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MARGREET DIETZ

POWERED FROM WITHIN

STORIES ABOUT RUNNING
& TRIATHLON

Powered From Within

Powered From Within:

Stories About Running & Triathlon

Margreet Dietz

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First edition

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ISBN 978-0-9865154-2-2

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CHAPTER 5

Runners tend to be determined people, and for better or worse, follow their hearts. Often it turns out for the better and in Ron Stuart's case it made him an age group world champion. In 1993 Ron, who is now 75, was training for his first appearance at the World Masters Athletics Championships in Miyazaki, Japan. He told his coach, Stan Johnston, that he had entered the 2000m steeplechase, 5000m, 10,000m and the 8km cross country events.

"Stan looked at me very seriously and said, 'At your age and if you wanted to continue running, do you think it is a good idea to do the steeple? If I was you, I'd pull out of the steeple'. I said, 'Oh well righto, if that's what you think I should do'."

On his way to Japan, Ron won his age group in a 5000m race in Hong Kong in about 19:02, also beating the people in the age group below his. In Japan, he faced some world champions in the 5000m, 10,000m and the cross country. "I wasn't too good in that," Ron says.

"I hadn't run in the main oval [for any of those events] so I thought I'd like to do that and the steeple was on the last day in the main stadium. Having done no specified training for the steeple, I went over the night before and I found I could get over the steeples. I didn't try the water jump. I thought, well I can remember how that was done. I thought I'll go in the steeple and I won't tell Stan."

Ron won the 2000m steeple in 7:51:96, setting an Australian 60+ age record. "When I came back home, I had to confess to Stan that much against his wishes I'd run the steeple. It just shows the standard wasn't very good if without specific training I could just do that."

Ron's running career started several decades earlier, when he won a scholarship to Scotch College in Melbourne. Each student had to run every athletic event and won points if they passed certain standards.

"If you got the A-grade standard, you got 2 points and you were also automatically included in the training squad for the school athletic team. I was hopeless at the 100m. I tried to duck the two judges at the end. They'd stand and then bring the rope down to stop anyone who was over time. Even though I was short I was unable to get under the rope. So I missed the 100m and the 200m. A couple of times I made the 440m. I certainly could get the 880m and I romped in the mile. I passed the A-grade standard and I was in the school athletic team. I ran with the Old Boys and for about five years I was unbeaten in cross country over a range of distances from about 3 miles to about 10."

Ron trained and raced with a who's who of Australian running. He was coached by Percy Cerutti as were John Landy, Merv Lincoln and Dave Stephens. "I'd beat Merv Lincoln in the university 3-mile state championship. I used to beat Dave

Stephens, the Flying Milko, until he went and stayed six months with Emil Zatopek,” Ron says.

Ron credits Percy with teaching him to run properly and to train to the best of his ability. “For example, he would sometimes have us running around the park trying to be like butterflies. The idea was to flit over the ground just touching down momentarily, not hitting the ground like a draught horse and then pushing off again. His training methods were well in advance of anyone else at that time and I learnt much from him - I don't get the injuries that many of my younger friends get.”

Percy demanded a lot of his athletes as Ron experienced first-hand. “He pushed us hard. I fell down the stairs at work one time and hurt my leg enough to think of missing training that night. However I went to tell him what happened and he said, ‘You broke your leg did you?’ I said, ‘No.’ He then said that I should only do 14 repetition 440s at 70 sec instead of the 20 reps he had set,” Ron says.

Ron studied accounting but Percy wanted him to focus on running. “He set goals for everyone and if he thought you were not giving it everything you had then he lost interest in you. When he wanted me to stop doing my part-time university course so that I could train more intensively to become a world champion, I refused as I said I could not live by just running. If you won a prize worth the equivalent of \$5 in those days you

were disqualified for life from all competition as a professional. He then asked me to train with someone else. And John Landy had the same problem with Perce. He was starting with university and Perce wanted him to stop and he said no, so Percy told Landy to go too.”

While selected for the training squad preparing for the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, Ron hurt his leg in training and didn’t make the team. He then contracted polio in 1958 which ended his early running ambitions. Ron joined Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA) as a letter boy and after graduating in the late 1950s, he moved to the bank’s economic department. Ron married Ruth in 1960. That same year CBA was split into Commonwealth Banking Corporation and Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) and Ron was transferred to the RBA in Sydney.

