



National Senior Games Association

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Personal Best Athlete Profile

Karen Newman, 52

New Greenwich, Connecticut

Forever 21



It would be easy to survey the athletic accomplishments of seven time All-American triathlete Karen Newman and assume her road has been a relatively easy one. Of course, a natural runner with an intensely competitive attitude would be able to return to form after taking a break to marry and have three kids. Nothing that extraordinary about earning a place on Team USA's amateur triathlon squad at age 40, traveling the world and becoming the fastest American on more than one occasion-that's just what great athletes do, right? Winning Gold in the 50-55 division in her first try at the 2013 National Senior Games Presented by Humana? Easy for a person with her athletic gift.

The numbers don't tell the whole story, though. As a youth, Karen had to overcome a physically debilitating eating disorder, one so severe that she feared she might never have children. The experience helped shape the future as she earned a master's degree in clinical nutrition and still pursues a career as a registered dietician. And it takes much more than raw talent to come back after childbearing years. But the kicker is that Karen Newman continues to excel even after a harrowing battle with breast cancer. A fire based in deep faith in God and fueled by an intense desire to persevere has transformed her life and forged a new sense of purpose to help show the way to others.

Yet, there is an incredible story in the numbers after all. Karen's first child was born on July 21. The National Senior Games triathlon in Cleveland was scheduled on July 21. It was also her son's 21st birthday on that date. Even more amazing, when she pulled out her race number at registration...you guessed it, 21. Coincidence? You'll never convince Karen Newman of that!

What was the background on this amazing "21" story that happened in Cleveland?

I suffered from a severe eating disorder back when I was younger. It was really tragic...I did a lot of damage to myself. I know it was only God's grace that saved me. So when I got married I was worried if I would be able to have children. My husband and I prayed in church that we could have a healthy baby boy. The next week I was pregnant and our son was born on July 21st. The triathlon for Nationals was scheduled for July 21st. And my son's 21st birthday was going to be on that day. That was extraordinary enough, but when I went to the village to pick up my bib number it was...21! I cried because I knew it meant that God had planned everything this way all the way back when He was so kind to give me a beautiful son and blessed us with two more. I want to tell everyone that He loves and cares about all of us and could even pick this number 21 to show me. I am in awe that He brought me through this valley to lift me up on that mountaintop. There have been so many mountaintop miracles like this that I could share with you.

What got you going with sports?

I always loved running, there was just something about it that made me happy. When I was a little girl I would race every boy in the neighborhood or anyone who would want to race me. When I got to high school my father said "OK, you have a choice: you can be on a varsity sport or you can work after school." Of course I wanted to run. Fortunately the school offered cross country for girls. We ran with the boys because there weren't that many girls doing it back then.

I left high school thinking I was great, because I was MVP and captain of my team. But when I came to the University of Vermont I ran only one season on their cross country team. It turned out there were girls there who went on to the Olympics, including Judi St. Hilaire and Leslie Bancroft. We competed against Joan Benoit, who was running for Maine. It was just an amazing team and top competition and since I was not even in the top five (only their times counted), I lost interest the following year, didn't participate in sports and instead met my husband to be.

How did you start doing triathlons?

I had always wanted to do a triathlon. When I was younger I did swim-a-thons to find a cure for cancer- isn't that interesting? So after college I heard about the Montauk Triathlon going on that weekend and decided to do it on a fluke. I didn't own a bike so I borrowed one. It was too big for me and I had to stand up on it the entire time-it was so ridiculous! *(Laughs)* The wet suit I borrowed for the swim was also too big and filling with water. I felt I was drowning. The weather was freezing and they were pulling people out for hypothermia, but I wouldn't stop. In the run I couldn't feel my toes but I managed the 6.2 miles. When I got to the finish line I thought "I love this!" That's, crazy, right? *(Laughs again)*



(Makenzie L. Goodman/ Brooks Institute)

It put a dream in my heart and I did a few more. Then I got married and had children, but that dream was still there. As soon as I finished nursing my last child I told my husband I want to try to make the U.S. Amateur Triathlon Team. I was 40 when I finally got to go to Team USA trials in Lake Placid. I was fighting bronchitis but there was only one day to do it so I had to go even though I was hacking. The good thing is that the water was so freezing cold that they shortened the swim. I was really far behind when I got out but I had a good bike segment and a really great run. Coming down the track I just managed to pass a girl to place as fourth woman and took the last spot. I made the team. It was so fantastic. I was so proud to wear the U.S. uniform. I just love love love triathlon.

Then you faced your biggest competition...against breast cancer.

