

The Need for Speed

By Robert Harding

I have been competing in track and field events for almost 30 years. Success did not come early or easily for me. My track career started at Appomattox County High school. The first couple of years of my high school career I ran middle distances, mainly the 800. It wasn't until my junior year that I had my first experience of sprinting in competition. Coach Ray Archer had penciled me in for the 100 meter dash at one of the early season track meets that year. I was somewhat reluctant in that I had done very little work on starting from starting blocks and I did not own a pair of spikes. However, I wound up placing third in the 100 at that meet. It was at that point in time that I declared my eligibility to run sprints any time Coach Archer wanted me to. Heck I was so excited by the performance that I begged to run the 200 meter dash. However, I didn't volunteer to run the 400 meter dash. I wasn't that excited.

It was really a no brainer. Run the 800 or other middle distance event, crash and burn, and don't score any points or run the shorter races and score points. By the time I had finished my senior season I was lucky enough to own the school's record in the 100 meter dash, a record that stood for almost 20 years.

I continued my running career at Lynchburg College. However, the transition from High School to College was not exactly a smooth or easy one. In my sophomore year I injured my knee playing basketball in Coach Jack Toms' gym class, my track coach would you believe. It took me a while to fully recover from the injury. It was a frustrating time. However, through a lot of hard work I recovered and in my senior year was ODAC conference 200 meter champion, finishing second in the 100 meter dash.

At the conclusion of the ODAC Championships my senior year I thought that sprinting or racing career was over. I didn't think that there were opportunities for sprinters to continue to compete. I guess I could have started doing the road race thing, but I think I mentioned the success or lack thereof that I had in my early running career at the middle distance events. Then in 1989, five years subsequent to my college career, the Commonwealth Games of Virginia were formed. Several years later Brett Boman started the Lynchburg Road Runners Lynchburg Summer Track Series. While I have missed several of the latest Commonwealth Games, because of other running events, I think that I have participated in the Summer Track Series every year since 1992.

As time passed I would find more and more meets in which I could run. Over the years I have gotten pretty involved in the Masters Track and Field scene. I usually find a hand full of Master's meets to run in each year. There are meets in Charlotte, Raleigh and Northern Virginia that I try to make every year. I have also had the privilege of competing in several of Masters Track and Field National Championships. At these meets I am always amazed at the quality and fitness levels of the athletes that are not only my age but athletes that are much older than I am and are still competing at a high level.

This year I have a couple of things in the works that are new to me. On April 29 I will run in the Masters 100 meter dash at the Penn Relays. Competing at the Penn Relays is a tremendous experience, running in a stadium that is actually full of people. In July I hope to compete in the 100, 200 and 400 meter dashes at the State Games of America in Colorado Springs. The respective state games (Commonwealth Games or example) are qualifiers for this national meet.

So you may be asking why do you still feel the need for speed? I think there are several reasons I continue to run competitively. One reason is that I feel that God has given me this ability or talent to run and to run relatively fast or faster than most people my age. I am a believer that God gives each and everyone of us talents and it is up to the individual as to what they do with those talents. I must admit there are times when I wish God had given me just a little more talent so that I wouldn't have to do that next hill or 600 meter interval run.

Another reason I continue to compete is that it keeps me physically fit, and helps me to maintain the quality of life I want to maintain as I mature (maybe I should say as I continue to mature). My training regime includes lifting 4 to 5 times a week before work. My weightlifting program includes upper body as well as lower body exercises. I also try to get to the track 4 to 5 times a week during my lunch hour. I run and lift year round. During the winter months when I am not competing I may substitute a three or four mile run for a track workout.

Another reason I am still competing is because of my love for the sport. I enjoy being involved with track and field at the college level by officiating or assisting with college track meets. Over the 21 years since my graduation from Lynchburg College I have been a volunteer official at most of the track meets that have been held on the Lynchburg College campus. I also try to keep abreast as to who is doing what at the high school level. If I know track and field is on the television I am typically glued to my television set. I just can't get enough of the sport.

However, one of the main reasons that I am still competing is because through events like the Lynchburg Summer Track Series as well as other masters track and field events, I have had the opportunity to develop a camaraderie with a number of individuals who have similar interests or backgrounds as mine. Like any other track geek I like to talk with old friends about their training, meets that they are competing in, their family, etc.

It is almost that time of the year for the summer track series. This is a great opportunity to introduce our young people to the sport, for distance runners to get that needed speed work on the track and an opportunity for non distance runners (sprinters) to compete locally. We are lucky to have an event like this in the area.

Keep the pace, and I hope to see many of you every Tuesday evening in June at the Summer Track Series .