



THAT

PICKLEBALL MEMBER PROFILE

Number 19

By Laurie Einstein Koszuta

From Medals to Momentum: How PB Rekindled Jeannie LaBella's Competitive Fire

Jeannie LaBella, has long measured her life in miles and medals. The native of Swartz Creek, Michigan, her passion for long-distance running began after she and her husband moved to Southern California early in their marriage.

Who Am I?

“It was my identity,” Jeannie noted.

As a competitive runner, she trained with a running coach, pored over race statistics, and strategically decided to enter events where there was a good chance she'd make the podium.



Running & triathlon medals. Need to do PB tournaments to add medals!

“I'd look at past finishing times in my age group,” Jeannie said, “and think, ‘Yeah, I can place in this one.’”

Interestingly, Jeannie's decision to run a race came down to the actual medal. “I loved medals so much,” she laughed, “that I'd choose races based on how they look.”

Beyond Self

But her passion for running went beyond personal goals. As a mom of four, she started an after-school running club when her youngest, twin boys, were in second grade and ran it for seven years.





I've been spending so much time with my machine. I think I need to name him something other than Erne.

Something Is Different

However, over time, she began to feel that something was amiss.

“My times were getting slower, and I felt unusually sore,” Jeannie recalls. “My coach thought I might be overtraining.”

As the soreness got worse, Jeannie began to wonder if hyperparathyroidism, a medical condition that had been diagnosed ten years earlier, was catching up with her.

“Hyperparathyroidism is a condition where tiny parathyroid glands fail to regulate calcium properly. There’s no medication, only surgery,” Jeannie noted. “I delayed having surgery because my symptoms were mild and because it required a big incision across my neck.”

Surgery, Then Pain

However, the fatigue worsened. By the time she opted for surgery a decade later in 2019, the procedure had become minimally invasive. “I was glad I waited,” she says.

Jeannie returned to normal activities, including working out at the gym. One day, however, she lay down after returning from a family outing and realized she could barely move.

**RUNNING
WAS WHO
I WAS!**

“The next morning, just moving an inch made me scream,” Jeannie said. “The paramedics came, but they couldn’t even lift me without sedation. I spent five days in the hospital, undergoing every test you can imagine. I left the hospital with a walker and high-dose prednisone.”

Walking Again but ...

Although she regained her ability to walk, it became apparent that her days of long-distance running were behind her. “The most I could run was three miles, but I couldn’t handle the impact anymore. That was in 2021. I feel fine now.”

For Jeannie, giving up running was a loss that cut deep.

“Running is such a communal sport,” she said. “You train, race, and celebrate together. Letting go of that felt like letting go of who I was.”

Then Came Pickleball

That’s when a friend suggested she try pickleball.

“I thought pickleball was for old people,” Jeannie admits, “but I was desperate to move again, so I gave it a try. Now I’m obsessed.”

True to form, Jeannie dove in, enrolling in Pickleball 101, 201, and 301 classes. She now plays three to four times a week and drills regularly, often alongside her son, who helps her fine-tune her ball placement.

“Because I work part-time, I have ultimate flexibility,” says Jeannie, now 60 and living in Gainesville, Virginia. “If I have a bad game, I grab my machine and go work on whatever I struggled with.”

Playing With A Wheelchair Athlete

One of her most eye-opening moments came while playing a doubles game with a wheelchair athlete. It made her learn to adapt to their unique style of play.

“Wheelchair athletes are allowed two bounces,” Jeannie explained, “but my partner didn’t

need it; she was phenomenal. At first, I thought I’d have to cover for her, but she managed to get to everything. It changed my perspective. Never assume someone can’t cover the court.”

Despite her growing skill and clear passion, she has yet to enter a tournament.

“I want to enter some tournaments,” she admits. “But I get nervous and feel like I need the right partner and that it has to feel perfect before I take that leap.”

In the meantime, Jeannie is spreading her enthusiasm for the game. She’s a devoted fan of That Pickleball School, its community, and the coaching styles of Kyle, Tyler, and Zach.



Jeannie’s girlfriend Tracy, (far left) put a PB court in her front driveway. Now "Pickle Tuesdays" every Tuesday evening is a real thing! (Jeannie in blue)