I was diagnosed with cancer when I was 46 and it was a difficult journey because it took over two years to find out. When I first had a lump in my breast the doctor told me the mammogram was OK and it was nothing. A year later, it got bigger so they did a biopsy - but the tech took it from the wrong place and it came back negative. So another year goes by and now my lymph nodes in my arm are inflamed. I was dismissing it since I was working out a lot to keep on Team USA but it became a marching, tingling sensation and I knew something wasn't right. Next was an MRI but it was delayed because you have to be a certain number of days in your (menstrual) cycle to do it and mine was all over the place. It took nine months to schedule it...can you imagine? Still, something weird was going on because I couldn't feel my fingers and the lymph nodes under my arm were really big. It was time to find out what was going on.

The news was terrible - this time they confirmed it was cancer and it had advanced. Then came all those unbelievable trials -the chemotherapy, four surgeries, the radiation treatments. I had some of the worst "cording" the doctors have ever seen. Cording is when the lymph and blood vessels scar up so much they form these cords that look like strings. They caused my shoulder to pull forward and my ribcage to move up-it literally twisted my spine and my whole body.

It's amazing that you even survived, let alone returned to competitive form. Is it true you did a triathlon while still under treatment?

Yes, I was right in the middle of some chemo but I had a purpose. I was determined to be with the US amateur triathlon team at the world championships in Vancouver in June 2008. I called Tim Yount , the team coach, and told him "I've got cancer and I know I'm not going to do well, but I want to do this for everybody battling cancer. I want them to know that life doesn't stop and this is not going to get me." Tim was so nice and said they would be honored to have me. It was the hardest thing I've ever, ever done. I can tell you God helped me finish that race. It was really challenging trying to swim again, and they pulled tons of people from the water because it was so cold. They even cut off the swim portion after my wave left and turned it into a biathlon. But I refused to quit. It took me 30 minutes to get my wet suit off and put on my cycling shoes- I had no feeling in my fingers. I lost a lot of weight in that race. As I ran in coach Yount handed me an American flag and I saw all these people from around the world cheering me on over the finish line. It's going to make me cry just thinking about it now. It was one of the greatest experiences I could ever have, to reach my goal to finish.

So now you are in remission and competing at a high level again. How did you find Senior Games?

I was at a running event in Vermont and Don Kjelleren, who is really involved with the games there, told me "You have to come compete in our triathlon." So I went and won the race! Don came up to me again and said "You just qualified for the National Senior Games-you are now an Olympian. You have to go to Nationals!"

I was so excited and immediately booked my room for Cleveland. You guys did an incredible job with everything. I enjoyed going to the athlete village and the opening ceremony. And what could be better than to run by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame?

(Laughs)

How did your National Senior Games experience compare to other events you've been in?

It was such a different atmosphere than other events. At the World Triathlon Championships people are much, much more just about competition. Athletes were still competitive at the Senior Games, but everyone was so friendly and nice and supportive. Before the triathlon race, I told my amazing "21" story to the other athletes and they got everyone together and we all said a prayer. All of us were hugging each other and rooting each other on. I've never seen anything like that at a competition. And then to go out and win my race...it was such an incredible day.



So what do you tell others that aren't as active as you are? You're an elite runner and athlete, how do you get them to relate to your example?

Well, I'm also a clinical dietician and a coach so I'm always trying to motivate people. I usually ask them "What is your favorite thing? What do you love to do or would like to do?" They don't have to be a runner. There's eight million other things to do. There's swimming, or they may like Zumba. If they say "painting" I say OK, let's take a walk and you can paint about what you see. If you only have ten minutes you can turn on some music and dance. Whatever it is, do something you love. You can transform yourself faster than you can believe.

The other thing that is extraordinary to motivate people is to use the buddy system. When you do things with a buddy you wind up relying on each other and spurring each other on.

How do you keep in shape? Do you train all the time?

We have a place in Vermont and that's where I train a lot. I take the winter off from triathlon training and do cross country skiing and snowshoeing. My husband and I play paddle tennis too. He's very athletic and loves tennis. We do play some tennis together. But I love triathlon and he prefers tennis, and that's good because we are both so intensely competitive.

What inspires you?

I'm so inspired by athletes with disabilities. And I coach kids at the Greenwich town track where we live. We have about 130 in the Greenwich Track club and some have disabilities or are overweight and don't have self esteem. My biggest love is coaching and giving kids hope when they think they can't do anything, helping them start out and watching them go around the track. It empowers them. Sports can change people's lives.

My uncle is a personal inspiration. He's big on running and has done over 60 marathons. He urged me to get into the Chicago Marathon with barely any training when I was 25. He's 86 now and still runs every day. I've got to get him into Senior Games!

What other interests are you pursuing?

I'm writing this book about my experiences that God put on my heart. The title is "Just Three Words" with the tagline "Live your Life Transformed" The response to my story from agents and publishers has been incredible. One said "I think we could turn this into a movie." Wouldn't that be awesome? The Senior Games will be highlighted!

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