

His Life's A Beach



Photo courtesy of Cape Cod Times

Greg Johnson '83 can regularly be found with his toes in the sand, surveying the sea from the shores of far-off destinations. But he's not at the beach to relax — far from it, in fact. Over the last four decades Johnson has competed around the country in some 20 U.S. Lifesaving Association Championships. Last year, he punched his ticket to the World Lifesaving Championships, held in The Netherlands in September.

Johnson was one of five master competitors from the United States who joined 3,500 athletes from across the globe. “It was like being at a lifeguard Olympics,” he says.

Now closing in on 39 summers as a lifeguard at Nauset Beach in Orleans, Mass., Johnson became hooked on the sport of competitive lifesaving, which includes events like the 2K beach run, board rescue, beach relay and surf ski, back in 1979. Athletes are chosen to compete for the U.S. at the World

Championships based on recent past performances at the U.S. National Championships, and anyone wishing to compete in the age group divisions may do so as long as they are current USLA members.

Johnson's main events are the paddleboard race and the beach run. For most of the 1980s and early 1990s, he was nationally ranked as a paddleboarder and 2K beach-runner. Today, he consistently places in the top three in these events for his age group.

Ocean lifesaving competitions pose unique challenges. "Depending on weather conditions, one may be racing on flat water, windblown chop or even overhead surf," Johnson says. That means training under a variety of ocean conditions and being prepared to change strategies both on water and land — as Johnson had to do at the world championships. For his paddleboard race, the North Sea was, "boiling with two- to three-foot choppy surf," he recalls. While he was unable to advance to the finals in that event, he was undeterred, and the following day, he placed third in the beach run.

Johnson credits his early experiences as a student-athlete at UNH with providing the foundation for his success at his first world competition as well as in his work as a teacher, coach, athletic director, trainer and athlete. "I will never forget my initial meeting in John Copeland's track office," he recalls. The walls were filled with photos of past athletes, including former Wildcat and 1972 Olympic decathlete Jeff Bannister. Running track for both Copeland and Jim Boulanger and playing lacrosse for Ted Garber at UNH, Johnson spent innumerable hours in the Field House, training on the indoor track and working out in the weight room. His coaches and professors not only taught him what he needed for his degree in physical education but also about training for athletic performance. "For close to four decades, I have shared this knowledge and experience with children and adults here on Cape Cod," he says.

And with a World Lifesaving Championship now behind him, Johnson shows no signs of stopping. "I am most proud of how far I have come since college

and being able to continue doing the things that I love to do and even making a living at it,” he says. “At age 58, I am still training and competing as an athlete.”

When he’s not at the beach, Johnson spends much of his time painting and performing music, and many of his murals and paintings are on display in Orleans. Finding musical inspiration in performers like James Taylor, Dan Fogelberg and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, he founded a successful James Taylor tribute band, Shower the People. He’s written and recorded three all-original CDs, which sell in his local music stores. His favorite original song? A tune called “Lamprey River,” an homage to the freshwater body just outside the Durham campus.

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