

# A NOVICE OLYMPIAN

Meet Andrea Lee Negroni

**THE 2024 PARIS SUMMER OLYMPICS** officially ended in August, but the games continued through September for the 1,000+ competitors who gathered on tracks, fields, pools, tennis courts and at game tables in the Northern Virginia Senior Olympics. I've exercised regularly since I retired, but athletic competition was not something I ever imagined doing, let alone after 70. But at this stage of life, if there's no compelling reason to say no, I usually say yes.

So, when a friend won a weightlifting medal at age 83, I agreed to his suggestion that I compete the next year. At the end of my sedentary indoor career, I longed to be active and spend more time outdoors. That's one reason I bought at Gulf Harbour. Experts cite outdoor activity's benefits: varied terrain challenges the muscles differently, exposure to sunlight and vitamin D is greater outdoors, and exposure to nature can spur feelings of wellbeing. I definitely feel more alive and energetic outside than on treadmills or in Zumba classes.

Tennis invariably tops lists of healthy outdoor activities so I focused there. I play occasionally at Gulf Harbour when I can find a partner. (Big shout-out here to organizers of the women's hit-around and to Dean Llamas's tennis staff.) My Virginia home is two blocks from neighborhood courts, so I took lessons with Parks and Rec. At the Y near home, and when on vacation at places with tennis courts and coaching, I signed up for cardio tennis. Three years passed and I began to improve.

When our Senior Olympics opened, I registered for tennis, trail running, and power walking. There are dozens of other choices, too, from canasta to ERG rowing, diving, disc golf, cornhole toss, bocce and even javelin throwing. If you're 50+ and have \$10, you're in.



The NoVa opening ceremony had a military color guard, music, swag from sponsors and pro sports photographers. In the bleachers, I asked another participant about her event. When she said jigsaw puzzles, I was the one puzzled until she explained why senior wellness depends on mental as well as physical health. Puzzles were clearly working for her as she fired off the cognitive benefits of table games.

My first event was a 3-mile trail run which I assumed would be a cakewalk because I can run six miles on a flat course. My mistake was not checking out the trail in advance, which was hilly, not flat. After 40 hard minutes I finished fourth.

My women's 70+ tennis singles match almost didn't happen. When my opponent no-showed, the event manager offered me the winner's medal by default. I declined out of sheer stubbornness because driving to the courts took 40 minutes in rush hour traffic. I wanted to play, not get back in the car for a slow slog home. Coincidentally, one of the male players also no-showed so we unpaired players devised an ad-hoc mixed-gender match. At 8-6, I earned

my medal properly. When it was draped around my neck I wouldn't have traded it for real gold.

My last event was power walking which I mistook for racewalking, an Olympic sport. Racewalking requires keeping one foot on the ground at all times and a straight leg (no bent knee) for the leg forward of the vertical body. I watched online videos, read the rules, practiced a little and watched the wonderful old Cary Grant movie, "Walk, Don't Run," featuring racewalking in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Only at the start line did I learn power walking doesn't have a bent-leg rule. The goal is to walk fast without running. And that's what I did, circling the track 12 times to a silver medal finish.

At all these events I met and engaged with energetic people my age, plus some older, and many younger. I challenged new muscles and old ways of thinking about wellness. But the best part was how much fun I had.

Unlike the "real" Olympics, the next Senior Olympics isn't four years away and I've already set my goal. In 2025, I'll try to rewind my clock a little by getting better results or entering more events at 72 than at




71. I may even try table games to strengthen the mind-body connection.

In Florida (and nationally), the Senior Olympics are officially called the "Senior Games," and Lee County has a web page for its Senior Games, as do other Florida counties. Why not check out the offerings? You might surprise yourself. I did.

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