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Reprints

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# Bohemia club members don't let age keep them off track (and field)

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By JASON MOLINET. Special to Newsday



Caryl Senn-Griffiths, a member of the Bohemia Track Club, practices her javelin throw on Aug. 4, 2014, at Farmingdale State University, where she works as an assistant coach. (Credit: Newsday / Audrey C. Tiernan)

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Then her competitive streak kicks in. Senn-Griffiths, once clocked throwing a baseball at 68 mph on a radar gun, is in a headfirst sprint and launches her javelin. The silver-tipped spear sails effortlessly downwind before burrowing into the grassy field. It's only practice, but Senn-Griffiths, an assistant track and field coach at Farmingdale State College, doesn't do anything halfway.

"I started throwing javelin in my backyard," said Senn-Griffiths, a track and field standout at Massapequa's Berner High School in the 1970s. "I started throwing shot put off my back porch."

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In demonstrating her sport, there's an intensity in her movements that is associated with the most zealous of athletes. Expect nothing less from the former two-time NCAA Division III All-American in the heptathlon at Ithaca College.

The women's heptathlon, a two-day, seven-event test of versatility and endurance, is an ironman-like challenge set within most outdoor track and field meets. It features, in order: 100-meter hurdles, high jump, shot put, 200-meter dash, long jump, javelin and 800-meter run. Now old enough to join AARP, Senn-Griffiths still practices up to five days a week.

Along the way, she shed her "lone wolf" mentality and found a home with the Bohemia Track Club, one of a handful of athletic organizations where Long Island's army of mostly recreational runners find comfort and camaraderie, thanks to road racing and

masters track and field.

The world of masters competition allows anyone ages 35 and older to compete against foes grouped by age in running and field events. Many are just starting or rediscovering their athletic side in their 50s. U.S. Track and Field estimates there are 30,000 masters competitors nationally, up five percent from 2010. And there are 1,300 clubs nationally that include masters athletes. Now, Senn-Griffiths is a national masters champion and still chasing her athletic yen.

"I'm still trying to defy time," Senn-Griffiths said. "I'm not opposed to going to a track meet and competing against college kids. I still train with my athletes at Farmingdale State College. I try to beat as many of them as I can. And I often do, especially in the throws."

Competing across the country

While the Bohemia Track Club is 125 members strong, Senn-Griffiths is one of five who regularly represents the organization at elite masters events around the country. Four of them -- Mary Trotto, Sue Nesbihal, Janis Henderson and Senn-Griffiths -- happen to be women who "throw." It's a craft that's banded them together -- and set them apart.

"Come and try something. Try anything. You'll love it," said Nesbihal, 65, a retired Nassau County probation officer from Islip Terrace. "You don't have to be great at it. You don't have to be good at it. If you throw 30 meters in the javelin, people are going to cheer for you. But if you go out there -- and it's your first time -- and you throw 10 meters, people cheer for you."

Nesbihal played softball into her late 30s and then took up road-running. But after her husband died in 1998, she gravitated toward track and field. One year later, at her first national meet, Nesbihal broke the American record (50-54 age group) in the steeplechase, a 3,000-meter obstacle race. "And then I got hooked," she said.

Along the way, Nesbihal learned to pole vault, triple jump as well as throw the discus and javelin. She still does, despite being legally blind since 2002.

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"I fool a lot of people who don't know I have a vision problem," Nesbihal said. "I've compensated for it. When I do the steeplechase, I tell the officials, 'I do it in Braille, don't worry.' But I count steps. I know the number of steps it takes to go 80 meters. I practice so much, the [steeplechase] barrier is not a factor."

Trotto, 67, is one of the Bohemia Track Club's founding members. Though she now lives in Kihei, Hawaii, on the island of Maui, Trotto still owns a home in Smithtown and returns to Long Island each summer. This is her track and field season.

The former LIU Post professor and chair of the physical education department won steeplechase and triple-jump national titles in her age group at the USATF Masters Outdoor Championships July 17-20 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

In fact, Trotto, Senn-Griffiths, Nesbihal and Joe Cordero helped the Bohemia Track Club place 13th in the team standings against strong competition. Senn-Griffiths racked up seven medals in North Carolina, including gold in the five-event pentathlon, javelin, high jump and 4 x 100-meter relay.

### **Coping with injury**

Henderson, 67, of Mount Sinai, competed Aug. 2-3 at the USATF-USA Masters Throws Championships in Worcester, Massachusetts. She did it despite fracturing her left ankle in an unrelated accident in July. She wore a brace and finished third in her 65-and-older age group in the throws pentathlon, which featured the hammer throw, shot put, discus, javelin and weight throw.

"There were a lot of painful moments over the weekend," Henderson admitted after returning home. She altered her technique to accommodate her injury. And while the throws weren't close to her previous best, she said what mattered to her was that she didn't give up.

Henderson, who won her age division in the weight and superweight throws at the USA Track and Field Masters Championships in 2013, fought her doctor's advice to stop competing.

A cancer survivor, Henderson says she took a fistful of medals to the examination room, showed them off and said, "This is who I am."

A volunteer firefighter in Mount Sinai, Henderson spent 30 years as a school nurse before retiring five years ago. She took up triathlons after beating uterine cancer more than a decade ago and then discovered the Long Island Senior Games. That's where she picked up throwing events.

"The power, the skill, the coordination," Henderson said, "it's a dance if done right. That's a beautiful thing."

The hard-throwing women of the Bohemia Track Club say they'll aspire to do better with every hammer throw and steeplechase jump for as long as they can.

"I'm going to keep doing it until I can't physically," Trotto said. "I don't see any reason to stop."

### **THE ISLAND'S ATHLETIC CLUBS**

The Long Island Senior Games have been on hiatus for two years due to budget cutbacks. Officials hope the games ([longislandseniorgames.org](http://longislandseniorgames.org)) return in 2015. Mildred Wilcox, the organization's vice president, said the event needs \$25,000 to be funded and the group is seeking donations and grants.

Here's a list of clubs and websites for athletes of all ages.

\* The Long Island Road Runners Club ([lirrc.org](http://lirrc.org)) has more than 60 events a year for runners of all ages.

\* The Bohemia Track Club ([bohemiatrackclub.org](http://bohemiatrackclub.org)) meets the third Wednesday of each month, starting in September, at 8 p.m. at the Bohemia Recreation Center.

\* The Northport Running Club ([nrcrun.org](http://nrcrun.org)), home of the Great Cow Harbor 10k on Sept. 20, meets the fourth Wednesday of each month at 7:30 p.m. at the Northport American Legion.

For a list of other clubs, go to [nwscy.li/trackclubs](http://nwscy.li/trackclubs)