



National Senior Games Association

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2016 Personal Best Athlete Profile

Harold Bach, 96

Bismarck, North Dakota

Catch Me If You Can



Photo by Rebekah A. Romero

People have always had trouble keeping up with Harold Bach. At 96, the North Dakotan should have earned a dictionary entry under the word “active” by now. He’s pretty fast on the track too, and has been a fixture at the National Senior Games since his first appearance in 1993. He wins his share of medals, and at the 2015 National Senior Games presented by Humana, he logged the fastest times in our history in the 50, 100, 200 and 400 meter sprints for men 95-99. The amazing part is that he never entered a running event until he was 72 years old.

For family and friends who know Harold, it’s not surprising that he is still going strong, nor that he would take up a new passion as a septuagenarian. Growing up during the Great Depression in a rural area, Harold and his family moved several times and learned how to be resilient and creative. After high school, he joined the Civilian Conservation Corps and bought himself a scooter. He was then drafted into World War II, where the Army tasked him with driving a truck delivering ammunition and bombs in North Africa and Sicily. Then, in Italy he was a messenger driving a Jeep between field locations and Army headquarters in Rome.

After the war, Harold moved to Seattle to look for work, and convinced his sweetheart to ditch college and go with him. They were soon married, and he talked his way into a good job with the Boeing Company. However, the couple became homesick for North Dakota. Returning home, he taught school, bought into a hardware store and lumberyard, was elected mayor, and then settled in as a rural mail carrier from 1959 to 1987. It was only fitting that the job he stuck with longest kept him moving every day.

Did we mention he flew airplanes, raced snowmobiles, and owned a Honda Gold Wing motorcycle, which he drove to the famous Sturgis Rally in South Dakota every year for three decades? You are beginning to get the picture now-taking risks and trying new things is also part of Harold’s DNA.

Harold enjoyed bowling, golf, hunting and other activities, but was only a matter of time before running track became an avocation. Harold has entered competitions in California, Arizona, Utah, Minnesota, Montana, as well as South and North Dakota. He loves going to the National Senior Games, both for the added competition and to see new places. With a lean, 5-foot-3 frame, Harold says he can’t gain weight no matter what he eats. That could be his compensation for a lifetime of nonstop activity, and his vitality also likely helped him survive a bout with lymphoma ten years ago.

Harold Bach is a salt of the earth guy who shows by example how to live a long, healthy life: just keep moving. Even in conversation he has a fast wit, and once he gets started he finds it hard to stop talking. That’s OK, because he has a lot to say and has seen and done a lot of things over nine decades. Settle in for a tomato beer and enjoy his Personal Best story.

Harold, you’ve won a lot of gold medals, but you were past 90 before you got into the NSGA all-time records. How do you feel about being Number One in the 95-99 age group in all four sprint events you entered last year?

I feel kinda lucky about all that. I didn’t have a lot of bad things happen to me. So I don’t think I would have accomplished all these things without the word “luck.” Maybe something in the genes too.

There’s training goes with it too. It’s sometimes a bit of a chore, but you have to do that because that’s the difference for your heart and your lungs, you know. That means running regularly, practicing your sprints. Keeping yourself in shape is the best way to avoid injury.

You had never competed before you started Senior Games at the age of 72. What would you say to people who think they can't do this because they haven't tried it before?

You can start any time. The main thing is getting started. Enter anything you want that you feel comfortable with, that's the way to go. But if you don't do anything at all, you'll be in trouble. Walking is the best exercise there is. Don't just sit in the house and watch TV.

There are a lot of health gains to it. You meet a lot of people going to these games, too. If you don't get out and socialize, it will hurt you mentally. Like people for who they are. You never want to say bad things about others. Everyone has a different personality.

Have you had people say you are an inspiration to them?

I've gotten a lot of TV and newspaper stories around here, and they always say I'm an inspiration. You know, several times when I'm coming home from these competitions, there's usually someone from the locality at the airport to greet me. It's nice to see them there, so I guess I am an inspiration.

