

Competitors in a certain age group in July's Commonwealth Games will have a youngster to compete with this year. "Youngster" being a relative term, of course.

Clara Lee Ripley will turn 85 before the Games kick off, so she is now in the 85-89 age bracket.

"I've been promoted to the next age group so I'm the youngster now," Clara Lee said.

Not that she needs any advantages to do well in the Games, Ripley has amassed quite a haul of medals in the 30 years she has been a regular competitor in the Commonwealth Games and the Virginia Senior Games.

"I've won a total of 225 medals in the Commonwealth Games and Senior Games in the 50-, 100-, and 200-meter dashes, the long jump, triple jump, shot put and discus," she said.

Those are the events she will compete in again this year, but they are just a sample of her athletic prowess. Ripley competed in 18 different sports along the way, starting with ping pong in 1995 where she won her first bronze medal.

A physical education teacher and coach, during her 32-year career, she was at G.W.H.S. in Danville for 29 years and before that, 3 years at E.C. Glass in Lynchburg. Following that, she founded the G.W.H.S. girls' Tennis team.

While in the 6th grade, she won the Triple Jump for the whole school at the big year end Field Day Event. The Triple Jump was then called, the "Hop, Step, and Jump." Ironically, 49 years later in 1999 at the Inaugural State Games of America in St. Louis. At age 60, she won the Triple Jump for the whole nation taking first in her age group. At that event she also took home Gold in the 100m and 200m, then earning silver by a tiny margin in the long jump.

In 2008 Clara Lee was honored, along with two outstanding male athletes to be inducted into the Danville Register and Bee, Sports Hall of Fame. It is one of her most cherished athletic awards.

Like most of the competitors at the Games, the competition is secondary. Fellowship and camaraderie are the primary motivations for returning year after year.

"I enjoy seeing the same people year to year," she said.

There is also a benefit to maintaining wellness with a goal of competing in mind.

"The Commonwealth Games keep me motivated to keep my muscles in shape," Ripley said.

Staying in shape is important. She goes to the gym regularly and plays pickleball weekly to stay active. Additionally, Clara Lee has been a leader in Bible Study Fellowship International for 30 years.

Clara Lee Ripley is not unique. She knows when she sees friends each July that others also look forward to getting out on the track for competition and friendship. The Virginia Commonwealth Games Masters Track & Field events will take place July 21st at Liberty University's Matthes-Hopkins Complex. Consider coming out to cheer them on; or better yet, consider registering to compete.