



No stopping ‘The Great Jean Horne’

Kitchener resident isn't just staying active in her mid-80s, she's winning race-walking championships around the world

BY KELLY PEDRO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRESTINA MARTINS

When it comes to race walking, Jean Horne is hard to beat. At 85, the Kitchener resident is the reigning world champion in her age category. Horne laughs as she admits the 80-plus age category isn't exactly stacked with competition. But she's been at the top of her game long before now, training with a coach and competing in six races a year. And she doesn't plan to stop. In September, she will defend her five-

and 10-kilometre gold medals at the World Masters Athletics Championships in Spain. She's been atop the podium since 2013. "I keep thinking maybe this is my last (world championship)," she says. "But I keep doing it." Horne has long been a firm believer in the importance of physical activity. "I've been exercising on a regular basis since I was 35 — that's when I learned to swim," she says. She took up the sport after watching her two young boys at swimming lessons. It looked like fun, so she signed up for



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Jean Horne holds and wears medals won as a race walker. On the wall are medals from her running days.



Jean Horne competes in Masters track meets.
Photography by John MacMillan

WHAT IS RACE WALKING?

More than just a foot race, race walking is technique-driven with two key rules.

First, racers have to appear to keep constant contact with the ground. Judges along the course watch competitors to ensure they have at least one foot on the ground at all times. Racers are warned if a judge deems the competitor has lost contact with the ground — called “flying” or “lifting.” If three judges along the route see the racer breaking this rule, the racer is disqualified.

Second, the front leg must be straight until the body crosses over the knee. In other words, the racer can’t bend their front knee whenever they want. Breaking this rule can lead to disqualification.

classes. She became such a strong swimmer that she worked as a lifeguard.

Then, after nearly two decades, she traded her swimsuit for running shoes and began competing in various race categories – 400-metre, 800-metre, five-kilometre and 10-kilometre. She dominated her respective age category for about 25 years but wore out the cartilage in her left knee. About six years ago, she switched to race walking.

Though Horne is humble about her success, Stafford Whalen, head coach of the Ontario Racewalkers, notes that when the gun goes off, Horne is a competitor.

Whalen recalls an incident from about five years ago when he was coaching three athletes competing in a race walk – Horne and two other women aged 45 and 50. All were fighting for the win, but Horne, who was almost 80 at the time, came out on top.

After the race, one of the other women approached Whalen, deflated that she had lost. Whalen told her not to worry – if she kept training she’d beat Horne in six months. When he turned around, he saw Horne standing behind him. She had heard the whole thing.

“She smiled, walked by and whispered, ‘Not if I can help it,’” Whalen says.

Horne is amazing – not because she does what she does at her age but because she is who she is, her friend, Myrna Eby, says one Saturday morning as 10 women gather around a table filled with fruit, yogurt, muffins, coffee cake, nuts, fresh buns, coffee and tea.

The women, part of a group they call the KW Women’s Running Club, have gathered after a brisk 90-minute walk to share stories about Horne and how she inspires the group. Horne has been a member for more than 30 years.

“We call her ‘The Great Jean Horne,’”



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“She listens to her body very well. She’s an amazing lady. Everyone who meets her is just in awe and I am too.”

STAFFORD WHALEN
JEAN HORNE’S COACH

Eby says, laughing.

Horne was at an American championship race many years ago when the announcer introduced her as such before the race “because she kept winning,” Eby says. Over the years, the nickname stuck.

Though she’s had so much racing success that she was inducted into the Ontario and Canadian Masters halls of fame in 2006 and 2009 respectively, her friends are quick to point out Horne is just as impressive off the track as she is on it.

Her family moved to Canada from England when Horne was 14. She met her husband, Jim, at church. Now retired, he was a University of Waterloo philosophy professor and Anglican minister. The couple has two grown children and four grandchildren.

Over the years, Horne became a registered nurse after taking a three-year course at the former Grace Hospital in Windsor, then studied history part time as a mature student at University of Waterloo to get her graduate degree. Along the way, she met a woman who invited her to check out the running club.

The group meets three mornings a week. On Saturdays they take turns hosting the club, walking or running in their respective neighbourhoods before enjoying coffee and camaraderie.