The Stuarts didn’t know Sydney and Ruth looked at more than 400 houses before they chose one in Mosman, disregarding their agent’s advice that that was a dreadful suburb. In 1965 the RBA transferred Ron to Papua New Guinea where they stayed five years.

Then Ron was interviewed by the International Monetary Fund, which seconded him to Swaziland in 1978. So the family moved to the kingdom bordered by South Africa and Mozambique. After they returned to Australia four years later, Ruth was diagnosed with breast cancer. The IMF asked Ron

whether they'd be willing to go to The Gambia in West Africa. "Despite my wife's tenuous health she said, 'Yes, yes, let's go.' So we went. I was to assist in floating the currency and rescheduling the national debt which we were successful in doing." As Ruth's health deteriorated they went back to Sydney. "I'd retired at this stage to look after her at home. After she died [in mid-1991] I found that I was getting puffed putting my slip-on shoes on."

Ron's daughter Natasha tried to convince him to join a gym. She was very persistent and finally Ron relented. He took circuit classes led by Tani Ruckle, silver medallist for Australia at the Auckland Commonwealth Games in 1990. That's when he met Stan Johnston who took him on runs and became his running coach.

Soon Ron began winning his age group in fun runs and he went to the National Veterans Athletics Championships in Adelaide where he competed in the 5000m and 10,000m. One of the competitors in the race was Ron Young from Victoria. The two Rons had competed against each other in the early 50s.

"He ran for St Stephens and I ran for Old Scotch - mostly 3000m steeplechase and 3 mile races. He told me to keep running and we could have a good competition the next year. So with Stan's help I trained hard and we raced the next year in Sydney when I did 18:35 for the 5000m. I don't think Ron [Young] ran the 2000 steeplechase which I won in 7:58."

The increase in training also helped the then 63-year-old Ron win his age group in the Sydney Morning Herald half marathon in 84:54. "Since that time we have run against each other at the nationals and we enjoy it immensely. I was really tired in an 8km cross country in Sydney that year and I had been running just behind Ron for the first 4km - we had to run two laps - and I was thinking that I was too tired to do another lap and might pull out.

"However I noticed he was also struggling so I made an effort and ran past him quickly for some 100m and then dropped back to my previous pace. I ended up beating him by about 150m. It shows how you can talk yourself into or out of doing well."

Ron says it is important to focus during races. "I am thinking of all the things I have to do. I find that you are thinking about your pace, about your style, whether you are relaxed, how your shoulders are, what your neck is like, are you lifting your knees, are you kicking up too high at the back, where are your competitors, how you can catch them up or how you can get further in front and you want to be watching all the time how fast you are going because if you get sucked up in the start and go too quickly that can ruin your race at the end. Then you are thinking about where you are in your training and whether it is where you want it to be."

Ron's preparations for the 1997 world championships in Durban, South Africa, were going well until he broke his leg three days before he was due to leave. With his leg in plaster, Ron talked with his doctor and says it went something like this:

Doc: "You are not going to the games now."

Ron: "What are you going to do if I stay?"

Doc: "Well nothing really."

Ron: "Well I am going."

"So I went and Harry Gathercole, the Australian 93-year old sprinter, saw me on the plane just as we were getting off and said, 'You silly young bugger, can't you look after yourself?' So age is just relative."

After the championships Ron met his daughter Natasha and went back to Swaziland, followed by a safari in Botswana. "I'd had to send a medical certificate to say that I was fit and capable of doing this. When I broke my leg I thought, 'I won't send them another medical certificate.' When we finally got off the plane, the leader's mouth just dropped when he saw me getting off the plane with crutches. He said, 'we are going for a big walk this afternoon.' I said, 'that's all right I'll be there.' So we walked about eight miles that afternoon and I made sure I was behind the leader at all times."

The next world championships were held in the UK in 1999. "By this time I'd woken up that this was a good excuse to go

for a holiday. So after the games I set off by myself and went to St Petersburg and caught the Siberian-Mongolian railway to Beijing which took me a month. I kept on getting off. I got off at Ulan Bator and stayed in a yurt, went riding. I like the Mongolian horses, they are more my size - a bit smaller and very powerful. I ended up in Beijing, had a look at the Great Wall and so forth, and the Forbidden City."

