

Midas touch

Copeland Oaks senior is Olympic medalist

By **JENNIFER R. BARRETT**

Copeland Oaks

Every time Beth Hanks, 91, has entered the Copeland Oaks pool recently it seems to turn from blue to gold.

In June Hanks, a resident of the retirement community in Sebring, competed in six events at the 2007 Summer National Senior Games — the Senior Olympics in Louisville, Ky., held June 22 through July 7 — and brought home a gold medal from each event.

Hanks broke three game records for her age group (90-94) and beat her own personal best in the number of gold medals won during an Olympic competition. This was the ninth time she has competed in the biennial Summer National Senior Games.

Almost a half-dozen women who qualified worldwide registered to compete in the age group, and one competitor swam unchallenged in the 95 to 99 age group. She was off just 10 seconds from her record-setting win two years ago in the younger bracket, when she competed in the 2005 Summer Games held in Pittsburgh.

This year Hanks competed at the University of Louisville's Ralph Wright Natatorium over a three-day period in the freestyle and backstroke swimming events. She swam in the 50-, 100- and 200-yard categories for both events and managed to change some record books herself in the process.

"I beat my own personal best on the 50 back," Hanks said. "I don't think I've ever swam faster than that one. I was thrilled!" She swam two lengths of the Olympic-sized regulation pool in 1:21.42 seconds, a half minute faster than the previously held record

set at the 2001 Games. She broke records for the 100-yard backstroke and the 50-yard freestyle events and set a record for being the first woman in her age group to swim the 200-yard backstroke.

"She swam stronger during these competitions than I have seen her swim in the last year," said her daughter, Barbara Richmond. "I just sat there and enjoyed it thinking, 'Wow, you know ... she can still do this.'"

Hanks has been swimming her entire life, but only in competition for the past 20 years.

"My family was always very healthy," Hanks said. "My mother had six children and she lived to be just one week shy of turning 100. I was the fourth in the family — my younger brother and sister are still living — and we were all brought up swimming. My parents belonged to a country club when I was little and when my father got home from work, it was just standard procedure that we all went swimming. Then when Charlie and I got married and had children, we moved to Alliance, joined the country club and continued the tradition with our family."

As a matter of fact, it was her family who encouraged her to start competing in the first place.

After she retired from a career in accounting at age 68, Hanks took a trip to California to visit family members. "I was swimming with one of my nephews and he said I should join the Masters," Hanks said. "So when I got home he sent me some information about it."

Masters Swimming officially began on May 2, 1970, as an incentive to encourage adults to improve fitness through swimming and has



Review Photo/Kevin Graff

Beth Hanks takes a break from her swimming workout to display her Senior Olympic gold medals at the indoor pool at Copeland Oaks.

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grown over the years into a nationwide organization of over 42,000 adult swimmers. Today, qualified athletes ages 19 and older may participate in the quarterly meets.

"I would also go to the Y," Hanks remembered, "and watch my two grandchildren race and I thought, 'I could do that.'"

At about that time in St. Louis, a group of seven men and women formed the original leadership for what was initially known as the National Senior Olympics Organization. The very first games were scheduled and held 20 years ago in 1987 in St. Louis with 2,500 competitors. Bob Hope was featured during the games' ceremonies at the St. Louis Riverfront Arch. Since then, the Summer Games competition has grown and become the largest multi-sport event for people age 50 and older held anywhere in the world. Qualifying athletes from foreign countries are welcome to participate and eligible for all awards.

Hanks didn't participate in the inaugural event, but when the next Summer Games rolled around in 1989, she decided to take the plunge and get her feet wet — and the rest of her, as well. After qualifying on the local and state levels she moved on to compete nationally in St. Louis. With very little experience, she didn't do as well as she had hoped.

"I didn't even get a ribbon the first time," Hanks said with remembered disappointment. "So I decided to take the next Olympics off in 1991 and just keep swimming in the Masters meets to gain some more practice and experience."

And like fine wine, she improved with age. With the exception of the '87 and '91 Games, Hanks has participated in all the rest with much success. Besides this year's Senior Olympics, she traveled to compete in Baton Rouge, La., in 1993, San Antonio, Texas, in 1995, Tucson, Ariz., in 1997, Orlando, Fla., in 1999,

back to Baton Rouge in 2001, Hampton Roads, Va., in 2003 and Pittsburgh in 2005.

Expenses average \$115 for individual athletes to register, plus hotel fees and other traveling expenses.

As a result of her ongoing dedication to a sport she loves, Hanks has a vast array of medals, medallions, badges, ribbons and plaques from numerous Masters competitions and Senior Olympic events.

None of this well-deserved glory has gone to her head, however.

When asked where she keeps her gold medals and other significant awards at her Copeland Oaks home, she waves her hand and laughs, "in a dresser drawer down in the basement."

Of course, she credits her family's continued support as part of the reason for her ability to succeed.

"I don't drive anymore and neither does Charlie, so for the last six years, my daughter, Barbara, has driven and traveled with me and made sure I got to where I needed to be. My grandson, Eric, also encourages me and he has swum in the Masters with me for the last two years," she said smiling.

Hanks' husband, Charlie,

who is quite confident in her abilities, has opted out of traveling long distances to see his wife compete, after all these years.

"I've seen plenty of the competitions," he said, "so now I'm just mentally cheering her on."


"Yes," Hanks said laughing, "he just expects me to win every time so I don't even have to call him when I do."

This collective encouragement is worth its weight in gold. With six more golds under her belt, Beth Hanks looks ahead to the August 2009 Games in the San Francisco Bay Area. She plans to swim at the site in Palo Alto, Calif.

"In 2009," Charlie said, "we'll be celebrating our 70th wedding anniversary. So I keep telling her she'd better plan on sticking around for it."

Hanks has been an inspiration to others over the years and she continues to find inspiration herself from people all over.


"I still compete because I think it encourages others to continue and I like to try and encourage people. I also think it is very healthful," said Hanks. "People say I inspire them and it just thrills me to hear that."



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