

## Racing Against the Clock Marathon runners over 50 take off

By: [John Hanc](#) | Source: AARP Bulletin Today | October 22, 2009



*Former Olympians Joan Benoit Samuelson and Frank Shorter are proving that older runners can still go the distance—and fast. Benoit Samuelson photo courtesy Brightroom; Shorter photo by Ronen Zilberman/AP Photo*

In 1970 only one runner in his 50s crossed the finish line of the [New York City Marathon](#). Four decades later, as marathon running has become astoundingly popular, the percentage of runners over 50 has raced ahead of the pack.

It started with the “running boom”—when a generation of otherwise sedentary American men were inspired by Frank Shorter’s gold medal in the 1972 Olympic marathon to lace up their sneakers and take to their neighborhood streets.

Today, boomers are swelling the ranks of marathons across the country.

According to Running USA, a nonprofit that tracks running trends, the number of 50-

plus marathon finishers has more than doubled, from 32,500 in 1992 to 76,500 in 2008. Older runners made up about 18 percent of the 425,000 marathon finishers in the United States last year. "These runners are part of the generation who helped start the first running boom back in the 1970s," says Ryan Lamma, a researcher for Running USA. But, he notes, a large part of the growth also comes from newcomers who are taking up running at an older age. Boomers are pushing all kinds of boundaries, he says, "and I think that's what we're seeing now in the marathon."



### Older runners stretching their limits

At this Sunday's [Marine Corps Marathon](#) in Washington, D.C., the country's fifth-largest marathon, about 15 percent of the approximately 20,000 runners will be age 50 and older. Each year, says race director Rick Nealis, more and more runners join that category.

Road races typically give awards to the top finishers in different age categories, usually broken down in five-year increments. In 2000, the oldest category at the Marine Corps Marathon was 65 and over. Now, because of the burgeoning number of finishers in their 60s and 70s, awards are given to the top runners ages 65 to 69, 70 to 74, and 75 and above.

The change is even more dramatic in the world's largest 26.2 mile race, the New York City Marathon. Only 55 people finished the first race in 1970, which was run in loops around Central Park. Today some 40,000 runners are expected to finish the marathon, which winds through the five boroughs of the city. In the first marathon, no women finished the race and only one runner in his 50s crossed the finish line. Last year, 20 percent of the 38,000 runners who crossed the finish line were age 50 and over. "It's incredible," says Mary Wittenberg, CEO of the [New York Road Runners](#), organizers of the marathon. "It proves that age does not have to be a barrier. If you do the training and take care of yourself, and get a training group around you, you can do anything you want to."

Among the runners age 50-plus who are expected to compete in this year's New York

race on Nov. 1 is a name even nonrunners should recognize: Joan Benoit, the winner of the first women's Olympic marathon at the 1984 games in Los Angeles. The image of the pixyish Benoit, waving an American flag and running a victory lap around the Los Angeles Coliseum, was one of the most memorable moments of those Olympics. In crossing that finish line a quarter-century ago, Benoit helped prove that women—who had for decades been barred from competing in the marathon—could go the distance, too. Now Joan Benoit Samuelson, 52, is helping prove that older runners, male or female, can still go the distance—and fast.

Running in New York to celebrate the 25th anniversary of her Olympic win, she hopes to finish in about 2 hours 50 minutes—a far cry from her gold medal-winning time in the Olympics but still a time most marathoners of either sex and any age could only dream of accomplishing. But it's not just former gold medalists who can achieve greatness at the long distances: In 2003, [Ed Whitlock](#) of Milton, Ontario, became the first man over age 70 to run a marathon in under three hours at the Toronto Waterfront Marathon.

The years don't seem to slow him down. In September, at age 78, Whitlock came in 304th of 3,411 runners in a half marathon in 1 hour 37 minutes.

### **Celebrating 50 years in 26.2 miles**

Benoit Samuelson, who lives in Freeport, Maine, is conscious of the growing number of her contemporaries who are taking the 26.2-mile challenge. She says when they reach 50 many people think they need to do something special to prove they aren't old. "For many people over 50," she says, "this is that something."

And running is indeed a sport that can be discovered and enjoyed later in life. Case in point: Mimi Dannel of Washington, D.C., who commemorated her 50th birthday two years ago by running her first marathon. At first, she expected to find herself running with young super-athletes. But on her training runs along the bike paths at home, and finally on race day at the 2007 Nike Women's Marathon in San Francisco, Dannel was bowled over by the diversity of the marathon population. "There are people of all shapes, sizes and ages, every demographic group you can imagine," she said.

