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He's hard to stop

81-year-old still running strong



Christopher Boan Green Valley News

Dave Thomas shows off the litany of medals he has won this year at events in Tucson and Phoenix.

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Dave Thomas might be the fastest 81-year-old you'll ever meet.

He still sprints, jumps and hurdles past competitors, earning him seven gold medals and one bronze at the Arizona Senior Games in February in Phoenix. And that was after winning seven golds at the Tucson Senior Olympics the month before.

Thomas has loved the sport of track and field his whole life, ever since competing in the 100-meter dash, the long jump and the javelin at Wilsonboro High School in Pennsylvania in the late 1940s.

He picked up where he left off after college, coaching several high school track teams while teaching high school English in New York, Pennsylvania, Oregon and Arizona from 1962 until 1987.

Thomas still says his favorite memory was when his boys' track team at Livonia High School in New York won the Livingston County League Championship and his girls' team won the Finger Lakes League.

Thomas kept competing

everywhere he taught, joining track clubs along the way. He says the sport is unlike anything he's ever experienced elsewhere in life.

"I love that it's me against you," Thomas said. "You're looking at your competitors, saying, 'I want to beat that guy.' So when I get to the starting line when I'm at an event, I want to win."

Thomas turned his attention to track and field events full-time after retiring to Green Valley from Oregon 11 years ago, and has competed in Green Valley, Tucson and Phoenix.

He gleefully recalls never being beaten at the GVR Southern Arizona Senior Games, when track and field events were held from 2005 until they stopped being offered in 2009.

The father of two says he would have gone after more medals in Phoenix, but couldn't compete after hurting his groin muscle during the high jump, which he won.

"I wanted to win the triple-jump to get a gold medal for my friend John Brazle," Thomas recalled. "After the Tucson Senior Olympics I told him, 'I'll win you a gold medal in

Phoenix.' But I couldn't do it. I couldn't even walk."

ACTIVE RETIREMENT

Thomas still spends several hours a day training, and says he hasn't let his recent injury slow him down much.

"I like to run, so I play softball and tennis, and I work out in the hot tub and pool," Thomas said. "I was there this morning at a quarter after six and I'll be there tonight as well."

Longtime friend Bob Allen, who has known Thomas since their days together at a school in upstate New York, says he's never met anyone with the motivation that Thomas has for everything he does.

"I think he's got a certain drive to succeed, and he perseveres in that, despite the fact that a lot of times you get a pulled muscle or something like that," Allen said. "He still goes out there and fights through it, even if he is in quite a bit of pain. He's got that drive to always shoot for number one, and if he can possibly do something then he's going to do it."

Thomas says he's motivated to keep coming out to statewide events each year, as he wants to shatter his

own personal bests in each event he enters.

"You want to see if you can get close to your best out there, which is harder and harder to do," Thomas said.

"Getting over 3 feet 6 inches in the high jump isn't very easy any more. I tried it and pulled a darn groin muscle. I would have probably been dumb enough to try 3 feet 8 inches."

GOING FORWARD

Thomas says he's not sure when he'll hang up the spikes for good, as he still enjoys going out and competing.

"I don't know if I'm going to run next year or not," Thomas said. "This might be my last hurrah. Maybe when I reach 85 I'll try again, because then I'll be in a different age group."

Thomas plans on picking up softball again after he recovers from his recent injury. He had to forgo playing with BAJA this season so he could train for the events in Tucson and Phoenix.

"I love all the sports

things that you can do here," Thomas said. "I used to play racquetball and tennis too — and there's just so much to do here. It's unbelievable. I haven't even gotten to any of the card games yet, or the shuffleboard. Any of those things. But I'll get to those one of these days, because I will give out sooner or later."

For now, Thomas will keep training and competing in various events for seniors across the state, as that's where he's the happiest.

"Everybody's working together. It's great," Thomas said. "Like when I was in Tucson, I was high-jumping and I kept coming down on my knee and knocking the bar down. And Dave Douglass, who won the thing, told me, 'You're taking off too far. Pick up your

speed and take off close and you'll make it.' "Everybody works together and it's just fun. It's good competition. Nobody gets upset if they lose. It's good sportsmanship. They'll come over and shake your hand after an event. The camaraderie is excellent."

Allen said he's given up being surprised by his friend's ability to defy age on the track.

"He's still a terrific athlete, despite being 81 years old," Allen said. "And in terms of character, he was a great teacher and is a great friend."

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ABOVE: Thomas finishes his daily sprinting routine here on the track at the Continental School on the outskirts of Green Valley on March 4.

Oh, the joy of the Senior Games

There are few events I enjoy covering more than the annual GVR Foundation Southern Arizona Senior Games.

I say this because, let's face it, where else can you see such an eclectic group of athletes of all shapes, sizes and ages competing, and more importantly having fun, in such a wide range of sports and activities?

This March marks the second time I've had the pleasure of covering the games, taking me though an array of venues and activities.

Yes, folks, I've pretty much covered it all in my two years here — working events ranging from Texas Hold 'em to canasta to billiards and oh, so much more — and I've enjoyed everything I've seen

thus far.

What entertains me the most isn't so much these events whilst I cover the action on the field, court or table, but the smiles and genuine enthusiasm shared by competitors and volunteers alike.

JOY OF COMPETITION

Take, for instance, the recent basketball shoot competition held on the court outside the Canoa Ranch Center on March 4.

What stood out to me from that event was the fascinating backstories of the competitors — with pretty much every profession known to man represented by at least one of the athletes.

What also stood out was the showing by 69-year-old Kathryn Lamkey, who put on a performance for

the ages — wracking up a whopping 31 points in the contest, which combined a contestant's baskets for an aggregate score.

Performances like Lamkey's speak to the genuine beauty of these games, as you can never judge a book by its cover. There's so much talent in pretty much any athletic field down here, and so many people jump at the chance to show off their mettle when the opportunity presents itself.

BEAUTY OF GAMES

These games speak to the attraction of living in a place like Green Valley, as they show off the area's athletic facilities and prove yet again that we should never let age limit us in whatever we choose to do with our time on this

earth.

I've learned over and over again through these games to challenge my own beliefs and assertions. I've seen failure, I've seen success, but more importantly, I've seen the faces of hundreds of men and women who discovered that you can continue doing what you love, no matter your age.

There's no reason why the games, as good as they are in their current iteration, should not expand beyond the current 32 activities offered.

I'd love to see sports like track and field and frisbee golf added down the road, as these games have quickly become the premier event for seniors in the Southwest. I know Green Valley

Recreation's Karen Rans, who has tenaciously built the event into the staggering success story that it is, wants to get the games to the next level (which is to have more than 1,000 participants involved), and I don't doubt she'll hit that milestone sooner, rather than later.

Rans and company have done a top-notch job getting the games where they are, and I know from talking with her that no one involved is satisfied with the status quo.

I, for one, welcome the continued growth of the games, as I'd love to write about and hear more stories like Lamkey's, and see more smiles and competition in and around Green Valley.

These games have taken on a life of their own and



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have a legitimate chance to bring in the next generation of retirees that faces an increasing variety when it comes to places to retire.

The games add another layer to the claim that March is one of the greatest months in sports, and can and should be used as a way to show off the area — not just to the rest of our country, but to our friendly neighbors to the north and south as well.

Here's hoping we'll see that come to fruition soon.

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