

LIFELONG ATHLETE 'A TOM BRADY, ONLY OLDER'

82-year-old leaves aging in his wake



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR



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ABOVE: Dr. John Howell, 82, negotiates a slalom course on Lake Anna behind Al Luck's boat. Howell still competes in slalom events and has won regional championships several times. **TOP:** Howell gets geared up before hitting the water.

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Dr. John Howell doesn't just break the stereotypes about aging, he completely blows them out of the water while on skis—or on the tennis court with a nasty backhand or on the dance floor with a few Cuban steps.

Howell, a dentist who continued to practice until he was in his late 70s, remains an internationally ranked water skier in his 80s.

Even during the winter, he skis over a slalom course on Lake Anna where the water stays a warm 70-some degrees after being heated to produce steam for the nuclear plant and then released.

He also plays tennis several times a week, snow skis at Massanutten, takes cruises, goes to the Kennedy Center and takes his wife out dancing—she's 29 years younger—when COVID-19 conditions make it safe to do so.

His level of activity inspires both seniors and juniors.

"When I found out his age, I was dumbfounded," said Steve

Flanagan, who's part of the tennis group Howell plays with and is almost 20 years younger. "He runs like a deer. I can't get over how impressive his stamina is, his ability, his speed. He's a genetic freak of nature. He's a Tom Brady, only older."

Born a year before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Howell is 82 and always has been a "super jock," as he calls himself. The son of a career military man and West Point graduate, Howell went to four high schools as his father got different assignments—and

SEE HOWELL, A16



Lori and John Howell, shown at a wedding last fall, enjoy dancing, cruises and the theater.

HOWELL

► FROM A1

he played practically every sport known to man during high school and college.

He kept a similar pace in the decades that followed.

Howell already had finished undergraduate work at the University of Virginia and dental school at what was then the Medical College of Virginia when he volunteered to serve in the Vietnam War in 1966.

He had done a little water skiing before then, but when he got assigned to a camp along the shores of Cam Ranh Bay, Howell told the officer ordering supplies what he needed for his dental facility. He also casually mentioned that it was “too bad we don’t have a ski boat.”

Within a week, Howell had his dental equipment—and a 16-foot fiberglass boat.

“To make it interesting, they had jellyfish the size of trash-can lids with tentacles going out so many feet,” Howell said. “You could fall out there and it looked like someone beat you with a willow. It didn’t take me long to learn to get up, I’ll tell you that.”

Howell would apply that same kind of tenacity to other sports and endeavors in the years that followed.

“The man has kept in shape and obviously he’s got super eyesight and quick reactions to be able to move, both through a slalom course while water skiing and during tennis, where he loves to come up and play the net,” said Mike Puig, who organizes the tennis group. “But he’s been active his whole life, that’s the thing. He never stopped, he never became a couch potato.”

‘NOTHING BORING ABOUT HIM’

Howell was a dentist in Woodbridge for 51 years and for some of that period, he divided his time between homes in Arlington and lakefront property west of Spotsylvania Courthouse. In the mid-1970s, he and fellow water skier Joe Cornett were so desperate to find a place where they could practice—without interference from jet skis, fishing boats and joy riders—he chartered a plane to search for possible private lakes.

He found Jennings Pond off Robert E. Lee Drive,



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Al Luck pilots his boat through a slalom course as his friend Dr. John Howell, 82, skis on Lake Anna.

and he and Cornett found partners to develop the 269 acres around it. The two men also removed stumps and layers of mud, drained the lake, cleared the bed and built a new dam and spillway—all to make the lake ski worthy. In a late 1970s story in *The Free Lance-Star*, Howell called it “one of the finest ski sites on the East Coast.”

The partners later built a second body of water—Bear Lake—that’s fed by natural springs. Those involved got to pick their lots based on when they joined the partnership and Howell’s first dibs entitled him to a home that abuts both lakes.

The four children he had with his late first wife got to enjoy obstacle courses he set up at the Jennings Pond property, where they could swim, kayak, shoot BB guns and bows and arrows and rope-swing into the lake.

