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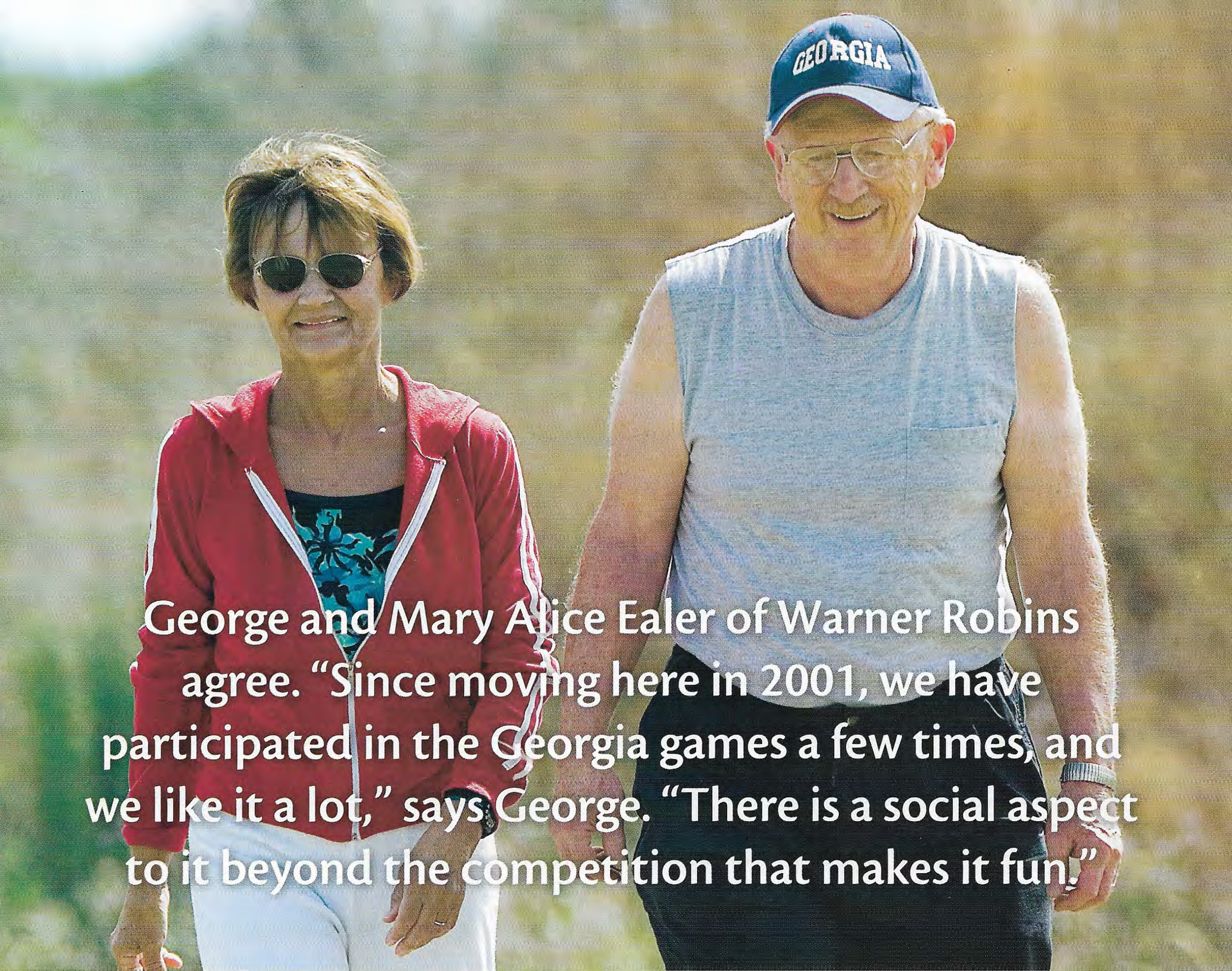
GO Seniors FOR THE GOLD in Georgia

by Tara Poole

photographs by Paul Abell

“I have always been competitive, but now I am competing against aging,” Mary Alice Ealer explains. “I have high blood pressure and the beginnings of osteoporosis so I compete to maintain my health. We like to travel and hike and do physical things. I want to stay physically and mentally active so I can have a lot of good years left to see and do things.”

- Mary Alice Ealer



George and Mary Alice Ealer of Warner Robins agree. “Since moving here in 2001, we have participated in the Georgia games a few times, and we like it a lot,” says George. “There is a social aspect to it beyond the competition that makes it fun!”

They come by the hundreds each year from every county in the state of Georgia. Some even come from neighboring states. They are some 500 to 600 senior adults who travel to Warner Robins each year to compete in an organized athletic event called the Georgia Golden Olympics.

A state-wide athletic competition for senior adults 50 years of age and older, the Georgia Golden Olympics provides senior adults of all skill levels an opportunity to participate in amateur sports competition and to learn new leisure activities while enjoying the benefits of physical activity. But most importantly, the Georgia Golden Olympics is an opportunity for these senior adults to have some fun and to meet new people.

