



Running marathons has opened Barbara Freedman up to a new world.

OFF THEIR ROCKERS

Over 40? That's no reason (or excuse) for not playing sports. Meet some older athletes competing in high-calibre Masters events—or just for the sake of it—and find out what motivates them to keep on training.

BY DIANE SELKIRK

MOST OF us know regular exercise is good for the body, but competition can be good for the soul. “I found the real me when I started to race,” says Barbara Freedman of Montreal, who credits running marathons with opening her up to a new world. “I learned that things I previously thought were impossible were possible.”

The Dawson College dean, now 56, took up racing in her late 40s when she

wanted a different experience from running on the treadmill at the gym. Her biggest worry about her first 10-K race was finishing dead last, but she didn’t—and she used that success to propel her into her next race. She soon found she loved the camaraderie and the competition. “I kept signing up for 10-K races and one time I mistakenly signed up for a 20 K. When I finished, I thought: I guess I’m a distance person.”

Freedman’s not the only athlete racing past the age barrier. At just about any sports competition these days

there's more grey hair than ever before; older athletes well into their "has-been" years are putting themselves out there for one more round—or even for the first time. And they're competitive.

Consider that in the early days of the Boston Marathon, a mecca for the running crowd, there weren't enough older runners to form separate age-group categories. The Masters division wasn't officially recognized until 1975 and it was another three years—when a third of the 4,760 racers were over 40—that the veteran and senior divisions were added. In 2007, of the nearly 24,000 people who registered for the race, 13,279 were over 40, including 120 who were older than 70.

Freedman, then 55, was among them. It's hard to top Boston, but Freedman did, deciding to race back-to-back marathons last spring: Paris one day, Boston the very next. First, she confirmed the feat was logistically possible, then she stated her goal out loud. Her friends were incredulous at first; then they began to support her. Running what she calls her "ultra-marathon with a break," Freedman proved to herself that her initial defeatist impulse could be overcome with effort and positive thinking. "I went into Paris knowing I couldn't allow negative thoughts during the race. Conditions were incredibly difficult, but I concentrated on how beautiful it was to be running in Paris."

She did it, finishing each marathon comfortably in under four hours. A few months later, she ran 100 kilometres nonstop—part of her training

for a 161-kilometre race near San Francisco in August. Though the trails were rocky and uphill, Freedman completed the gruelling race in less than 31 hours.

For Freedman, long-distance competition deepened her self-confidence and met a need she hadn't known she had. "I sometimes wonder who I would have become," she says, "if I hadn't taken that first step and raced."

WITH MANY sports, opportunities for competition used to end when what was perceived as our fittest and fastest

years came to a close. But science proves that exercise is one of only two things that can truly slow the aging process (the other is healthy eating). Research shows that without exercise, muscle mass diminishes. One study found women's muscle mass decreases by about 22 percent, and men's by 23 percent, between the ages of 30 and 70. But a 1994 study of strength training in frail older adults, published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, showed a ten-week strength-training program yielded a 113 percent increase in strength and a 2.7 percent increase in muscle mass in the thigh.

There is a growing recognition that people of all ages thrive on competition, and organized sports have been rising to the challenge. In Manitoba, for example, registration in the competitive Manitoba Major Soccer League doubled between 1998 and 2006, to

STACKING UP

Most older competitors probably won't beat elite athletes in their prime, but their race times are far from shabby:

- Barbara Freedman, at 55, ran the 2007 Boston Marathon in 3 hours, 46 minutes and 37 seconds, while the fastest female, 33-year-old Olympian Lidiya Grigoryeva, finished in 2 hours, 29 minutes and 18 seconds.

- At the 2005 World Masters Games in Edmonton, Canadian André François, 41, ran the 100-metre dash in 11.56 seconds; at the 2004 Olympics in Athens, American Justin Gatlin won the 100-metre event with a time of 9.85 seconds.

- Steven O'Brien, 41, from Brownsburg, Que., finished the 400-metre dash at the Masters

Games in 53.48 seconds, while U.S. Olympian Jeremy Wariner completed the same feat in Athens in 44 seconds.

- Edmonton's Gail McGinnis, 39, won the 100-metre freestyle swimming event at the Masters Games with a time of 1:05.26; her Olympic counterpart, Australian Jodie Henry, clocked in at 53.84 seconds.

just over 4,000 adult players. Masters player Rob Del Grosso says that while not all of the players are in the over-35 group, this age category has seen the biggest increase: "Just two years ago, we didn't even have a Masters league. But now we have six teams, and last October we ran the Western Masters and Classics tournament."

