

Sporting Seniors

Three alumni strut their stuff

By Chrystal Ingram '88

When most people reach retirement, they slow down, take it easy and enjoy their golden years. For Margaret Flannagan '30, Ben Lynch '53 and Margaret Lopez '32, winding down is the last thing on their minds. These three Rowan alumni believe in reaching for the gold and becoming champions in their favorite sports.

Don't let Margaret Flannagan's quiet demeanor fool you. She's got a lot to boast about—like being a Senior Olympian with 20 gold medals. "My friends kid me about being famous," says Flannagan, 85, "but I don't swim for the recognition—I swim for my health. Swimming is good for a bad knee or hip. You can strengthen your body without stressing the joints."

A late-blooming athlete at age 80, Flannagan competes at state and national levels as often as her schedule allows. In May she competed along with 8,500 other seniors in the U.S. National Senior Games in San Antonio, Texas where she won six gold medals in swimming. "I always win the backstroke, but I'm not that good at freestyle," she says.

She has come a long way since the days she learned to swim in the Delaware River. In September she competed in the 85-89 class of the Garden State Games in

Toms River. Flannagan, who describes herself as "locally grown, just like the tomatoes," lives in Westville in the home she and her late husband John shared. She played field hockey in college, and after graduation in 1930, taught in Deptford Township. Later she entered the Women's Army Corps for two years during World War II. Her treasured teaching achievement is opening the first special education class in 1956 in Gloucester City. "We were the pioneers of integrating special education into the regular schools," she says.

It's no surprise that Flannagan is not a one-sport woman. She has been a member of the Botana Hiking Club of Philadelphia since 1933, and leads historical hikes of South Jersey. Always training, Flannagan has no plans to slow down. "If I stop I'll be like so many other older folks who lose their zest for life," she observes. "They say, 'Use it or lose it,' so I'm using it."

When Ben Lynch, 66, retired in 1992 after 20 years as principal, baseball and basketball coach of Highland High School in Blackwood, he had no intention of sitting in his recliner and channel surfing. He became Rowan College's assistant basketball coach and

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tennis coach, and he continues to play and compete.

In May, Lynch and his partners won the Garden State Games 3-on-3 basketball championship. He is looking forward to the Senior World Games this October in St. George, Utah where he'll team with former NBA players to play full-court basketball. Training includes shooting hoops five days a week at the Rowan and Washington Township gyms.

He also hones his skills regularly with a Washington Township 35-and-over basketball team. Originally from Bridgeton and now a resident of Washington Township with Judy, his wife of 35 years, Lynch left his mark at Rowan as the first to score 1,000 college career points in basketball. That record has since been matched, but Lynch still safely holds the highest game-average record, at 26 points.

Since graduation in 1953, sports and education have jointly ruled Lynch's life. He serves on Rowan's Alumni Association Board of Directors and has been inducted into the South Jersey Coaches Hall of Fame. He was also president of the Camden County Principal's Association (1986-88) and chairman of the Eastern U.S. Semi-Pro Baseball Tournament, assisting at least 20 players to the major leagues.

Lynch recently tried his hand at a new game and ran for the state senate. "The Democrat Party asked me to run," he says. "I garnered over 25,000 votes on a platform of education and property taxes." It was a close race—the incumbent won by a mere 1,000 votes.

Though basketball may be Lynch's favorite sport, he can't help but excel at whatever he does, including baseball. "I introduced the designated hitter rules used in the majors, and the American League is now adopting the speed-up rules I created for high school and college," he says proudly. "One of the

biggest complaints about baseball is that the game takes too long. With the speed-up rules, the team has to be off the field in 90 seconds. The pitcher is allowed no more than 20 seconds between each pitch, or it will count as a ball against him. And the batter must be in the batter's box within 10 seconds after he's called, or it counts as a strike against him."

With impressive accomplishments in both baseball and basketball, Lynch will no doubt need to clear shelf space for more medals and awards. But if there wasn't room for both and he had to pick only one sport, he says, "I love to play basketball—that's my sport—and I enjoy coaching kids. To combine the two, what more could I ask for?"

At 84, Margaret Lopez has all the vibrancy, spunk and sass of a woman one-quarter her age. In fact, this runner, biker and hiker doesn't know what getting old means. "If friends my age are still alive, they're not an inspiration," she says. "They're always complaining about this ailment or that one. Then they always want to take a nap! They complain about being old, but don't do what it takes to stay young.

Lopez is a two-time New York Marathoner, running the race at ages 70 and 71. "Of course, I came in first in my age group," she jokes of her five-hour marathons. "I was the only 70-year-old woman running." Hard to believe that Lopez had only begun running a few years earlier, at age 67. Her most recent race was a September 5k run in Middletown.

Coached by her son Alan, Lopez trains by jogging every other day, alternating three and five miles. On the days she doesn't run, she bikes 25 to 50 miles. A few years ago, she biked 730 miles of the California coast. For recreational sports, she prefers hiking.

"There's much more camaraderie with hiking. You talk to people and get to know them," she says. "You can't do that while biking or running."

Lopez attributes her youthfulness to centering her sports activities around people two or three generations younger than she, and she worries little about her health. "People say, 'What does your doctor think about all this activity?' And I say, 'What doctor? I don't have a doctor!' I don't know anything about blood pressure. I know I'm alive. What more do I need to know?"

When Lopez graduated from Glassboro Normal School during the heart of the depression, she was fortunate to land the only teaching vacancy in Paulsboro where she taught fifth grade for three years. Her next position was in Princeton where she met her husband Joe. She retired in 1941 to raise three children, and the Lopezes finally settled in Middletown in 1955. A desperate phone call from the superintendent who was looking for a sixth grade teacher put Lopez back in the classroom where she remained until mandatory retirement at age 70.

You'd think the adventurous Lopez, whose 1876 Victorian home is decorated with trophies, awards and sports photos, would have nothing left to conquer. Think again. The woman who says, "I don't know why people make such a big deal about me" will celebrate her 85th birthday May 18 in Canada by jumping out of a hot air balloon. "I told my son to find me something different to do and this is what he came up with." After a pause she flings her anus out, throws her head back and says, "But if I don't make it, what a way to go—in a blaze of glory!" ■