

Four 80-year-old men finished a 100-mile race. Here's how they did it.

Meet the octogenarians who competed in the USA Track and Field 100-mile road championship

By [Kelyn Soong](#) March 20, 2023 Washington Post



David Blaylock, 80, won his age group in a 100-mile race in March. (Kevin Youngblood)

At a 100-mile race in Nevada earlier this month, the winner crossed the finish line in about 14 hours. But you had to wait another 15 hours for the real excitement to begin.

This year, five octogenarians entered the USA Track & Field 100 Mile Road Championships held in Henderson, Nev., on March 3 and 4. Four of them finished [in the field of 44 athletes](#), including the winner of the 80-to-84 age group, 80-year-old David Blaylock of Draper, Utah, who completed the course in 29 hours 49 minutes and 29 seconds — roughly 45 minutes off the [existing age-group record](#).

It's a feat Blaylock said he wouldn't have accomplished in his younger years, when he couldn't make the track team. "If I had tried out, they'd have thrown me out," Blaylock said. "I don't have any speed. I've got short legs and short feet." In addition to Blaylock, three other men aged 80 and over [completed the race](#): Eddie Rousseau, 83, of Park Rapids, Minn.; Ian Maddieson, 80, of Albuquerque; and Denis Trafecanty, 80, of Santa Ysabel, Calif. A fifth, Todd Leigh, 81, of Reno, Nev., finished nearly 93 miles of the race, and dropped out because of leg fatigue. Finishing a 100-mile race is remarkable at any age. But in the world of ultramarathons, it's not uncommon to see runners competing in their [60s, 70s and 80s](#). The men's and overall winner of the Henderson race, Jonah Backstrom of San Francisco, is 49, while Sierra DeGroff of Las Vegas, the women's champion, is 32. The oldest female participant in the race was 70-year-old Kit Brazier of Carlsbad, Calif. Three women in their 60s finished the race: Yolanda Holder of Corona, Calif., 64; Louise Mason of Chicago, 69; and Yen Nguyen of Houston, 60.

There are several reasons ultramarathons have become a sport for many [later-in-life runners](#). The sport favors experience and consistent training. Steady pacing is more important than speed. Even the younger athletes who finish ultramarathons tend to be on the older side. In 2020, researchers analyzed more than [370,000 finishers](#) of 100-kilometer (62.14 miles) ultramarathons run between 1959 and 2016 and found the age of peak performance was 40 to 44 in women and 45 to 49 in men.

Lin Gentling, one of the USATF liaisons for the 100-mile road championships, said there may be a few reasons this particular race attracted five octogenarians this year.

The runners had a "generous" 40-hour cutoff time to complete 100 miles, which made it well suited for aging runners, she said. And, the 1.17-mile looped course of mostly asphalt meant that there was an aid station every mile. The course is also flat, making it a popular event for runners of all ages who want to establish faster race times.



Eddie Rousseau, 83, was the oldest finisher of the race. (Kevin Youngblood)



Ian Maddieson, 80, finished third in his age group. (Kevin Youngblood)

Starting later in life

Blaylock started running marathons in his early 40s because he was looking for a new challenge after giving up motorcycle racing. (“Too many broken bones,” he said.) He then picked up ultramarathons around age 50 after watching the Wasatch Front 100 Mile Endurance Run in Utah and wondering if he could run it himself.

Rousseau has completed over 100 marathons and 100 ultramarathons, but he didn't start running until around age 40, when he decided he needed to live a healthier lifestyle.

"I've got fresh legs," Rousseau said of his later start in ultrarunning.

This doesn't surprise [Hirofumi Tanaka](#), a professor and director of exercise physiology at the University of Texas at Austin who studies masters athletes.

"Most of the masters athletes you come across these days — they're not really lifelong athletes," Tanaka said. "That's encouraging news, because that tells you that it's never too late to start exercising and you can actually achieve elite status even though you are a couch potato or you are not really competitive when you're younger."

