

A Golden Time Competing at the Commonwealth Games

The only undefeated competitor in athletics is Father Time.

Lee Corning gave the old guy a run for his money. Corning decided to give up competing in track and field, which he did at the Commonwealth Games in 2020.

With a sterling resume of success in bodybuilding, Corning decided to move on from that sport in 2016. He experienced an unexpected resurgence in track and field, when he was looking for something to do during the 2020 lockdown and heard about the Commonwealth Games.

Now, as he prepares to retire to Costa Rica, he reflects on the years of competition, the medals, and most of all, the camaraderie that made it all worthwhile.

For Lee, the Commonwealth Games were about more than just medals—they introduced him to a community of fellow athletes. It came as a surprise when he experienced that fellowship first-hand.

At first, he treated the meets like his past competitions: show up, compete, then head to a restaurant. Then he was approached about being part of a group photo of all the competitors.

“That’s when I finally understood how close-knit this group was,”

he says. “Just standing next to these guys, knowing how long they had been doing this—it meant a lot.”

One of his biggest influences was Charles Alcorn, a longtime track and field coach who had been throwing for decades. The two became fast friends, bonding over weight training and shared experiences. Charles, despite having both hips replaced, remained a champion in his own right.

Field events were a natural for Corning, who loved lifting weights even as a young child. He enjoyed lifting furniture as a child, even raising a bed with his 280-pound father still on it. Seeing Lee’s natural ability, his father got him his first set of weights, setting the stage for what would become a lifelong pursuit.

At Lunenburg Central High School, he excelled in the throwing events where strength is paramount - shot put and discus. After high school, however, the passion for body building and power lifting remained, but the track events were set aside.



July 2024 - Lee Corning leaves the track after participating in his final Commonwealth

When he decided to give the Commonwealth Games a try, he started training without any coaching. Then, he drove to Lynchburg from his home near Petersburg to compete.

“I was a rookie,” he said. “It was the year they had to move the meet to later because of Covid, and they had the meet inside. I showed up with a steel shot. I didn’t even know there were indoor shots. I thought there would be a pit. So, I had to borrow one from a fellow competitor.”

All’s well that ends well, because Lee won gold in his division.

“When I got that gold medal I cried,” he said. “I cried in front of a bunch of people because I hadn’t had a victory in a lot of years. I was still training. I practiced here at home, but I didn’t know how to throw at all.”

The feeling was worth repeating.

“I was hooked,” he said. “Seems like everybody who throws has been a coach for 40 years. That really boosted my self-esteem to know I could throw with these guys who have been practicing for all these years. To even stand next to them of a podium meant a lot to me.”

He’s won three gold medals in shot put and one in discus. He finished second to Alcorn one year and took a bronze in discus on his first attempt.

The Commonwealth Games medals mean as much as the four state titles in body building -- three in North Carolina and one in Virginia. Those trophies from the multitude of events have been put in boxes or stashed away – Lee’s not sure where some of them are – but the great memories of competition will be with him forever.

With the wins came the pain. The injuries were too much to ignore, even though Corning tried hard. In December 2023 he tore his left bicep, two days before an invitational meet. No big deal, it was his non-throwing arm. “It was excruciating, but I ended up throwing the best I ever had and end up winning,” Corning said.

Defying age, time, and doctors’ advice makes for good stories but it’s not sustainable. Corning had to say his time had come to say farewell to competition. “My shoulder is out of whack, and I can’t compete anymore,” he said.

Though Lee is stepping away from track and field, he has no plans to stop training. Looking back, Lee is grateful for everything sports have given him. “I thought I was done, but you dragged me back in—at least in spirit,” he laughs. “Usually, when you retire, people forget about you before the sweat dries. But this community—it sticks with you.”

Lee Corning may be moving on, but his legacy in strength sports, bodybuilding, and the Commonwealth Games will not be forgotten anytime soon.