Ron then spent two weeks in South Korea. After the Puerto Rican championships, Ron visited Panama and Costa Rica while San Sebastian was a great base to explore Morocco, by camel. He has also seen Greenland via dogsled, hiked to Machu Picchu in Peru, cycled in Cambodia and took the "soft" option to see Antarctica as it involved daily showers and a real bed.

Ron had run several marathons in his 20s. He finished his first in less than 3 hours and his fastest in about 2:30. One race stands out clearly in his memory. Within sight of the finish, Ron sat down in the gutter and started taking his shoes off when his father helped him change his mind with "a few choice words".

When Ron resumed running more than 30 years later, he "vowed and declared" never to do another marathon. But with some help of Susan Griffith, coach of the Northside Running Group of which Ron is a member, word spread that Ron was planning to do the 45-kilometre off-road Six Foot Track in 2004. "Much against my better judgement I started training for it."

Ron researched the course and did several long runs in the Blue Mountains. He would be 71 on race day and no one over the age of 70 had finished the hilly trail race within the 7-hour cut-off time. Ron, two others in their 70s and three in their 60s were allowed to start an hour early. Ron got to Cox's River (at 15.5km) 3 minutes ahead of his schedule and went past Pluviometer (at 26km) 25 minutes ahead of plan. He finished in 6:48:31, the first and only person over 70 that year to make the cut-off.

Ron has just entered a new age group in turning 75. His training was interrupted in April and May by two cataract operations and he had to skip the most recent Sydney Morning Herald half marathon. His main goal now is the world championships in September in Riccione, Italy.

"I couldn't have had it [the layoff] at a worse time. I find that the older you get, the quicker you lose your fitness and that it takes about three times as long as when you were young to get it back again. I don't give myself much chance of getting back to a competitive edge but I'll give it a go - I have got nothing else to do," Ron says, laughing.

His post-race travel plans include Turkey and Egypt.

Ron trains as many as seven days a week and runs twice on Tuesdays and Thursdays. "I'd heard a couple of young ladies during a run say they were stopping because they couldn't keep up so I said, 'Right don't stop and keep running, come with me

and we'll run together on a Tuesday and I'll run at your pace.' That became a fixture," he says.

In his 20s Ron also encouraged others. The Scotch College Great Scot newsletter quotes a letter from former Governor-General Peter Hollingworth who recalls that, at the personal encouragement throughout the 3000m steeplechase by team mate Ron Stuart, he ran a personal best by about 17 seconds to enable the club to go up to A-grade. Ron says, "Peter was kind enough to suggest that I had helped him a little - but when the last water jump approached I had to make sure that I finished first and I set off with about 150m to go. I think the St Kevin's runner splashed Peter rather badly and that made him cranky enough to really make sure he came second to me."

Ron still does one of Percy's sessions which is also one of his favourites. "Thursday I run at the oval in the morning and do repetition 400m. Five and upwards, depending of where I am in my training schedule. Just keep on doing 10 or 15 laps, alternating fast and slow," Ron says.

Another favourite is Monday's NRG session which until recently was organised by coach Susan. His training partners include the speedy 12-year-old twins Vida and Ziggy Robinson.

"Being with the others keeps me honest. I have got to push myself except when I really decide I am not going to punish myself," says Ron.

On Tuesday Ron runs 10 repetitions of 100m as fast as he can, which is about 18seconds. He also does easy runs on Thursday, Saturday and Sunday and goes to the gym on Wednesday and Friday. "I look at Vida sometimes and I think I can almost remember when I used to run like that. I find it difficult to believe that I was running that fast. I don't think about the past very often but it has been fun to think of the happy times long ago. I have been very fortunate."

Ron's training schedule

Monday:	NRG training (speed work or hill repeats)
Tuesday:	Morning: 10 x 100m in about 18 sec Evening: easy hour
Wednesday:	gym: spin class, weights, rowing
Thursday:	Morning: 400m reps (five or more) Evening: hour easy run
Friday:	gym: spin class, weights, rowing
Saturday:	80 min run with NRG
Sunday:	60 min run with Mosman gym group

(First published in Run For Your Life in 2007)

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