Competitive soccer has been growing among Manitoba's women, too. As coach Lesley Milne explains, "The boom is partly due to soccer moms who decided to lace up their own boots and show their stuff." In the five years since the province's women's classics league was established, it has expanded to ten outdoor and 18 indoor teams.

Beyond soccer, the Canada Senior Games have also been increasing in popularity since their inception in 1996, when about 350 people came to-

gether in Regina to participate in sports ranging from swimming to ice hockey. This year, the games in Dieppe, N.B., are expected to draw as many as 1,000 athletes.

Internationally, the first World Masters Games, held in Toronto in 1985, attracted 8,305 athletes from 61 countries who participated in 22 sports. In 2005, more than twice that number came from 88 countries to compete in the games, in Edmonton.

Joanne Fath was one of those who stood on the Masters podium that year. Winning medals is nothing new for the massage therapist from Black Diamond, Alta.—except the last time she did it was in 1963.

Before marriage, kids and a career, Fath, now 62, was a world-class speed skater, with her sights set on the Olympics. "I loved competing; when it



Olympic gold-medalist Derek Porter discovered being an elite athlete can be more demanding the second time around.

was over, I felt like a part of my life was done," she says. She stayed fit with recreational skating, but always remembered the excitement of having a goal to train for. When her brother told her the Masters Games were coming to Edmonton, she decided to prepare for cycling, a sport she'd last participated in while cross-training for speed skating.

For six weeks, she rode through the hills near her home on an old, bor-

rowed bike. "My muscles remembered how to work, but more than anything, my mind remembered how to compete," she recalls. She says she used the skills from her earlier training to focus on the positive and ignore the people who said she couldn't do it. She took home two bronze medals from the games.

WHITNEY SEDGWICK, a psychologist at the University of British Columbia who specializes in sports psychology, says older athletes bring an expanded range of life skills to the competition. Mental skills like time management, the ability to set realistic goals and an understanding of the importance of needs such as nutrition and friendship can help older athletes compensate for the gradual loss of their physical edge. And the way athletes view competition can change over time, she says: "It becomes less about

winning. An athlete can finish last but still meet his goals and feel successful." Sedgwick says this broader definition of success is reflected in an athlete's desire to participate and compete just for the sheer pleasure of it all.

Dwayne Sandall of Winnipeg discovered this desire first-hand. In 2001, at the age of 34, the new-media designer was overweight and in a failing marriage. Running became both a way to

lose weight and take time for himself.

Sandall credits goal setting with helping him to get fit. He started out simply trying to run to local landmarks. Soon he was racing, which "provides an outlet for a different, edgier side of my personality." He's always setting more ambitious goals; next up is the 161-kilometre McNaughton Park Trail Run in Illinois. The long-distance trail runner is now 45 pounds lighter and in the best shape of his life, but despite rigorous training and giving up his Whopper-a-day habit, Sandall says he's rarely in medal contention: "I'm not a natural-born athlete."

DESPITE the fun he had competing, Derek Porter discovered being an elite athlete can be more demanding the second time around. When he first won Olympic gold, most of his current competitors were learning their ABC's. In 1992, at the age of 24, the Vancouver-based athlete and his eight-man team rowed to gold at the Summer Games in Barcelona. Four years later, in Atlanta, Porter won silver in the single sculls competition. After being shut out of the medals in Sydney in 2000, he hung up his oars. "I felt like I had accomplished everything I set out to do," he says.

The feeling didn't last. After watching the Games in Athens from the sidelines, Porter, now 40, says he missed the excitement. He decided to test the waters again and soon discovered what

many older athletes are finding out: He was still competitive at an elite level. "My body doesn't recover as quickly as it once did, but I can rely on experience and technique," he says.

After earning a spot on the national team in May, Porter and his partner Jake Wetzel headed to the World Cup in Austria in preparation for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. But the duo posted a disappointing tenth place, and Porter believes his efforts to balance his chiropractic business, a new relationship and a full-time training schedule contributed to their lacklustre showing. "I have no doubt I could race in Beijing, but getting there would be a bit too much to sacrifice on the work and relationship front," he says. Instead, he opted to drop off the national team and concentrate on triathlons.

For many athletes, nothing can replace the thrill of competition. It gives their training focus and structure; it brings teammates and coaches into their lives. It allows them to tap into themselves and push beyond preconceived limits. Competition can be such a rich experience that even if athletes think they're done, they can find themselves back in the game for just one more round. Even if they don't finish first, it seems they still win.

Perhaps Porter speaks for most older, competitive athletes. "It's not about beating people," he says. "It's about getting the most out of myself." ■

