

LIFE LIFESTYLES

NOT THE RETIRING TYPE

Lifelong athletes still feel the thrill

BY CAROLYN SCOTT KORTGE

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In Track City USA, we tend to expect athletic headlines — top performances that sustain the legendary status of those who train and race at Hayward Field. We glow in the radiance of achievements like those tallied by the UO's women track teams this year.

I bask in the energy of those successes even though it's been 20 years since I stepped on a track as an athlete. Something inside billows up, resurgence of the urge to push my limits in an athletic challenge.

It's a brief temptation — a flash that fades quickly these days. But for Suzy Wojcik, that flash fuels a passion that has propelled a lifetime of athletic competition and national status as a master's athlete.

"I've been an athlete all my life," she says. "I have pretty good health — a few minor issues, but I feel pretty good for 75."

Good enough, apparently, to prove that age is no barrier when it comes to record-setting performances. Bumped this year into a new, 75 to 79 age category, the Eugene woman has been knocking off records at regional meets and proving that getting older is sometimes getting better.

“It’s the one time you can feel good about being older because you move into the youngest level of your age group,” she explains.

Going into the National USA Track and Field Masters Outdoor Championships — which started Thursday and runs through Sunday in Baton Rouge, La. — Wojcik was ranked No. 2 worldwide in her age group in the superweight throw (16 pounds) and No. 9 in the weight throw (9 pounds). She also competes in hammer throw.

Those weights took on meaning when I considered a 10-pound bag of sugar.

“It’s funny — I can’t train as hard as I used to, but I love it out there,” she says. “I just love the competition, the adrenalin, the challenge and the fact that you are with peers that also care about their health and are fighting the arm chair.”

Rebecca Mitchell understands the drive that keeps Wojcik on the field, hurling heavy weights. It’s the same passion that keeps Mitchell running sprints at 63.

Both Mitchell and Wojcik have been representing Oregon Track Club Masters at the annual national Masters competition in Baton Rouge.

A year ago Wojcik thought her life as an athlete might be winding down. It wasn’t so much the armchair that called her as the 1987 Westfalia Vanagon that she and husband, Jerry Wojcik, roam the West in.

At the top of the 70- to 74-year-old competition group, she was throwing against women younger and stronger in her age group. She dropped out of competition and retired as a track official after 20 years of volunteer service. She hadn’t counted on the invigorating renewal a birthday would bring.

“I thought I was done with competition, but then I hit 75 and I thought, Well ... if I start training now, maybe I can do nationals next year. I guess it’s just in my blood.”

Weights drop a few pounds when athletes advance from 74 to 75. Wojcik couldn’t resist the temptation to test her form with this season’s lighter implements. The results banished thoughts of retirement.

Impressive performances at Masters track meets this year in Seattle and Portland and at the Hayward Classic in Eugene launched her into the athletic stratosphere with world rankings in super weight and weight throw field events.

Both Wojcik and Mitchell were familiar faces on the track back in the 1990s when I took a spin at competitive racewalking. I loved it too — the adrenalin, the full engagement of body, mind and spirit in a physical challenge.

Enthusiasm outpaced physical endurance for me. Eventually, I slowed to “spirited walking” and found my stride in teaching rather than competing. But the athlete in me still recognizes the personal challenge that motivates athletes like Wojcik and Mitchell.

During her early life in Santa Rosa, Calif., Wojcik found the challenge in swimming competitions. She earned high school letters in volleyball and basketball. She played a fine round of golf.

It wasn't until she came to Eugene that her athletic interests expanded to include track and field. The inspiration came at the same time as mine — the 1989 World Association of Veteran Athletes, known as WAVA, meet that brought hundreds of athletes 35 and older to Eugene.

Like Wojcik, Mitchell recalls an active, athletic childhood. She has medals from grade school track meets and memories of hours spent on hopscotch and monkey bars.

During early marriage years, she and husband, John, both worked for the U.S. Forest Service, spending hours on mountain trails. That was when she started to jog. Jogging led to 10K road races and a passion was born.

It wasn't until she was 40 that she found the courage to set foot on a track for a competitive sprint.

Mitchell's first meet was an informal 1994 summer event hosted by Oregon Track Club Masters at South Eugene High. When a runner 20 years her senior beat her in the 100 meter sprint, Mitchell drew strength from the potential she saw ahead for herself — a physical activity to last a lifetime.

"It's inspiring to me, running with women who are older and stronger than me," she says. "It has been so good for me. I have become a more confident person."

In the years since 1981 when she and her family moved to Eugene, Mitchell credits running with easing her through some of life's hard times — her mother's early death and then the loss of her own daughter.

It has propelled her out of the shyness that made social interaction uncomfortable much of her life.

"I think it's a balance for me — it gets me out, gets me social. Otherwise I don't spend that much time around people. I am at a level now in athletic meets that I know a lot of people, and I like the camaraderie."

Now retired from 28 years with the Eugene Parks and Recreation Department, she trains at least two hours a day to prepare for competition in 100-, 200- and 400-meter races.

"There are no shortcuts," she says.

"I'm disciplined so it's not hard for me to train. I don't let anything stop me. I love being outside. You won't find me in a gym."

For many years, Mitchell worked with local coaches to tweak her performance in competition and boost her confidence.

"It took so long to get over the nerves," she says. "But I don't get nervous anymore. When you have done something long enough, you become more confident."

At 63, Mitchell has achieved All American standards in two sprint distances and ranks 11th nationally in her age group.

But it isn't medals or records Mitchell sets her sights on when she enters a meet like the USATF National Masters competition. Confidence and camaraderie are the rewards she pursues on the track.

"I don't have the competitive edge," she says. "I don't look at a meet as competition — I look at it as the icing on the cake after all the training."

"I'm never thinking about beating people. I'm just out there to do my best."

Carolyn Scott Kortge, of Eugene, is a former Register-Guard editor and writer, and author of "The Spirited Walker." Contact her at spiritedwalker@gmail.com.