

NATION-WORLD

Julia Hawkins started running at 100. Now she's going for the gold

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It was a hot and muggy afternoon when Julia Hawkins headed out for a practice sprint on the street in front her house.

She steeled her gaze on the 50-meter mark on the far end of her property line, crouched down in a starting position and took off, clocking in the 50 meters at just over 19 seconds.

Hawkins is 101 years old.

Several times a week she's out in front of her Baton Rouge house trying to improve her time. This week, she hopes all of that practice will pay off when she competes for a gold medal in the National Senior Games held in Birmingham, Alabama.

"I just like the feeling of being independent and doing something a little different and testing myself, trying to get better. I want to please my family is the other thing," Hawkins said. "Having a momma that can do this pleases them, and it pleases me to please them."

She's been fitted for a proper running shoe - New Balance, gray with coral accents. Her sons have measured out the 50 meters in front her house, marking the distance with little white flags tied to the bushes.

Hawkins, a widowed former teacher, has been an avid bicyclist for many years, but only took up running after she turned 100. She competed in the qualifying Member State Games last year in Lake Charles, Louisiana, the oldest female runner by decades.

"I've got strong legs from bicycling," she said. "I'm always outside and the phone always rings, and I come running in is how I knew I could run."

After her 50-meter qualifying run, her kids surprised Hawkins by signing her up for the 100-meter race.

“I felt like it would be a challenge at my age, and doing the 100 would be neat,” Hawkins said, quickly noting that she doesn’t practice the 100-meter run nearly as often as the 50 meters. “I don’t have that many 100 dashes in me at this age and I don’t want to wear them all out before the meet!”

Watching Hawkins bustle around the house and tend to her intricate, sprawling garden - her slight frame stooping to yank out weeds - it’s hard to believe she could ever wear out.

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Hawkins was born in February 1916 in the middle of a Wisconsin winter. When she was just a few months old, she was packed into a homemade boat with her family as they traveled down the Mississippi River, eventually reaching Louisiana. They settled in the small town of Ponchatoula, a little more than 50 miles north of New Orleans, and operated a seasonal resort which drew the city crowd for fishing, water sports and a taste of the country life.

Hawkins worked three jobs to put herself through college, graduating from Louisiana State University in 1938 with a degree in teaching and a college sweetheart who would later become her husband of 70 years. She married Murray Hawkins after the Dec. 7, 1941, bombing of Pearl Harbor where he was stationed. They wed by telephone - Julia in Baton Rouge and Murray still in Pearl Harbor.

The couple has four children who now range in age from 64 to 71, plus three grandchildren and one great-grandchild. Murray Hawkins died in 2013 at the age of 95.

Their youngest son, Warren Hawkins, 69, said he is in constant awe of his mother.

“I wish I had my mother’s positive attitude. I think that’s what drives her. You’ve never met anybody that’s better at taking a positive outlook,” he said. “The glass is never half empty. It’s always half full and it’s always going to work out and something good is always going to happen. She’s just determined.”

The National Senior Games may be Hawkins’ first foray into national competitive running, but she’s competed in cycling at four other games, starting in 1995 and winning gold in almost all of her events. But as other women aged along with her, they quit competing while Hawkins kept going. Eventually she quit cycling as well, but only for lack of competition.

Now she’s back and ready to add more gold to her collection. She knows the risks - Birmingham’s hilly landscape is a tougher course than the flat Louisiana river delta, leading

the family to decide that Hawkins should forgo competitive cycling this year. And Hawkins is fully aware that sprinting at 101 puts a strain on her body, no matter how healthy she may be.

“The 50 dash isn’t going to be hard or anything. But you can always fall or have a heart attack or a stroke or something,” she said, matter-of-factly. “I hope not, but you got to figure it could happen at 101. Anything could happen.”

It’s that very reason that her son doesn’t worry too much about his mom pounding the pavement.

“She loves it and she loves the attention,” said Warren Hawkins, “and if it something happens, God forbid, there are worse ways to go.”

Hawkins said she has more important things to consider as she gets ready to race.

“It’s crossed my mind a few times, what should I eat, what should I not eat,” she said, remembering that she was told to eat spaghetti before bike races. “I’m going to have people who will give me advice.”

The National Senior Games began in 1987 as a venue for older competitive athletes. This year, more than 10,500 athletes over the age of 50 will compete in 800 events.

Hawkins is the oldest female competitor this year at the games, though the honor of the oldest competitor goes to 103-year-old retired cattle rancher John Zilverberg, who will be bowling, throwing discus and running short sprints. There are 43 female competitors over the age of 90, according to games officials, and nine of those are over the age of 95.

Centenarians in the United States have increased dramatically - 43.6 percent since 2000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Worldwide, it is projected that 3.7 million centenarians will live across the globe by 2050.

“Everybody wants to know how they can live longer and live healthier,” said Dr. Katalin Roth, a geriatrics specialist in Washington and an associate professor at the George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences. “It’s not only about how long people live, but how long they can be active.”

Exercise, staying active, being social and addressing hearing and vision loss are key components to staying healthy, Roth said, listing everything Julia Hawkins does naturally.

“It’s very unusual I think for people to take up new activities as they get older,” Roth said, “and so I really have to say that I admire her gumption for trying something new.”

Hawkins has her own recipe for longevity.

“I eat healthy. I try to eat a lot of vegetables and a lot of fruit,” she said, adding that she also sticks to chicken and fish, and has maintained a healthy weight her entire life. “Never have smoked or drank. I mean I’ve had a cocktail or two in my life, but it’s not something I do.”

She remains active in the community and is outside nearly every day tending to her plants and beloved Bonzai trees. She’s also written two volumes of her life story, one at age 80 and another at 100. She has a cellphone - a flip phone, not a smartphone - but she has never used the internet.

She is remarkably healthy for 101 years old. Her vision is failing, she’s taken a couple of spills off her bike and she has a stent in her heart, but her doctors are encouraging of her running and cycling.

“One of my doctors, I gave him one of my medals. I said, ‘You deserve this for keeping me healthy,’ ” Hawkins said laughing. “The other heart doctor is just amazed at what I can do and am doing. He doesn’t say don’t do it!”

After Birmingham is behind her, Hawkins may have a few more 100 meter sprints in her after all.

The USA Track and Field Masters Outdoor Championships will be held in July at LSU, just a few miles from Hawkins’s house.

“Once she’s done that Birmingham race,” Warren Hawkins said, “she’s probably going to feel like doing another one.”