

Celebrating Active Aging: Highlights from Detroit's 36th Annual Senior Citizens Olympics Words and Images by Zaire Talon Daniels

The city of Detroit celebrated its 36th annual Senior Citizens Olympics in June with a three-day event featuring indoor and outdoor recreational activities plus a special section for baking and arts and crafts.

The Detroit Parks and Rec department has always had a component to address the needs of senior citizens but it wasn't until 1984 that a team of seniors and community leaders gathered together to provide elderly residents with social activities that foster competition and fun despite mobility or physical limitations. Lisa Cunningham, assistant recreation coordinator for special activities for the Parks and Rec department says, "You have seniors that come to the recreational center just to play chess, checkers, and cards. There are events for everyone, even artisans have an opportunity to share their creations and compete."

The Senior Olympics featured about 19 different events ranging from the typical Olympics sports like running and swimming to some more non-traditional competitions like bidwish, pinnacle (card game), and chess. Seniors over the age of 50 are eligible to participate and are encouraged to compete in multiple categories. Athletes can even be selected to compete on a state and national level following their performance in certain events.

New to this year's senior games is Dancesport, where seniors participate in teams of 2 or more in a dancing presentation lasting 4 mins. The participants can perform in three different styles of dancing; Ballroom, Chicago Step, or the Hustle, and their dance performance will be judged by 3 experts. Cunningham says, "We are partners with the Michigan Senior Olympics and we saw their dance competition and thought it would be a great addition to our games. We teach dancing classes here at the rec centers and the Hustle really took off! We have a lot of teams signing up to compete."

Another popular sport being played is called pickleball, which I had not heard of before. Debra Ferguson, an avid pickleball player, and volunteer for the event explained the game saying, "It's like a combination of badminton and tennis played with a larger paddle and a wiffle ball. The net is low, and you set up and play in pairs much like you would play tennis or badminton." The pickleball tournament was set up in the gymnasium at Adam Butzel Recreation Center allowing four teams to play at once with groups of spectators perched on the bleachers. I was told from some spectators that pickleball can get very competitive among seniors and has been on the rise in popularity

as a game for all ages to participate in.

Ferguson expressed the importance of the game by saying, "Events like this give the community the chance to see that seniors are not rocking-chair bound, we can get up and move and have a good time!" Before the beginning of the tournament, Ferguson shared some words of encouragement with her fellow Butzel Rec teammates as they competed against other athletes from different rec centers in the area. "Now I know my people from Butzel are going to get out there and take the gold!" she said as teams huddled around waiting to be called to the court.

Bringing together athletes in a social setting is one of the major pillars of the Senior Olympics. Joyce Jones, aged 71, who jokingly told me she was a professional athlete in her own mind, says that she doesn't have a background in sports but looks forward to the games to meet others and feel the energy of competition. Joyce says, "People need people, we need to connect and events like this are great at keeping seniors active and talking regularly together."

This will be the third year that she has competed in the Senior Olympics and will be competing in pinnacle (card game), a jewelry presentation, frisbee toss, and the 1500-meter walk. Her husband, Johnny aged 73, sat next to her and was keen on sharing that he was the one who taught the professional all she knew. "This will be Johnny's first year in the Olympics, I was able to drag him out with me this year, we usually play at home," Joyce said as they began shuffling a deck before the tournament. James added, "And my team usually wins", but today they would have to work together if they wanted to bring home a gold medal.

Due to the pandemic, this is the first year the city has been able to put on this event. Cunningham said, "Usually you would see about 400 athletes signing up but this year we only had about 220 participants. Some athletes might feel a bit uneasy about gathering, We're just happy that they're taking the opportunity to come out and participate." The pandemic changed the way many of us worked out and stayed in shape and returning champion Cleo 'Sarge' Beal Jr. was eager to come out following his 70th birthday to see if he still had what it takes to win. In the previous Senior Olympics in 2019, Beal had earned five gold metals in Basketball, the 50 and 100-meter dash, the 400-meter run, and the 1-mile run. He said that he has been running since he was a high school athlete and continued to run in college and in the Army. Beal says, "When you get older, the arthritis keeps jumping on you, and your bones aren't like they used to be. But I think it's all mind over matter. I told myself I'm not ready for the rocking chair." he said with a chuckle as he changed into his running shoes.