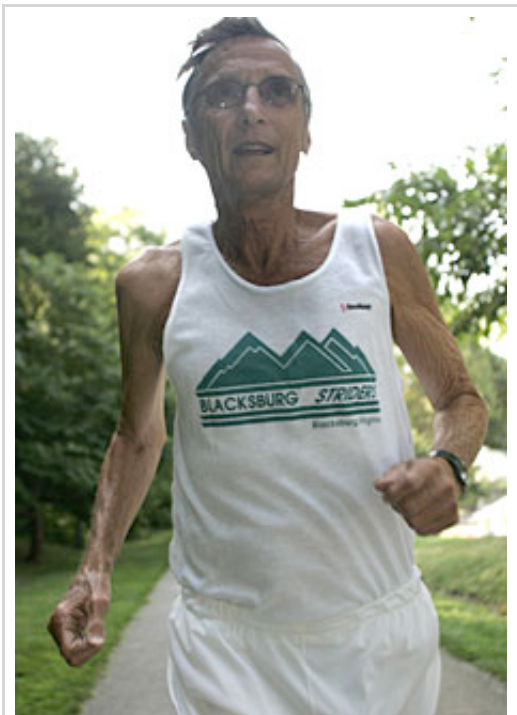


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'A reputation for being competitive'

A drive to win keeps Blacksburg's John Hosner, 81, running like a man half his age.

By Hart Fowler



Matt Gentry | The Roanoke Times

Hosner, 81, of Blacksburg runs on the Huckleberry Trail in Blacksburg. He holds the world record in 1500 meters and in the outdoor mile for his age group.

BLACKSBURG -- Running five miles in the feverish noon heat of early August is not for the faint of heart.

But for 81-year-old Blacksburg runner John Hosner, it is just part of the 30-mile-a-week routine he has been running for more than 40 years, which frankly makes the word "elderly" not quite fit the bill for this retired head of the Department of Wildlife and Forestry, now known as the College of Natural Resources, at Virginia Tech.

With a handful of world records for various age brackets and no signs of slowing down anytime soon, Hosner's heart is still stronger than many runners half his age.

For Hosner, it seems to be his competitive fire -- one that seems to still burn as hot as any noon sun -- that drives him.

"I like competition, and that's one of the reasons I still run," said Hosner, looking refreshed just a few hours after completing a five-mile run. "It really gets my adrenaline flowing. Some quit, but I'm still running."

Hosner, who has been an avid athlete in many sports throughout his life, said he became hooked on competitive running at age 50, when he set a state record for his age bracket at a race in Charlottesville.

Thirty-one years later, he holds world records in the 1500 meters, 60-and-older age bracket, and in the mile for the 75-90 age bracket, according to U.S. Track & Field.

Through the years, he has earned several state, national and cross-country course records for events ranging from the 1500 meters to the half-marathon.

He has also run in both the New York and Boston marathons, and he earned a sponsorship by Adidas at age 60.

For Hosner's running partners, there is one particular race that really gives a glimpse into his competitive nature.

It occurred at the annual 10-mile race in Lynchburg 20 years ago, a race known for a grueling mile-and-a-half ascent to the finish.

"He was 61 and had just got back from China and he wasn't doing very well," said Arthur Snoke, 66, who has run with Hosner for 30 years, including alongside him in the Lynchburg race. "He was really suffering."

Bob Benoit, 72, remembered the scene at the end of the race.

"He passed out at the finish line," he said, adding that they immediately hooked Hosner up to an IV and took his temperature. The thermometer read 108 degrees.

Benoit said Hosner's first question when he came to was did he set the age group record for that temperature.

Hosner concluded: "I guess I do have a reputation for being competitive."

Hosner's running partners' stories regarding his complete dedication to winning are nearly as numerous as Hosner's many records.

Benoit also recalled a race in Buena Vista where Hosner made a wrong turn, got lost, yet still managed to persevere and win his age bracket.

And Snoke remembered a disputed elbow between Hosner and a runner that allowed him to finish the Draper Mile a stride ahead of a much younger runner.

Hosner will not be competing in the Draper Mile this weekend, but not because his inner flame is flickering.

"I just don't have any competition. There's no age bracket for me," he said. The Draper Mile's top age bracket is 65 and older.