Of the five octogenarians who competed recently, three started running in their 30s or later.

Maddieson, who finished third in the 80-to-84 age group with a time of 37:15:39, was a runner in high school and college, quit for 15 years after breaking his foot, and started up again in his 30s. Trafecanty, who finished fourth in the 80-to-84 age group in 37:59:42, said he started running in his 20s and has been doing so continuously for 60 years.

A combination of fast walking and running

All five men train by logging dozens of weekly miles. Most of them get their miles in through fast walking, rather than traditional running. Blaylock walks 12 miles a day, six days a week. Sunday is a rest day.

To complete 100 miles in 30 hours, a competitor must average an 18-minute-mile. Blaylock said that although he stopped at aid stations, he never sat down during his nearly 30 hours on the course. "When you're racing Eddie, you can't be wasting time," Blaylock said.

The oldest of the bunch, Rousseau earned the nickname "Fast Eddie," in part because he uses a run-walk method when he races. Sometimes he jogs for 10 seconds and walks for 50 seconds. Or he might jog for 30 seconds and walk for 30 seconds. "It depends upon the event and depends upon the training," Rousseau said. He was the only one of the five men who technically ran during the race. The rest of them speed-walked. Some, like Leigh and Maddieson, used hiking poles for support.

"I wish I could run, but frankly my walking is faster than my very fastest running," Leigh said. "Eddie — he's amazing. He's very fast."

Eating to fuel their bodies

As for their diet, the men all consume a variety of food.

Blaylock eats whatever he wants for fuel: “burritos, hamburgers, stuff like that,” he said. “When you’re burning that many calories, you can splurge a little.”

When Blaylock goes for his yearly physical, his doctors tell him he has a “30-year-old heart,” he said. “I have a low heart rate, low blood pressure, you know, all that stuff that you’d like to see,” he said. “A lot of that stuff — I think, all the miles — kind of preserves that. But it’s a one-person experiment.”

Rousseau drinks nutritional shakes and sports drinks with electrolytes and makes sure he consumes plenty of protein. “If I feel a little weak during the day, I’ll have a big tablespoon of peanut butter,” he said.

Maddieson calls himself an “omnivore.” His diet consists of meat, fresh vegetables and a lot of starch. During races, he eats whole-wheat sandwiches with turkey and cheese and the savory British spread Marmite. “That has a very high salt content, and it’s very tasty,” said Maddieson, who was born and raised in England.

Trafecanty also eats meat, vegetables and fruit and avoids coffee.

Leigh said he starts each day with a glass of celery juice, followed by a protein shake. Lunch consists of hard-boiled eggs, toast and maybe oatmeal. Dinner is chicken or pork, sometimes red meat with salad, rice or potatoes and a green vegetable. He’ll usually drink a glass or two of red wine.

“I try to stay thinner, exercise, eat healthy — I think that’s the secret to a healthy life,” Leigh said.

Friendly rivals

Gentling, the USATF liaison who attended the event, said she was inspired watching the competition in the age 80-to-84 division.

“They were very encouraging of one another,” she said of the five men. “But don’t think there wasn’t competition, because there was.”

Rousseau was leading his age group for more than 90 miles, but with about 12 miles to go, he sensed a pain in his back that felt like “four wasps were stinging” him on his spinal cord, he said.

Around mile 95, Blaylock passed him. Rousseau, who finished second in 30:09:08, never caught him again. The two are friendly rivals, and when Blaylock crossed the finish line, he waited for Rousseau to complete his race.

All five men spoke highly of each other. Most of them train by themselves, so seeing other men in their 80s race made them feel less alone.

“I love these guys,” Blaylock said. “They’re tough old men, and we’ve all got problems, but we just keep coming back.”

None plan to stop running ultras anytime soon.

“I’m looking forward to the time when there’s a bunch of 80-year-olds competing,” Leigh said. “I think there’s a bunch around the corner.”