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## Do you have what it takes to be an Olympian?

Do you have to compete in the Olympics to be an Olympian? Is it necessary to be an athlete to be an Olympian? When you look at your life



**This is the “tennis gang” Constance Bayles met during the Senior Games. “I met many new friends across the country that truly inspired me,” she said.**

--Photo Courtesy of Constance Mols Bayles

each day, do you overcome challenges that you thought you could never accomplish? Do you fight for your health?

Olympian is defined (Etymology Online Dictionary) as “one who competes” in the (modern) Olympic Games” (1976). Another word used to describe compete is “fight.” I had the opportunity to

participate in the National Senior Olympics in Louisville this summer. I was very touched by the number of adults (50 to 100 years) who overcame barriers to compete. Being active physically and mentally is a commitment. I would like to tell my story.

For me, being an Olympian was not only about the tennis. In 1999, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I thought that I was going to die. I never thought that I could be healthy again.

My road to the Olympics started after my surgery. I could barely lift my arm. I had to work hard to straighten it again. I also knew that I had to keep moving and not lie around. Soon I would face chemotherapy and radiation. I had to stay strong, mentally and physically.

After a few weeks, I started monthly chemotherapy. The drug was



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powerful. I felt like I had the flu. On the first day of chemotherapy, I would try to walk 5 minutes. Once the drug wore off, I would walk at least 2 miles each day. I had to keep my mind occupied, keep busy. After six months, I was finished with the first round of chemotherapy. It was time to start radiation.

I traveled to the hospital every day for a month. I kept up with my normal activities. The radiation made me very tired. Mentally I knew I had to keep going and fight.

The last round of chemotherapy took four months. Again, I felt like I had the flu. I continued walking. The end of my treatment was near. After 18 months, I was finished....I did it! With the help of the people in my life and my determination, I fought for my health.

In 2005, Pittsburgh hosted the National Senior Olympics. I volunteered to help. Many people encouraged me to try out for the next Olympics. I really did not give it much thought but a year later; I decided to compete at the Pennsylvania State games in Shippensburg. Much to my surprise, I qualified in singles tennis for the 2007 Nationals. It was a shock to me; 8 1 / 2 years later, after my diagnosis, I was heading to the Olympics.

As I prepared to compete, I exercised with Jamie twice a week and played tennis 8 hours a week. I made sure I was eating right and getting plenty of rest.

When I arrived at the University of Louisville’s tennis center, I was impressed. It was state of the art with indoor and outdoor courts along with grandstands. After playing various people from my age division, I came in 6th place. As my friends congratulated me from back home, I told them that it was not only about the tennis. I was more excited about my health, how I fought to come back to play the sport I always enjoyed.

If I can do it, so can you. Health starts within. The will and determination to overcome barriers in our lives becomes most important. If we do not have determination, most often it is difficult for us to live life to the fullest. For the past 25 years, I have encouraged adults to be the best that they could possibly be. I have watched:

- A 75 year old woman suffer a stroke to learn that if she road a bicycle she would become self sufficient in a wheel chair.
- A strong, Italian woman who bought her first pair of tennis shoes at the age of 93.

Looking at the glass half full is important to stay healthy. Set goals for your own Olympics. You do not have to be an athlete or even go to the Olympics. Fight for your health....compete....be an Olympian. Love and live life for a “Healthier Tomorrow”.

*This column was written by Constance Mols Bayles, PhD, FACSM, Program Director of the Center for Healthy Aging. For more information on this article, please call 412-6243217.*

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*CHA is a part of the Department of Epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. It is one of 33 Prevention Research Centers in the United States funded by the Centers for Disease Control. For questions or more information about CHA contact David J.*

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