that will be there. I want to do well and finish every event. If I've done that, I've done pretty good I'd say.

Fitness & Nutrition

Have you always been active?

Yes. I was always moving. I played hockey as a kid and did track in high school. I wasn't real good at pole vault but that was my favorite. As an adult I started with competitive weight lifting and speed skating and that led to short track ice skating and in line skating as well as doing some cycling. I was a training fiend and competed hard. I won my share of races in my career, including two Ultra Distance Inline World Championships. People called me Mark The Shark but I'm a different person since the stroke. I still train hard but I don't take the risks I used to in competition.

My drive is the same. That hasn't taken a hit for some reason. I'm more dedicated now. I know I have to train harder and be more consistent in the things I do.

How did your doctors react to you returning to competitive cycling?

My doctors at the time were completely against what I was doing. My rehab doctor said forget it, you can't do it. I was using a blood thinner and that was his worry. He also knew I had

trouble focusing after the stroke and didn't think I could put it all together. But when I got on that Schwinn bike and it felt so natural to go down the road I knew right away it was what I had to do.

I parted ways with the rehab doctor when he wouldn't give me a letter stating I could race with my disability. I told him I would either be so far ahead or so far behind I wouldn't be bumping into anybody. My primary doctor now signs the letter every year and tells me not everyone can do what you do but he sees it has improved my coordination and overall health. My numbers are all good- blood pressure, cholesterol, weight. I know I'd be a lot heavier if I wasn't doing this.



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



Mark Ballenger Personal Best Profile

Page 5

How else has your sports activity helped you?

I don't think I could do my part time job if I wasn't cycling. It gives me strength to work through my challenges. I never get tired on my job. I just keep pushing through it.

How do you approach nutrition?

Because of all the calories I burn I don't gain weight. But my diet has been my weakest point in the past. I'm 140 pounds and can eat a box of donuts and not put on anything, but I know it's not the best for me. My wife helps me eat healthier and make better choices. I've cut back on meat and eating more vegetables. She looks out for both of us and I'm better for it.

Epilogue

Mark Ballenger's stroke was life altering but ultimately brought out the best in his character. Being selected as a Personal Best athlete has also changed his life forever. As a native Clevelander, his national exposure reflected positively on his hometown and he received considerable public and media attention. Mark the Shark has been embraced by his community and he is even more inspired now to be a role model for active, healthy aging. In Mark's words:



As I told you before, I did not expect to win any medals, but I achieved all of my goals - and more. I completed all of my events without incident and was at my peak competitively. It was special to be among so many other great cyclists my age.

I am so proud to have represented Cleveland. You told me the media might be calling and boy did they! To be named a torchbearer for the opening ceremony and to ride the torch in front of the other athletes, local people and my family was...I can't express the words. It was special.

Thank you for this recognition. I will never forget these experiences.

(Photo by Makenzie L. Goodman/ Brooks Institute © 2013)

[Continue Reading about Mark Ballenger](#)
[More Personal Best Profiles at www.NSGA.com](http://www.NSGA.com)

For more information:

Del Moon, NSGA Communications and Media
DMoon@NSGA.com
225.202.5719