Dannel, who raised money through the marathon for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society (she collected over \$8,000 for the charity), finished the marathon in October 2007—two months before she hit the half-century mark.

Now, two years later, she is going long again, this time in her hometown 26.2-miler, the Marine Corps Marathon. Dannel enjoys the camaraderie of marathon running and

the benefits that regular training provides. "Competition is absolutely not my primary motivation," she says.

Her goals for the long run stand in stark contrast to those of another over-50 marathon runner from the D.C. area, who is also doing the Marine Corps Marathon—albeit for the 25th time.

Jay Jacob Wind of Arlington, Va., ran the first Marine Corps Marathon in 1978. He has gone on to complete in 24 more, part of a staggering career total of 125 marathons. Running 26.2 miles, he says, "is what defines me," and unlike Dannel, who is happy to finish with a smile on her face, Wind is still trying to run like his last name—hoping to finish well below the median national finish time for men.

### **No finish line**

While he's slowed down from his personal best time of 2 hours 27 minutes, Wind clocks times that are still exceptional, especially for a 59-year-old. "I take pride in excelling at the marathon at a relatively advanced age," he says, "even though I don't think of myself as advancing because I'm running as well as many of the 20- and 30-year-olds."

Whether the goal is competition or completion and camaraderie, being able to run a marathon means exercising regularly and eating properly—adopting a fitness-oriented lifestyle. "Baby boomers understand the benefits of our sport," Benoit Samuelson says. "They feel good, sleep well, they're productive. They're going to run as long as they can in order to maintain all the good that comes from running."

Of course, you don't have to run 26.2 miles to get the benefits of physical activity. And for many people, old or young, other activities—walking, swimming, bicycling or even shorter-distance running—may provide more enjoyment and similar health benefits. However, marathon training can help older adults stick with a program, by providing a focus and structure for their training.

"It gives them goals to shoot for, something to train for," says exercise scientist Hank Williford, a specialist in senior fitness at Alabama's Auburn University-Montgomery. Nor does he see reasons for experienced fiftysomething marathon runners to stop anytime soon. "As long as they don't have orthopedic problems or injuries, they should be able to continue. They'll have to start slowing down at some point, but if they train properly and take care of themselves, that point can be delayed."

How long? Well, Wind has no plans to abandon his relentless pursuit of 26.2 miles—and

Dannel, who has lost 30 pounds since last spring, is already making plans for races in 2010. Even a marathon gold medalist can continue to reach for new goals in the marathon. "When I was younger, Nike had this poster of me that said 'There Is No Finish Line,'" Benoit Samuelson says. "I didn't understand that then, but I do now. After every race, there are always new goals, and always new reasons to keep going."

## **So You Want to Run a Marathon?**

Follow these training tips from Walter Bortz, M.D., professor emeritus at Stanford University Medical School.

- **Runner first, marathoner second:** "Don't leap in a marathon if you're not even active," says Bortz. Start by walking; and gradually intersperse your walking with short bouts of running. When you can complete a 5K race, set your sights on a marathon.
- **Quality, not quantity:** Some marathon programs advocate running six or seven days a week. Not a good idea, especially for older adults. Focus on quality: Coach Hal Higdon's [program for senior marathoners](#) calls for running no more than three days a week.
- **Don't skip the long run:** Work up to a run that brings you close to 26.2 miles. This is the key run of the week. Increase the distance of that weekly long run slowly, but don't compromise. You should be able to cover at least 20 miles a few weeks before the marathon.
- **Take care of your body:** Stretching and strengthening become even more important for aging joints and muscles. Make sure you do your cross training; hit the weight room, take the yoga class and get plenty of rest.
- **Talk to your doc:** Especially if you have some preexisting health condition, by all means have your physician check it out before you get started.
- **Ignore the naysayers:** The idea that you're "too old" to run a marathon is silly, as evidenced by the thousands of 50-plus men and women who are regularly doing them. "Age is not an excuse, it is an advantage," Bortz says. He should know. Bortz turns 80 on March 20, 2010, and plans to run his 40th career marathon in Boston the following month.

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*New York-based writer John Hanc, a contributing editor for Runner's World magazine, will be running Sunday's Marine Corps Marathon—his 27th marathon.*