



Photo submitted

Setting the Bar

From practicing law to competing in the National Senior Games, Thompson has done it all.

By Chris Marshall, BA '09

When college athletes choose to pursue the legal field over the football field, the workload that comes with the profession forces most of them to leave their playing days in the past.

But throughout law school, his early years as an attorney, and even now as the owner of his own law firm, **Fred Thompson, '66**, has always found the time and energy to compete.

Thompson played football at Ottawa University and coached at Washburn, and once his college eligibility expired, he took to the handball and tennis courts, where he claimed singles, doubles, and mixed doubles city titles.

A 1966 *Topeka Capital-Journal* headline proclaimed, “No Matter What the Sport, He Can Do Better Than You.” That statement still rings true to this day.

The founder of Fred T. Thompson Law Office has qualified for spots in the National Senior Games each of the past 20 years and traveled this June to Birmingham, Ala., to race other cycling and triathlon qualifiers from all areas of the country.

“You’d think at my age you’d start to slow down at some point,” Thompson said, “but I’ve stayed active, not just because of the Massachusetts Games, but because I just like sports.”

The 76-year-old is in his third year as president of the Massachusetts Senior Games, which organizes competitions in 24 different sports for ages ranging from 50 all the way above 100.

“Part of it’s about competition,” Thompson said, “but it’s also about good health, and the benefits it brings to senior citizens.”

While racing at the national level goes a long way toward satiating Thompson's competitive hunger, swimming, biking, and running are missing one of the key elements from his football days – the possibility of taking punishing hits.

To fill that void, Thompson teams up for whitewater rafting races with 53-year-old Charley Brackett, who Thompson said “keeps us in the under-54 division despite my advanced age.” The duo has won Northeast Canoe Whitewater championships each of the past six years.

“It's something I took up 12 to 15 years ago,” Thompson said. “It's a change because you don't have to run too far. You just have to know what you're doing in the water or you'll tip over and get crushed.”

His willingness to tackle a variety of challenges proves beneficial for his law career as well. In the small town of North Adams, Mass., Thompson said he has taken on a wide range of cases.

“I specialize in labor relations,” he said. “I also do family law and criminal law. I know everybody in this town. I've been trying to retire for about five years, but I'm always off meeting and talking with people or doing something in the community.”

Although he's happy with the balance between sports and law now, it's possible neither one would have been a part of his life were it not for a chance meeting in his hometown that led him to the Midwest.

“I was working washing dishes in the summer,” Thompson said. “I met a fellow from Ottawa who saw me throwing the football around, and he told me to come to Kansas and play football. I was about to go into the Air Force, but three weeks later, I was going to Ottawa.”

After his collegiate playing days ended, Thompson taught undergraduate physical education classes at Washburn and spent two years as an assistant football coach, including the 1964 team that ranked fourth in the nation.

He attempted to make football his full-time profession by trying out for the New England Patriots in 1963. When his NFL dreams fell short, he enrolled at Washburn Law and continued offering his assistance with the Ichabods, often suiting up as a scout team quarterback for Tuesday and Wednesday night practices.

“I'm not that big of a guy,” Thompson said. “I got knocked around quite a bit out there, and at one point, I lost a front tooth.”

Thompson's time in law school followed an unconventional pattern, consisting of two spring semesters and four fall semesters. Some believed the reason was because Thompson wanted to stay on campus for another year of football, which he doesn't deny.

“I played two years in college and coached three years at Washburn,” he said. “Then we had a team in intramurals playing for Phi Alpha Delta. People kidded me that I went to law school for an extra year longer just so I could play another season. I'm chuckling here, but they're all true stories.”

“When you're lucky enough to live as long as me, you've got a lot of stories. I'm thankful for my time at Topeka and Washburn, and I'll never forget the Sunday morning touch football games in front of the student union. We used to have a ball.”

Whether football was entirely his motivation, milking his time at Washburn could have had dire consequences. Thompson's graduation came in February 1966, just four months before the Topeka tornado reshaped the future of Washburn and so many of its students.

“I dodged a bullet,” Thompson said. “It hit my neighbors' houses to the left and right but not mine.”

He went back to Massachusetts for Christmas the year of his graduation, not intending to stay, but was hired as a labor relations counselor for Sprague Electric, where he worked for nearly 20 years before moving to private practice in 1986. Although his visits to Kansas since then have been rare—Thompson's last trip to Washburn was for a 40th anniversary celebration of his 1964 conference championship team—he said he still carries with him fond memories on campus.

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