I've had school kids write articles in school papers and send me letters. One time, I was on an Honor Flight where veterans were given a chance to go see the World War II monument after it opened. We met some students and they wrote letters thanking us for what we had done. They really put us up on a pedestal. Similarly, after the Senior Games in Cleveland, a grade school class wrote me a very nice letter saying I was an inspiration. It gave me a nice feeling.

Do you have someone who has been an inspiration to you?

I would say Jesse Owens, the Olympic runner. Germany was wanting to wipe out everybody in the world and he just made a fool out of them. It was a terrible blow to Hitler because he had such high expectations. So Jesse Owens was a hero of mine at that time. He just changed everything in the line of sports.

Yes, and he taught Americans a bit about human equality too.

That's right, that's right.

You grew up during the Great Depression in rural North Dakota. It's hard to imagine the hardships you and your family experienced during those times. Tell us a little bit of what you recall.

Living in the Depression was an experience to remember. To me, those were the good old days. People were much more humble and you could trust almost anybody. Sometimes a handshake was as good as a contract. Today you almost have to have an attorney's permission to talk to your mother-in-law! [Laugh]

There was very little employment and the weather was bad. There was a lot of dust and a lot of insects in the air. But you didn't think too bad of it because everyone was in the same boat. After it was over, everything went back into the positive.



I was born in a stone house outside of Regent in North Dakota. When I was six months old my folks moved us to Minnesota, to a horse farm owned by some wealthy English people who lived in St. Paul and had top show horses. On weekends they would come out for fox hunts in colorful clothes.

Another thing I remember well was everyone going out looking for honey. When they found large bees' nest hanging from a tree they would bang on it with pots, pans and anything that made a loud noise. The bees couldn't stand it and took off, and we stole the honey. I still like honey. But now, I purchase it from the store instead!

Anyway, my dad heard about a job back in North Dakota so we loaded up in our old Model T and headed back and lived with my grandparents on a homestead 12 miles outside Regent. We had to walk a mile and a half cross-country to a small school where one teacher taught all eight grades.

My dad delivered gas in rural areas for Standard Oil Company. We had a Model A truck with barrel holders on the sides, and my brother Archie and I would ride on them when we went visiting on Sundays.

We also got some cattle on the edge of town and it was our chore to go get the cattle in to the farm every night. This was no easy task because the pasture had cactus. Most of the time we didn't wear shoes, so you can imagine what happened. In winter we walked behind the cattle, and we took the temptation to get our cold feet in their deposit. I still think about it to this day. Now you know the rest of the story! [Laugh]

We then moved to Havelock just east that had a population of 150. Archie and I delivered milk around town. I love that little town, so much that I later bought five lots. I still own them today, and I like to go out there with a metal detector looking for something antique and old. The last time I went I got to thinking the only old thing around was me, so I went back home! [Laugh]

Anyway, we moved back to Regent where my dad was manager of Farmers Union Oil until 1941. I graduated from school there in 1939.

Boy, you moved around a lot as a youth. You got plenty of exercise with chores and odd jobs. Were there organized sports in school when you were growing up in the Depression?

Really, not. I had basketball in high school. I was a good shooter but I'm not tall at all- I'm a long way from being a center. And all the little towns had softball teams, but I really didn't compete individually in any outside sports at all.



By then, most kids had bikes but I didn't have any bucks so I borrowed three dollars from my sister and bought a used one. I also did some golfing and skiing and other school activities.

After high school, I was looking for adventure and joined the Civilians Conservation Corps which the Army ran. I was sent to Aberdeen, South Dakota and then Miles City, Montana. I painted and installed wood signs, built fences and fought a few forest fires. In 1941 I bought a motor scooter.

Then came the World War II. What did you do?

I went into the Army in September of 1941. We were put on a ship in New York harbor and our supplies were put on another ship, which was sunk by German U boats before it got to our destination. Leaving shore and taking one last look at the Statue of Liberty was a hollow feeling.

Anyway, we went to Glasgow, Scotland, and 50 days later I was on a ship convoy with nobody knowing where we were going. We passed the Straits of Gibraltar and soon hit the beaches of Africa. My main job while there was to drive and deliver bombs and ammo wherever they were needed. These were up to 2,000 pound bombs. It was very dangerous because the Germans had air superiority and were always overhead. We lived in foxholes, and on one of the raids a bomb landed 75 feet from me and made a hole big enough to drive my truck through.

