

SPORTS

# Secrets of ‘UltraGeezer,’ Earth’s Fastest 70-Year-Old Distance Runner

A retired computer programmer out of Philly breaks a marathon record. His blunt training advice: ‘Just run.’



Gene Dykes breaking the record in Jacksonville, Fla. PHOTO: MARK GRUBB



By Jason Gay

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Let me introduce you to your new favorite American athlete: Gene Dykes.

Retired computer programmer, lives in the Philadelphia suburbs, married to a University of Pennsylvania economics professor, two grown daughters, one grandkid. Likes to garden, plays golf a few times a month, once got pretty good at bowling, to the point he rolled four perfect games.

But here’s why we’re talking about Gene Dykes today: He just ran a world record sub-three hour marathon...at age 70.

Dykes’s 2:54:23 (per-mile pace: 6:39), which he ran at the Jacksonville Marathon on Dec. 15, shaved a startling 25 seconds off the 70-74 age group mark set by the late, legendary masters distance runner Ed Whitlock.

It was a record which many—including Dykes—assumed would never be broken.

“I didn’t think this one was in my reach,” Dykes told me the other day on the phone, from his home in Bala Cynwyd, Pa. “Going into this year, I’d never run a marathon under three hours.”

What makes Dykes’s rise to record-setter so striking is that he was, by his own admission, a very average runner until he got a coach in his mid-60s.

Dykes, who grew up in Canton, Ohio, competed in track in high school and in college at Lehigh University, but, as he tells it, he wasn’t even close to a star.

“I was so, so thoroughly trounced on the track, that I really have this lifelong impression of myself as a mediocre runner,” he said.

Dykes would graduate college, get a Ph.D. in biochemistry, make a career in computer programming, and start a family. He ran on occasion, but only as a hobby.

“Sometimes I’d be in decent shape, sometimes not,” he said. “I didn’t race. There’s a big difference between racing, and just going out there and jogging for the fun of it.”

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Six years ago, Dykes retired. By then, he’d been doing some racing, which he enjoyed. His times were very solid—he ran a 3:16 marathon in 2012—but he thought a coach might help him go to a higher level. He hired a local trainer named John Goldthorp, and told him he wanted to win his age

group at the Boston Marathon.

“Who is this guy?” Goldthorp recalled thinking.

A partnership was born. Dykes, who will train through the winter in the Philly cold and snow, is blessed with a runner’s reedy frame—he’s 5’10” and walks around at about 143 lbs., dropping to 138 lbs. for big races. But he isn’t obsessive about a lot of the things runners obsess over.

“I never stretch, never do flexibility exercises,” he said. “No weightlifting, no strength, no core.” Dykes doesn’t count calories or adhere to any special diet. “I tend to eat healthy, but I’ll eat junk food with the best of them,” he said.

Instead Dykes sticks to a much more straightforward philosophy:

“Just run,” he said.

(He called “Just Run” the working title to “a book I’m never going to get around to writing.”)

Dykes, who is affiliated with the Greater Philadelphia Track Club, just runs. Goldthorp, meanwhile, sets the training agenda—one to which Dykes closely adheres, running hard on hard workout days, and easy on easy ones, trying to avoid the common trap of failing to adequately push himself, or recover in between.

“Gene’s hard days have evolved,” Goldthorp said. “He’s able to do very hard sessions now, sessions that I never would have programmed for him in year one.” The coach believes Dykes’s secret is “consistency over time, just like investing.”

A devoted fan of super-long-distance ultra-running—in 2017, Dykes did three 200-mile events, including one around Mount St. Helens—Dykes racks up an enormous amount of mileage. It’s Goldthorp’s job to tailor Dykes’s training for big targets, like this year’s push to crack three hours in the marathon, which Dykes did for the first time this spring in Rotterdam, running 2:57:43.

It was the first time anyone other than Ed Whitlock had broken 3 hours at age 70 or older.

Dykes’s success has reached the level that he’s even been tested by antidoping officials a few times.

“That’s when you know you’ve arrived,” Goldthorp said, laughing.

Said Dykes: “I was very happy to have the opportunity to prove I only have the joy of running to pump me up.”

Goldthorp said it wasn’t until late last year that he and Dykes began to entertain the possibility of chasing Whitlock’s 70-74 mark. “It just seemed untouchable,” Goldthorp said. Whitlock, a snow-haired Canadian who famously trained in a cemetery near his house and died in 2017, remains a giant of distance running, with dozens of records across the sport.

“Let the record show that for age group world records, it’s still ED 35, GENE 1,” Dykes said.

That kind of humility is one of Dykes’s most pronounced characteristics, said his youngest daughter, Hilary Shirazi.

“I’m glad he broke this record, because he’d never go out of his way to share his accomplishments,” Shirazi said. “Even when I called him after [the record] to tell him I was

proud, he said, ‘I’m just an old guy having fun.’”

Dykes’s wife, Olivia Mitchell, who teaches at Penn’s Wharton School, confided that her husband’s nickname is “#UltraGeezer.” (Yes, she used a hashtag. Professor Mitchell is cool.)

What’s next for UltraGeezer? At the moment, a rare stretch of time off—at least for a couple more weeks. But then Dykes will get right back on the road, stepping away from his focused marathon work to spend more time with his beloved ultrarunning.

“On the day [my break] ends, I’m going to run a 50-mile race in Louisiana,” Dykes said. “Two weeks later, I’m going to run a 50-mile race in Utah. When we get done, I’m going to run a 100-mile race in Texas, and two weeks after that, I’m going to run a 200-mile race in Australia.”

He’ll turn 71 on April 3. On April 15, he’ll be at the Boston Marathon, attempting to crack three hours there.

The UltraGeezer doesn’t stop.

“I do have this deeply embedded thing that I am just an ordinary runner,” said Gene Dykes, who the world now knows is anything but.

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