

NSGA May 2018 Athlete of the Month

Peggy Birkenbuel, 79

Fairbanks, Alaska

“Driving” Miss Peggy

When athletes travel to the National Senior Games, they usually fly if the drive is more than a day or two. Not Peggy Birkenbuel, 79, who has driven her car two out of three times to The Games from...wait for it...Fairbanks, Alaska.

“It takes me four days to get from Fairbanks to Dillon, Montana, where my boys live,” she explains. “Then I set out to drive, and I sleep in my car. It took me almost a week total to get to Houston for The Games in 2011. It was fun, though. When I drove back, I did my first sky diving in Moab, Utah. That was the last thing on my ‘Bucket List’!”



Photo courtesy Larry Mitchell

While the trip was a bit shorter to Minneapolis in 2015, and she was able to fly to Birmingham last year, it's always a challenge for the multi-sport competitor to pull together the resources to make the trip. She lives in a cabin with no running water, but says she gets along with the help of friends around her. “I tell people I live on Social Security and my good looks,” she says with a laugh. “But I like to drive my own car. I don't want to rent a car and I have too many things to do while I'm at Nationals.”

A native of Portland, Oregon, Peggy played sports in grade school and continued playing on company softball teams and other competitions while working for Boeing and the phone company in Seattle. At age 60, she obtained an education degree from Western Montana College in Dillon and found that Montana schools only wanted her to substitute. She applied for positions in Alaska and landed a job teaching 2nd and 3rd grade children in Crooked Creek, located in a remote western area of the state.

“It took five plane stops to get there,” she recalls. “The school was a trailer, and I shared it with the teacher doing 4th grade. It was also a long way from where I could live, but I could cross country ski, and when the river froze I could go that way as a shortcut.”

Peggy moved on to teach in Anchorage and then Fairbanks, where her senior sporting life took roots. She helped get the Alaska International Senior Games started in 2003 and continued to volunteer and play many of the sports they offered. She enters field events and horseshoes at National Senior Games, and scored enough ringers to earn bronze (2015) and silver (2017) in horseshoes. She says she can't count how many medals she has earned in state games, but she sees awards as a byproduct. “I do it to keep healthy. I'm movin' and goin' all the time. If something wasn't going on I'd be sitting around too much.”

Through Alaska's harsh winters, Peggy finds ways to stay active, including volunteer work and going to the community pool for aqua exercise and swimming. “You also have to go up and down a lot of stairs because there aren't many elevators around here,” she observes. She then adds, “People comment that doing sports keeps me out of the bars, but I don't go to them anyway.”

This fall, Peggy plans to move back to Montana to be close to her sons. That means shorter drives, and she says motoring to Albuquerque for the 2019 National Senior Games presented by Humana will have a dual purpose. “I have a lot in Taos, New Mexico. I won in a contest at the 1964 World's Fair in Seattle,” she says. “I've been down there three or four times to look at it. It was barren at first, next time it had some bushes, and now it's got beautiful big trees. It will be good to see it again.”

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