I left Africa and was sent to Sicily and Italy. In early 1944 we entered the port of Naples and set up camp 30 miles south of Rome. I ended up with the job of running messenger between there and Army headquarters in Rome. I was issued a Jeep, a brief case and a .45 caliber pistol. It was one of my better positions but it was also scary driving those country roads alone, especially up in the mountains. On one of my trips, I even ran into my brother Archie whose outfit helped take Rome.

It was over 70 years ago, but in a way it seems like as though it was last year. It's hard to believe that the loss of life was so high. I would never want to go through it again, because the odds weren't all that good on coming back you know. And yet, I wouldn't want to trade the experiences I had during that time.



This is all interesting. Before we get back to your Senior Games years, tell us briefly what you did in the next six decades.

After the war, I went back to Regent and worked for an oil company, and then was asked to come teach school as teachers were hard to get. Those unlucky kids. [Laugh] Veterans could get college paid for, so I qualified and took up pilot training at a flight school in Mott. But after awhile I called it quits because I was getting a little reckless and took too many chances. So I decided to keep one foot on the ground at all times.

I decided to go west to look for work but didn't want to go alone. I had been seeing Evie on and off since she was in the eighth grade, and I figured sooner or later we would get together. She was supposed to take a train to college, but I talked her into going to Washington with me instead, without telling her parents. You can imagine how her folks felt, but it all worked out well. We were married in Seattle.

I went to apply for a job at Boeing and the employment line was very long. They were turning almost everyone away. I kept my ears open and heard the secretary at this big desk say "No" to the applicant in front of me. I was thinking fast and desperate. She asked what my skills were and I blasted out, "I'm a secretary!" very confident like. I did take typing in high school. Well, I was in as a shipping clerk.

I was working the night shift, but had more college coming on the GI Bill. So I went to private detective school by day. Even though I had a good job at Boeing, we got homesick after I finished school. We hitched up the trailer we were living in and headed back to North Dakota. I worked for the oil company, and then as a carpenter for \$1 an hour. I also worked part time as a postal clerk. During this time, I was elected to the city board and voted in as mayor. Evie's dad had been mayor in 1910, my dad Fred Bach was mayor in 1940, and now I was mayor in 1950. I served 28 years on the board.

In 1954, I purchased a lumber and hardware store in Regent. After three years, two postal carriers were about to retire, so I took the civil service exam with about 20 others and I ended up being picked. I understood afterwards that of the top four, two of us were World War II veterans and the others were not and that was the difference. So I sold my half of the lumber business and became a letter carrier.

The mail route was rural and the roads were poor. I did a lot of snow shoveling. But I made many friends. In 1978, I transferred to Dickinson and it was a big change. I had about 300 families and 126 miles to go each day. I retired in 1987.

Wow. We know you move fast, but this sounds like you never stopped moving all of your life!

I was a person who just couldn't sit still for long, I guess. Our whole family kept active. All four kids took part in many activities-hunting, fishing, hiking, golf, bowling and so on. Evie was on a women's bowling team and liked looking for fossils and artifacts on farmer lands. The boys and I had cycles and snowmobiles, and I raced snowmobiles for awhile but got quite reckless and quit. I bought a Honda Gold Wing in 1976, and we went to Sturgis, South Dakota many times for the national rally. I went for 29 straight years. I also rode it alone to San Antonio for an Army reunion in 1979. It was 100 degrees all the way down and the guys all thought I was nuts.



OK, Harold. Slow down, we can't keep up! So tell us finally how you got into the Senior Games.



Photo by Rebekah A. Romero

It was kind of an accident. I had some relatives that were going to the North Dakota senior games in 1990, and I decided I would go along to Fargo with them. They were good in golf and bowling, so I participated in them too. Well, I got to see the running events and they kinda appealed to me. The next year, I entered the 5K and won the gold medal. I'm still running to this day on that account!

I've never missed going to the National Senior Games since the first one I went to in 1993. I have 166 medals now. I got a lot of gold too. I always can't wait for the next one because we have such long winters and short summers here.

