

WENDELL THOMPSON



Wendell Thompson likes to play mind games. And he's good at them, too.

Thompson, 81, has never been the strongest athlete or the fastest, but he is often the most strategic and calculated.

"I major in the minor sports," Thompson said. "A lot of sports depend upon strategy and accuracy. That's what attracted me to shuffleboard."

In June, the Bartlesville resident competed in men's singles and open doubles shuffleboard events the National Senior Games in Albuquerque. With his partner, Michael Middlemiss from Iowa he received the gold medal and placed 4th in singles.

The retired librarian prepares for the senior games on his backyard court, which he built to be the same size as the courts used at nationals. The court is about 15 years old now, and Thompson repaints the stripes himself about every three to four years. A little friendly competition from his brother, who also competes in shuffleboard events mostly in Oklahoma, keeps him sharp.

At the Oklahoma Senior Games, Thompson has taken first place in every shuffleboard event he has entered during the past 21 years. He also helps coordinate shuffleboard and croquet events for the state games.

Even when he was new to shuffleboard, which he began playing around the age of 60, the game felt familiar. Thompson has been bowling since the age of 12, which requires a similar strategy and focus, he said.

Thompson has won quite a few trophies in bowling, too, including two military Championships in Okinawa, Japan — one as a member of the U.S. Marine Corps team and the other with the Air Force.

“I arrived in Okinawa in mid-September, 1958, and I wanted to be on a bowling team, but all the Air Force teams had been formed and I couldn’t find anyone to bowl with,” said Thompson, who was in the Air Force at the time. “I saw a group of Marines and I asked if I could join their team. That was unheard of but I had the audacity to ask.”

Eventually, the Marines caved and allowed Thompson to join their team. They went on to win the Island Championship in 1959. The following season, the Air Force team made room for Thompson and he led them to victory in 1960 and on to win the regional championship the same year.

Thompson continues to bowl and has recently started playing pickleball. He has also competed in racquetball, table tennis and badminton over the years. Regardless of the sport, it’s the competition that drives him.

“I just enjoy the competition,” Thompson said. “You keep trying and, eventually, you’re going to win something.”

Oklahoma Senior Games competitions occur annually in September and October. This year, competitions will be held in Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Shawnee, Norman, Yukon and Warr Acres.

Events include three-on-three basketball, track and field, golf, swimming, water walking, 5K and 10K runs, 5K power walk, 5K race walk, bowling, tennis, table tennis, golf croquet, shuffleboard, cycling, cornhole, badminton, archery, pickleball, racquetball, softball and triathlon. Participants age 50 and older will compete in categories by age and gender.

Oklahoma Senior Games qualifies athletes for National Senior Games competition held every two years. About 300 athletes who qualify in 2020 will represent Oklahoma in the National Senior Games competition November 5-18, 2021 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

For more information visit www.okseniorgames.com or call (405) 821-1500.