The water has also been a source of enjoyment for him and his second wife, Lori. She was a dance instructor, and she taught him how to improve his footwork—which he says helped immensely on the tennis court—and he taught her how to water ski.

Like his fellow tennis players, she never would have guessed how old he was when they first met. Even when she realized the difference, she wasn’t concerned because he



Some of John Howell’s water skiing awards and medals fill the top of a pool table in his home.

didn’t look or act his age.

In fact, when Flanagan once asked what drew her to him, she said it was because she’d seen him with his shirt off and he was ripped. He has a headful of hair, few wrinkles and no age spots.

“He’s just a fun, amazing, exciting man,” she said. “There’s nothing boring about him, and I can tell you that I’m not neglected in any way by being married to an 82-year-old.”

‘IT’S ALL ORIGINAL’

Not only does Howell keep moving—with a schedule that often includes daily sports matches—but he also does everything with a pedal-to-the-metal attitude. A photographer following him to Lake Anna had trouble keeping up with him on winding back roads. Once there, Howell wasted little time before climbing into the boat and heading for the slalom course.

His wife said he works at staying active and healthy. When he wants a snack, he picks an apple or orange while she says she’d probably reach for popcorn.

He doesn’t avoid red meat, but he doesn’t over-indulge, either. He weighs himself daily to make sure he stays on track and his weight has hovered around 163 pounds for decades.

Howell also has taken supplements for 30 to 40 years and often suggests them for friends and fellow players having pain or joint problems. He favors a tablet that combines glucosamine, chondroitin and methyl sulfonylmethane, or MSM, “to get rid of all those shoulder aches and knee pains and stuff like that,” Howell said. “It’s a preemptive strike so I don’t have problems.”

He also takes an antioxidant and another supplement to keep his prostate in check. He takes medicine for high blood pres-

sure and gout, especially after he played a tennis match while suffering a painful bout in both feet.

“Still, I went out and played. It was not of the happier times of my life, but my partner and I did quite well,” he said. “Certain things in life you don’t forget, and I’ll never forget that.”

Howell admits he has a high threshold for pain and that may be one reason age hasn’t been able to catch up with him—either that or he simply moves too fast for it. He avoids pain relievers because they’re bad for the kidneys, even though there were plenty of times when he probably needed relief.

He’s broken ribs, dislocated shoulders, knocked himself out, had concussions and suffered the normal twists and bends. Most injuries came on the water.

“You’re going 45 to 50 mph and all of a sudden you crash,” he said, “it’s like having somebody dismember your body.”

Even so, he’s proud he hasn’t done any major damage.

“If you look at my knees, they are perfect. No scars, no torn cartilage, no torn ACLs, no replacements, nothing,” he said. “It’s all original, like an antique car.”

And one that plans to keep running, full throttle.

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STAYING ACTIVE WITH A-FIB

Dr. John Howell was in his 70s when he was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation—an irregular heartbeat—even though he didn’t have any symptoms. He started taking blood thinners to prevent blood clots and reduce the risk of a stroke.

But the drugs increase the chance of heavy bleeding, especially among people with active lifestyles and as Dr. Kenneth Ellenbogen at VCU Health noted, Howell “is without a doubt one

of the most active people I know.” Howell went to Ellenbogen, the department of cardiology chair, to have a Watchman device implanted. Shaped like a tiny parachute, the device is placed at the opening of the left atrial appendage, where most blood clots form. It prevents the clots from entering the blood stream and causing a stroke.

Howell was featured in VCU Health’s summer magazine about advances

in heart-related issues, including an ongoing clinical trial in which up to 3,000 people worldwide will have the latest version of the Watchman device. The study will look at whether the device is a better choice than drugs for most people.

Ellenbogen believes the public needs to start thinking differently about people in their 80s who may not lead lifestyles as extreme as Howell, but still want to remain active.

“They want to have a good quality of life, that’s hard to do when you’re on these blood thinners and you’re afraid to do things, afraid to travel, afraid to do any kind of sports,” he said.

Howell said he figured he was included in the magazine because they wanted to say, “Hey, look, this guy is the real deal. He hasn’t blown it out of his chest yet. He’s crashed and done other things but the doggone Watchman is still hanging on.”