According to Joyce Hutcherson, a 12-year member of the state planning committee that oversees the games, the Georgia Golden Olympics is more than just a competition, it is a social event. “People can’t wait to get here to renew friendships with

athletes they have been competing against for years,” she says. “It is as much a party as it is a competitive event.”

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Originally from New Jersey, the Ealer’s moved to Georgia to semi-retire and to be close to their son who is in the Air Force. “We had never done the Golden Olympics before because there wasn’t an event in our state,” explains Mary Alice. “We met all kinds of people from all over. Some of the events were nonqualifying and were just for fun. It was wonderful.”

The Georgia Golden Olympics feature a variety of activities and competitive events that allow senior adults of any age or physical ability to participate. “There are some 30 odd events so there is something for everybody and

every age group and skill level," comments Hutcherson. "Different age divisions and several levels of ability spread the competition out so there truly is something for everyone to participate in."

This year's Georgia Golden Olympics will take place September 27-30 at the Warner Robins Recreation Department, which also serves as the official registration site for the games. "Warner Robins is always the host site for the state games," comments Hutcherson. "For 20 years, the games were held at Robins Air Force Base until 9/11. After 9/11, the games were moved to the Recreation Department for security purposes."

Competitive events are broken down into female, male, standing, and sitting categories. The sitting category being for those whose physical mobility is dependent upon supportive devices such as wheelchairs or walkers. Events such as badminton, field and track, horseshoes, racquetball, shuffleboard, table tennis and tennis are offered in five-year divisions from age 50 to 90 plus years. Team sports are offered in age divisions ranging from 50 to 75 plus years and include basketball, bowling, and softball. All other sporting events are offered in 10-year age divisions from 50 years to 80 plus years of age and include archery, billiards, checkers, clock golf, cycling, race walking, swimming, and wheelchair racing. A registration fee of \$20 allows an athlete to enter three events and participate in special activities such as the ballroom dancing reception and the awards dinner. Extra costs such as rental fees apply for some competitions and for each additional event entered. The deadline to register for this year's Georgia Golden Olympics is August 1.

"There are both local and state-level senior Olympic competitions," explains Hutcherson. "Warner Robins has had a local Golden Olympics event for the past 11 years. The state event, also held in Warner Robins, is a true athletic competition, and with this year being a qualifying year for the 2007 Summer National Senior Games, medal winners at the state event will qualify to compete in the national games next summer in Louisville, Kentucky."

But for George and Mary Alice, there is more to the games than just the competition. "We have tried to stay physically active, and the games are another way to stay active and motivated," comments George. "I participate in the race walking events and Mary Alice participates in the walking and swimming events. She has actually qualified for the nationals before in swimming here in Georgia."

Mary Alice also enjoys the physical aspect of the games. "I have always been competitive, but now I am competing against aging," she explains. "I have high blood pressure and the beginnings of osteoporosis so I compete to maintain my health. We like to travel and hike and do physical things. I want to stay physically and mentally active so I can have a

lot of good years left to see and do things. My father is 96 and I have an aunt that is 104, so long life runs in my family."

Initiated by what was then the National Senior Olympics Organization (N.S.O.O.), the first National Senior Olympic Games were held in 1987 in St. Louis, Missouri, with 2,500 athletes competing. In 1989, the second National Senior Olympic Games hosted 3,500 senior adults and garnered national media coverage from the New York Times, E.S.P.N., and Good Morning America. Today, the N.S.O.O. is the National Senior Games Association (N.S.G.A.), a not-for-profit organization dedicated to motivating active adults to lead healthy lifestyles through the senior games movement. The main event of the N.S.G.A., the Summer National Senior Games – the Senior Olympics has grown to be one of the largest multi-sport events in the world with 12,000 senior athletes expected to compete in Louisville, Kentucky in 2007.

"The games are very much like the real Olympics," Hutcherson says. "There are opening ceremonies and a parade of athletes. It is a sight to behold, and you would not believe the level of competition at these games. Athletes from neighboring states come to the Georgia Golden Olympics to compete, particularly those from states that do not have a Golden Olympics program. These out-of-state athletes can qualify in Georgia for the national games and earn medals for their state without taking medal opportunities away from the Georgia athletes."

According to Hutcherson, the state event is a true community effort. "We lost a lot of volunteers after 9/11 because most of them were airmen with the Base and were deployed. Now, we have a small contingent of volunteers from the Base, with most of our volunteers coming from the Houston County community," she states. "We also have wonderful cooperation from the Warner Robins city government with police protection and so forth as well as other community organizations such as Houston Healthcare which provides ambulance coverage for some of the events. Local restaurants also give discounts to the athletes. The Georgia Golden Olympics is a great economic boost for the Houston County community."

For Mary Alice, the games were a chance for her to get involved in a physical activity and to meet people in the community. "It is so worthwhile just to meet new people," she says. "I encourage all senior adults to give the games a try and support the program. Don't hesitate because you think you're not good enough to compete. You don't have to be an expert. There is something for everyone to participate in, even as a volunteer. I bet you if they come do it, they will be back the next year."

Tara Poole is a freelance writer and public relations consultant.