

# 15th National Veterans Golden Age Games

# Daily Champion



Special Edition

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## 2001 Most Inspirational Athlete Award Winner



*Clifford Junkins with his coach, Michael Benedisuk*

**By Kim Byers**

**VHA Coordinator, Public Affairs**

Clifford Junkins, 74, of Holyoke, Mass., has true team spirit. One of the Northampton VA Medical Center's 2001 Golden Age team, his five fellow team members and coach, Michael Benedisuk, couldn't agree more.

Signed by all team members, Junkins' nomination for the *George Gangi Most Inspirational Athlete Award* reads as follows: "Clifford's steadfast determination and desire to compete have inspired other Golden Age participants for over a decade... To those who have the pleasure of knowing and competing with him, he has come to represent all that an athlete and a veteran should be."

But Junkins is also a key member on another team, one that includes his wife of 53 years, Mary Jo. A devoted husband, Clifford is never without her. Because of Mary Jo's declining health, requiring that she use a wheelchair and constant oxygen, husband Clifford tends to her every need—both at the Games and at home. "He is the ultimate caregiver," says

Benedisuk. Mary Jo concurs, describing her husband as "always very helpful." Both of the Junkins relish coming to the Golden Age Games each year and have come to know many of the other competitors.

To accommodate Mary Jo's oxygen needs, the Junkins must travel by train—a long haul from Massachusetts to Texas. Clifford helps the team raise funds needed to attend the Games, and goes to the other members' events. "Without a word of complaint, Clifford has tirelessly tended to his wife while simultaneously earning medals in grueling events," say his teammates. "When he's not competing himself, he makes sure to cheer on his teammates, all the while providing a truly positive example for the Golden Age Games."

Clifford Junkins is indeed one determined and self-sufficient man. This week, when the bolt on his hotel door got stuck and hotel maintenance hadn't yet arrived, he climbed out of the window himself, in search of help. After all, he didn't want to miss his table tennis event (and fortunately, the room was on the first floor!)

Junkins, a WW II Navy veteran, usually competes in swimming, table tennis, and bicycling, although a recent medical procedure required that he not swim this year. While he's collected his share of gold, silver, and bronze medals since he started attending the Golden Age Games in 1990, it is the opportunity to meet the other veterans that is most important to Junkins.

"I am humbled when I see and visit with other veterans who have injuries much worse than mine, and see their courage to compete no matter how difficult it may be," Junkins says. "I am proud to be able to visit with them." His favorite aspect of the Games is "the spirit of these fellows and ladies who are so determined. It makes me see how fortunate I am, and they give me the incentive to compete. I have to ask, 'if they can do it, why can't I?'"

After the service, Junkins worked in construction, then began teaching in a vocational school. He returned

## Junkins (cont.)

to school part time at age 40 to earn his degree in Occupational Education at Westfield State College. Because he was teaching during the day, it took him seven years to finish, but the education paid off and he taught in the same school for many years until his retirement.

Born and raised in Holyoke, Junkins lives, with Mary Jo, in the house he was born in. In recent years he has not only helped attend to Mary Jo's needs, but also cared for his ailing father and a mentally disabled son, Allan, 48, who lives next door. "We couldn't be blessed any better with a son like Allan," Junkins says. He is equally proud of his older son, David, and his three grandchildren.

National Director of the Golden Age Games Dewayne Vaughn

heartily endorsed Junkins' selection for this year's George Gangi Award. "He was nominated by all his team members, and is a wonderful choice for this award," Vaughn says. "He shows, by example, the true spirit of the award—determination, sportsmanship, and team spirit. He inspires us all."

Like the athlete for whom the award was named, Junkins not only competes in bicycling, but also embodies the qualities of determination, dedication to the event, and an absolute love of the Games. "I definitely would recommend this to others," he says. "It inspires me to try to improve my health with physical exercise and meet other veterans from around the country. It has done so much for me—in the real spirit of *living!*"

## Coach of the Year

Larry Wong, coach of the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System team, is the recipient of this year's Coach of the Year Award. He explained, "I really enjoy coaching.



Larry Wong

I like seeing the athlete's potential, and then working with each person to help them develop their skills. The Games are about competition and camaraderie—it doesn't matter who wins, you're still friends.

"Someone recently said that being a coach is a little like being a den leader because people are looking to you for advice, inspiration, motivation, and insight," he added. "My job is to offer encouragement and confidence. I ask my athletes to dig deep, believe in themselves, and they can do it." This commitment to his athletes has earned him this very special award honoring a distinguished coach who is selected by the athletes, other coaches, and national organizers.

Wong has been with the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System for almost 20 years, working in several positions including patient advocate, and in the Quality Management Service. He has also worked as a coordinator for the Los Angeles Stand Down, and other events for homeless veterans.

Wong finds this opportunity to serve as a coach to be very rewarding. "I'm glad that VA offers coaches the opportunity to serve at veterans' events such as the Golden Age Games," he said.

- Cindy Butler, VA San Diego HCS

## Volunteer(s) of the Year



Virginia Howard, Tressie Jacobson and Barbara Grover

The recipients of the 2001 Golden Age Games Volunteer(s) of the Year Award are a trio of hardworking volunteers attending their ninth Golden Age Games together—Virginia Howard of Dallas, her sister Barbara Grover, and Tressie Jacobson, both of California.

"These veterans aren't old—they're young in their heads and hearts. Activities like these Games keep them young," said Howard. "We're here because we know the value of these events—some of

these veterans would be sitting home alone if it weren't for these Games.

"Working the events is hard work—we usually work 12 hours per day, but it's worth it," Howard noted. They also volunteer for the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. All three of their husbands were veterans, and two were disabled.

As a retired VA registered nurse, Howard headed the medical team for the National Veterans Wheelchair Games when they were in Arlington, in 1986. After that experience she was hooked, and has been volunteering for the Games ever since. She recruited her sister, Grover, and then they met Jacobson at the Winter Sports Clinic nine years ago. Now it's their annual event. "We combine the Games with our vacation and have a great time," said Jacobson.

- Cindy Butler, VA San Diego HCS