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Seniors run, toss, dive, go for the gold

By Christine Rizk
staff writer

IT WASN'T much different from any other type of competition, save for the participants — there were cheers from family members, sights of fatigue from competitors and cries of the victors.

Perhaps the only difference during the day of winners and losers was the aged veneer of wrinkles and gray hairs of those who competed during the seventh annual Michigan Senior Olympics at George's Orchard Ridge Campus Aug. 16.

More than 600 seniors from Farmington, Rochester, Livonia, Westland, Canton and Oak Park turned out for the event, which featured everything from shuffleboard and horseshoes to swimming and track.

Fewer than that, however, left with gold, silver or bronze medals indicating their expertise in their field of competition.

Send one senior, who voiced his complaint about the ability of his peers: "Why is he able to keep running and I can't?" he said. "Nobody can beat him and I've kept for the last years straight."

The answer, according to the volunteers who staffed the event sites, is simple — everyone has the opportunity to practice for the senior olympics well ahead of time (some seniors, in fact, prepared months ahead for competition).

Those who arrive in top form are encouraged to compete and are rewarded, said Marge Miller, in charge of registration for the olympics.

"It's like anything competitive," she said. "If you're the best, you should win."

THE OLYMPICS is designed to encourage better exercising and good health, Miller said. "Seniors have really not been into the sports scene for too long. I guess everyone expected them to sit in rocking chairs at their age."

A chance toward the playing fields for cycling, track and tennis indicated that many seniors were set to define that image.

As dozens of spectators gathered to cheer on family members, the competitors, 55 and older, looked more like young U.S. Olympic hopefuls on their way to fame and fortune than like grizzled grandfathers and grandmothers.

Helene Matson, 67, from Garden City, won a bronze medal for the male walk. Her activities outside the campus depict the kind of life-style most seniors competing Saturday lead — active and healthy absent wheelchairs or rocking chairs.

Mercem, who participated in her fourth senior olympics this year, plays volleyball, baseball and bad-

minut when she's not preparing for competition.

"I'd much rather be active than sitting at home," she said. "I hate just sitting. Besides, I've always been active, even when I was younger."

Jennie Hughes and her husband, Robert, share a unique tie to the olympics.

Hughes, 66, from Farmington Hills, received a bronze medal in the 100-yard dash.

Her third year in competition, she practices running daily. "I don't know if he [Robert] got him," she said. "He's just my coach."

Robert said he earned his reward vicariously through her.

Active or not, more seniors are entering the competition and more spectators are turning out for the events, Miller said.

It's a sign, she added, that seniors are fast becoming a more important part of a society that traditionally left them sitting in rocking chairs past the age of 60.

"We emphasize an active lifestyle," Miller said. "More importantly, we advocate senior recreation. Back 20 or 30 years ago, when the average age was then 30s and 40s, there was no time for recreation," said Miller. "They were told to work and raise kids so they have not really been in the sports scene for too long."

The idea, she added, is to convince seniors first and then others, that they can still remain an active and important part of society.

THE MICHIGAN SENIOR OLYMPIC COMMITTEE, while advocating good health and exercise, recognized that the spirit of competition would undoubtedly prevail.

"Age has nothing to do with the fact that these people want to take home a medal," Miller said.

In an effort to promote senior activities, the committee will help sponsor participants who take first-place honors and who qualify by time to the U.S. National Senior Olympics in St. Louis next year.

It will be the first time seniors will gather to compete on a national level.

The Michigan Senior Olympic Committee next year will even sponsor a Miss Senior Olympics.

Sylvia Kozorosky, deputy director of Westland's Department of Aging, attributed seniors' abilities during competition to the kinds of activities offered in their communities.

"If a community lets seniors see that they are a useful, vital part of that community, then the chance for ability to flourish is there," said Kozorosky.

One senior's shirt stated it as aptly as comments by the Olympic committee — "Life, Be In It."

"This is our third year here," said Albert Dill, 62. "It's like an old song — it's so familiar."



George Grantham took the bronze medal in the 100-yard dash, then headed for more competition on the tennis court. The 65-year-old Farmington resident, when not in competition,



Harry Weaver (at left), a 78-year-old resident from Troy, tugs on Louis Menghin's old English bicycling helmet. Menghin is director of St.

Clair County Council for the Aging, based in Marine City. Weaver won the gold in his class.



Participants and spectators arrived and left all day, but Virgil Pyle of Westland spent the entire day on campus practicing for his event.

Staff photos
by
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Iva Folds, 69, of Canton takes to the track for the cycling event.