What do you do to stay in shape?

I do a stretch exercise and run or use the treadmill every morning. I bowl once in awhile, and I like to play golf- there's a good bit of walking in that so that's really exercise too. I try to play once a week, but the wintertime here in North Dakota gets pretty cold so there's a long dry spell during that time.

In the winter I go to a senior rec center that's near me in Bismarck. They have many types of good equipment there. So when the weather is nasty I go walk on the treadmill every day. It's a must to keep your heart and lungs in shape. If you keep them up, the rest of the body takes care of itself.

I'm sure that's got something to do with my good health. I did a lot of exercises, and took part in many things over the years. I wouldn't stand a chance in my age bracket over 90 if I wasn't staying active. Most runners and athletes have had training, but I just looked in sports magazines and found a lot of help. I just used my imagination I guess.

Another thing: I always have goals to work for. I also have several hobbies, like lapidary. I collect stones from all over the world and have some diamond equipment and make jewelry. I don't sell any, but all of my relatives are wearing my jewelry.

Have you avoided major illness or injury all of your life?

Well, I have had cancer, really twice.

One was a skin cancer and they just took off a little chunk of my ear for that. I also had lymphoma, that was in 2004. The symptoms didn't seem all that serious, but they recommended surgery and the two doctors decided to go a little further in their exploration and they found no doubt in the world it was non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. That could be fatal so I went along with whatever they told me to do. I went through the whole chemo pattern, and then I had to take radiation every day for 30 days. I was lucky because they told me it has totally cleared up.

One of my doctors is from India, Dr. Amin is his name. He and I got to be good friends, and I told him, "If I am lucky enough to get a gold medal at the next senior games I will give it to you." So I did, and he has it hanging on his wall.

Other than that, I've never had anything physically bad happen to me. I had a lot of luck with it.

Do you follow any special diet?

I tell ya, I have no special diet. I can't seem to gain weight no matter what I eat. I like everything. Peanuts and graham crackers are favorites. Also vegetables and fruit. But I'm a bad one for sugar. I eat a lot of candy, and I know you're not supposed to do that. But if there's a bar of candy around, I'm gonna grab it. [Laugh]

I rarely drink, but I keep some beer and wine around, because guests sometimes like to have it. I do like a tomato beer from time to time. I'll mix the little can of tomato juice with it. You can't help but like it. I like Bud Light, I guess because I like the sound of the name.

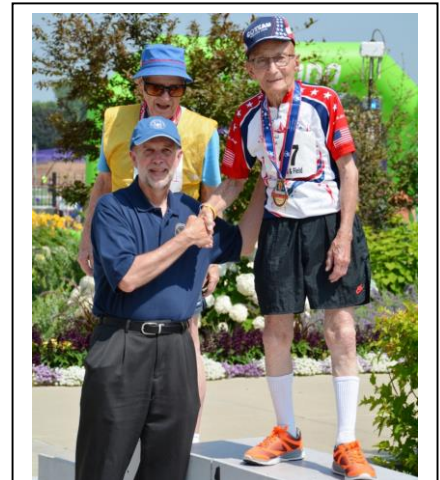
So, we can count on seeing you tear up the track in Birmingham for the 2017 National Senior Games?

You bet. I won't miss anything here on out unless something happens to my health. I've kinda got my mind set on setting another running record. I don't know which event it would be, more than likely the 400 meter. I won that by quite a bit in Minnesota. It's once around the track and you don't run slow. The one who has the best heart and lungs is going to win.

When you run, do you think about beating the other guy, or is it more about challenging yourself?

I tell you, it's both. You always think you can get better with just a little extra effort. But I am also aware of my competition. I meet a lot of the same ones every year, so I keep track of everybody, and I also try to improve a little bit on my running.

And you know, there's a camaraderie to all of this too. I like to say I got lots and lots of friends, but I don't know where they both are now. [Laugh]



Noted physician and professor Dr. Stephen McDonough, a member of the President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition, counts Harold as an inspiration and requested to present a medal to his fellow North Dakotan at The Games in 2015.

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