Horne used to run with the club regularly, but the women joke she doesn’t join them as frequently anymore because they’re too slow – though she does still take time to recommend books.

An avid reader, Horne worked as a librarian at the Kitchener Public Library, first with the mobile library and then at

the Pioneer Park branch. She retired just before she turned 65 because she was going to the running world championships in South Africa and wanted a month off to train.

Her friends also praise her incredible sense of volunteerism – something that makes Horne sheepishly hide her face in her hands.

She has volunteered in elementary schools, helping children learn to read. Horne says her volunteer work these days is mostly through her church and “visiting old people,” which draws a laugh from the crowd of women.

“Jean creates an enthusiasm for what she does,” notes friend Judy Johnston.

But mostly, Horne has been a role model for women in sport, adds Jodi Murray.

“It’s an inspiration to think you can do it and balance it with your life, being a mom and keeping your sense of self,” Murray says.

Horne is always positive, says another friend, Lorna Kropf. She never looks down on other women – even those who couldn’t keep up with her. Kropf says Horne was always waiting for her when she crossed the finish line.

“She’d always say, ‘Oh, good job Lorna,’ even though she had finished half an hour ago,” Kropf says.

Though she’s an accomplished runner, Horne has never run a marathon – something her friends attribute to her longevity as an athlete.

“Some people think that’s the definition of success (for a runner) – to run a marathon – but Jean never felt that way,” says Nancy MacAlpine, who founded the

running club. “Her definition of success was maintaining her training, doing well and speed.”

According to the Canadian Masters, Horne still holds 14 Canadian records for running and race walking between the 60 and 80 age categories.

Distances range from 400 metres to three kilometres for running and five kilometres for race walking. In 1999, at age 66, she set a world record in the 800-metre run.

Whalen says Horne will set a new record nearly every time she competes because she keeps getting faster. She is poised to break the 1,500-metre outdoor race-walking record this year by nearly two and a half minutes, he says. The existing record is 14 minutes and 30 seconds.

“That’s how much better an athlete she is,” Whalen says.

Despite her long history of athletic success, Horne confesses she’s not a natural athlete.

“I have to go through the learning process,” she says.

But that’s what makes Horne so tenacious, notes MacAlpine, the running club founder.

Horne needed that tenacity when she first took up race walking. She was disqualified several times in her first year because she kept getting flagged for having a bent knee. In race walking, racers who don’t keep their front leg straight until the body crosses over the knee can be disqualified.

It took her years to learn the right style for the sport. To make sure she doesn’t falter, Horne travels to Toronto twice a week to train with Whalen as there’s no race-walking group in Waterloo Region.

Whalen remembers the first time he met Horne. It was about 15 years ago when she was competing in the World Masters Athletics Championships as a runner. She was holding on to second place in a pack of three women but, as they came around

the final turn, the racer in third was closing in on Horne. To secure her silver medal, Horne dove across the finish line, landing so hard spectators in the stands heard her head hit the track.

“I thought: Who is this? I’ve got to meet this lady. This is unbelievable,” Whalen says.

Whalen – then race-walking co-ordinator and coach for Athletics Canada – chatted with Horne after the race. Years later when she took up race walking, she called him for help.

“Race walking is one of the toughest events in track and field. You need the flexibility of a gymnast, the strength of an 800-metre runner and the endurance of a marathon runner,” Whalen says. “To try and learn a new event when you’re almost 80 years old is quite something.”

In her first full year with the club, Horne was named athlete of the year.

Whalen coaches about 20 race walkers, ranging from beginners to Olympians, but Horne is the healthiest athlete in his club with the fewest injuries.

“She listens to her body very well. She’s an amazing lady. Everyone who meets her is just in awe and I am too,” he says.

With her competitive drive, Horne has accumulated an impressive race-walking record. She has competed in four world championships, travelling to the U.S. where she won bronze and silver in the five- and 10-kilometre competitions respectively, and Brazil, France and Australia where she won gold in both the five-kilometre and 10-kilometre races in her age category. She is poised to win gold again this fall in Spain.

To prepare for the competition, Horne trains six or seven days a week — cross-training some days and race walking the rest.

She’d like to get back to swimming — she tried it again recently, she says, though “it didn’t go very well.”

But, in true Horne fashion, she’s not ready to quit. 

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