

Firefighter, professor, runner, wine expert, powerlifter: Sunset District man didnâ??t want any idle time

Description

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At 5-foot-7 and about 160 pounds, Jim Gallagher is a lean, gentle man with a short gray ponytail. You might never guess he holds the international powerlifting record for competitors 80 and older. Heâ??s 86. When he was 83, Gallagher deadlifted 380 pounds, outstripping his nearest competitor by 99 pounds. Even Gallagher was surprised by his success. â??I certainly did not expect to be a world champion and record holder when I started training,â?• he said.

Thatâ??s Gallagher: accomplishing the unexpected. He spent 30 years as a San Francisco firefighter while holding down university gigs teaching psychology. A wine expert, he taught seminars and wrote columns on the subject. Why so busy?

â??I like a structured life,â?• he said. â??I donâ??t want a lot of idle time; thatâ??s the worst thing.â?•

Dedicated surfer

A native-born San Franciscan, Gallagher grew up in the Richmond District. â??Iâ??ve never been east of Divisadero,â?• he joked. The oldest of 12 children from what he called â??a white-collar, working-class family,â?• he worked his way through high school, while still finding time to surf before class.



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Jim Gallagher holds the international powerlifting record for competitors 80 and older. (Photo by Judy Goddess.)

Graduation from George Washington High School might have marked the end of his education, but classes for his job as a civilian radar tech in the California National Guard convinced him to continue. But how to support himself while going to school? A job with the San Francisco Fire Department was the answer.. â??A lot of guys joined the department because you could work evenings and surf days,â? • he said.

After completing an undergraduate and masterâ??s degrees from San Francisco state University, he went on for further graduate studies at the University of California-San Francisco. His ambition was to teach while continuing to be a firefighter.

Despite a professor telling him â??You canâ??t do that; they canâ??t be combined,â?• Gallagher went on to earn a doctorate from UCSF in 1973 and began teaching courses emphasizing the science in the study of humans and animals in USFâ??s psychology department.

Balancing both jobs was challenging. â??It was a very, very careful dance,â?• he said. â??I worked a lot of Sundays and holidays so I could get time off to teach during the midweek.â?• Though the fire department was supportive of his graduate studies, he never told anyone about his teaching career, worried it might violate the departmentâ??s rules on outside employment.

Gallagher began running in graduate school when he could no longer find time to chase the waves. â??It was the first time in my life I recognized that I needed exercise in my life to stay healthy.â?•

Exercising firefighters

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Seeing the benefits, Gallagher encouraged his firefighting buddies to join him. To make it more appealing, he started the Interstation Competition in 1978. The yearly interdepartmental race, which raises funds to combat cancer among firefighters, continues to this day. In 2014, it was renamed the Jim Gallagher Interstation Competition in honor of his work organizing and sustaining the run.

Gallagher took up powerlifting at 76 when his physical therapist suggested leg presses to address a pulled tendon. While other exercisers at USFâ??s Koret Health and Recreation Center marveled at his ability to lift the 220-pound bench and 600-pound leg presses. But, Gallagher knew he could do better. Three workouts a week paid off. At his first United States Powerlifting Association federation meet in December 2016, he dead-lifted 330 pounds

By 2018, he was the International Powerlifting League world champion, a title he retains.

â??I exercise for two hours â?? 12 sets, five minutes between sets â??three days a week,â?• Gallagher said. â??It all has to do with technique and leverage. When youâ??re working out and itâ??s heavy, youâ??re doing it wrong. If I worked to exhaustion, it would take longer to recover.â?•

When the pandemic forced the gym to close, he turned part of his garage into a gym.

There are three components to competitive powerlifting, Gallagher explained: In the dead-lift, a barbell with weights is lifted off the floor. In a bench press, itâ??s lifted while lying flat with feet on the floor. Itâ??s held behind the neck In a squat. â??I donâ??t think I ever squatted before I began powerlifting; itâ??s still the most difficult position for me,â?• he said.

Gallagher is surprised by the support heâ??s found at the weight-lifting tournaments. â??When an 85-year-old wants to break a record, itâ??s inspirational,â?• he said. â??The most gratifying part of lifting has been the warmth and support I find at the meets.â?•

Research & wine tasting

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When he wasnâ??t fighting fires, Gallagher was spending time in the lab designing and conducting scientific studies and field research on the survival tactics of animals. He explored why Japanese quail normally reject albino quail and how much alcohol affects the territorial behavior of fish in a tank ?

But the fish were not the only ones drinking. Gallagher and his lab mates often gathered for Friday afternoon wine tastings. But after purchasing wine so bad the trash collectors returned what had been left on the curb, he decided to enroll in a class on wine.



Ever the serious student, he soon found himself teaching seminars and writing a column for the Society of Medical Friends of Wine newsletter, which he still does and for which he is event manager and immediate past president. He also organized wine tastings at his Sunset District home, and belongs to

a wine-tasting group that with pandemic restrictions lifted meets monthly.

Gallagher retired from the classroom in 1990; retirement from the fire department came two years later. His said his health is good, despite 104 skin cancer surgeries, the price of surfing before wet suits and sunscreen.

He credits exercise and a mostly sensible diet supplemented with â??about 375 ml of good wine.â?•

He keeps up his training regime because thereâ??s always the next powerlifting meet â?? heâ??s heading to Las Vegas for one in July â?? and heâ??s collaborating on a video about powerlifting.

Category

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