

# Senior athlete travels many roads in many ways

NICK GANDY

If Rodney Atherton's track and field training diary were a passport, he would be recognized as a world traveler.

After setting high jump, triple jump and pole vault records at the 2016 Florida Senior Games, in the 60-64 age group, he has traveled to six track and field meets around the state and country, sharing his Tallahassee-based talents.

In 2017, Atherton competed in the Emerald Coast Senior Games (Destin), Capital City Senior Games, Good Life Games (Pinellas County), The Villages Senior Games, the USATF Florida Championships, in Jacksonville, and the USATF Masters National Championships in Baton Rouge.

At the USATF National Championships, Atherton won a gold high jump medal, silver medals in the triple jump and pentathlon, and a bronze in pole vault. He also finished fourth in long jump, sixth in the 100-meter hurdles and ninth in discus. That's six events in four days.

His medal count could have been higher but during the 100-meter hurdles, he fell after hitting the final hurdle, got back up, and finished sixth place. "That was a good meet," he said.

He earned his pentathlon silver medal for his performance in five events; long jump, javelin, discus, 200 meter and 1500 meter runs. Atherton entered the event ranked second in the country in his age group, behind Noel Ruebel, a high school and collegiate track and field coach, and top ranked 60-64 age group pentathlon athlete. Atherton needed to finish five seconds ahead of Ruebel in the final event, the 1500 meter run, for the gold medal.

"He was on my tail the whole race but I couldn't pull away," Atherton said. "I finished just two seconds ahead of him for the silver medal."

He grew up in a military family and moved around quite a bit before settling in Tallahassee. He ran track at Godby High School, attended Tallahassee Community College and Florida State University before settling into a career with the State of Florida where he worked for 38 years.

He has a variety of hobbies besides track and field that put him in the public eye. Atherton is a member of the Capital Chordsmen, an a capella singing group that practices at the Tallahassee Senior Center. As a member of the Chordsmen, he also sings in Barber Shop Quartets. "I can sing just about anything, tenor, bass, lead, baritone," he said. "It helps to be versatile." Versatility is an understatement for Atherton.

Since retiring, he trains every morn-



Atherton pole volts!

ing at either the Florida A&M or Leon High School track. "I eat in the afternoon to regain calories burned in the morning. Then I do some weight training." His daily training diary keeps track of his accomplishments on the track and where he travels to meets.

After graduating from Godby High School, his versatile nature led him to take a break from track and field to become a member of the FSU Flying High Circus during his junior and senior years (1977-78). "I did some juggling, the slack wire and high wire and the quartet adagio," he said. "That's a routine where a couple of guys throw a girl around."

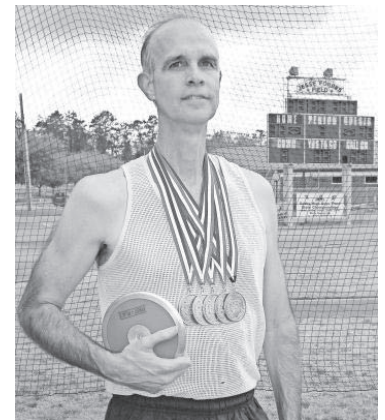
How does one go from track and field to a circus performer? His dad was such

a fan of the circus, his parents first date was to a circus performance. On their honeymoon, they traveled to Sarasota to visit the Ringling Museum. Within the last five years, Rodney's son followed in his dad's footsteps and also was a member of the FSU Circus doing juggling acts.

After graduating from college and spending two years as a circus performer, Atherton wondered, "How would I have done if I ran track?" He approached a Florida State track coach and was allowed to compete in a Metro Conference Tournament (FSU's conference affiliation at the time) as an unattached athlete. "My results would have earned All-Conference status," he said. "I was a le-

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Senior Athlete Rodney Atherton pictured with his many track & field medals.

gitimate contender."

Besides competing in five sport events like the pentathlon, he also competes in the 10-sport decathlons. He recently competed at a USATF meet in Jacksonville against Open Division athletes of all ages. His performance was the third best overall in Masters competition in his age group. With that as a motivator, he has set a goal to establish a new American record in 2018.

Standing just under six foot three inches tall, Atherton admits his height gives him an advantage in the jumping events and allows him to excel in the pole vault as he can place his hands higher on the pole. While he is very visible around town between his track and field training, as a Capital Chordsmen singer and his career with the State of Florida, it's his method of transportation that makes him most noticeable. "I'm the Segway guy," he proudly proclaims.