



80-year-old runner sets marathon record

North Vancouver woman sets sights on upcoming races in Hawaii, New York

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Betty Jean McHugh set a world record Sunday at the 29th Royal Victoria Marathon -- and that's not even the most interesting part of her story.

She ran for four hours, 36 minutes and 52 seconds, and pushed through the finish line to loud cheers from the crowd and the booming voice of the announcer. The real kicker? She's 80 years old.

"I just run because I like it, I don't keep good records at all," said McHugh, a mother of four and grandmother of four.

"I knew I was feeling good and running well. I knew there was a possibility [for a world record] but I didn't push myself. I probably could have done better, but one of my friends said, 'Just keep it at a certain rate.'"

With more than 13 Canadian and world records to her name, McHugh is a well-known dynamo in the running world. Sunday's record was for all women 80 years and older on a 42.195-kilometre course. McHugh took 13 minutes off the record of Helen Klein, who ran the New York City Marathon in four hours, 49 minutes and 52 seconds in 2004.

McHugh, a retired nurse from North Vancouver, has been running since her 50s. But she wasn't even sure she'd make it to this year's Victoria race after she was tripped and injured twice by dogs last year while out training.

That temporarily limited her training regime, which starts at 5:45 a.m. three days a week and concludes with a long run on the weekend.

But McHugh said the support of her entourage -- a group of six or seven female friends who help her run and organize her events -- made participating in the Royal Victoria Marathon possible. "They actually deserve a medal," she said. "It was a world record for them too."

Next in her sights is the Honolulu Marathon, in Hawaii on Dec. 14. By then she'll be 81.

"I'll see how I feel," she said. "I won't be pushing it."

There's also a half-marathon in Vancouver in June that's on her radar, and a long-term goal to be at the New York City Marathon next November.

But McHugh said Victoria's event stands out for its great organization, good people and -- sometimes, like this year -- fine weather.

"Today I feel great," she said yesterday, while recuperating at her North Vancouver home.

"My joints are a little sore but I'm walking upright.

"As I told my family, it beats staying in the kitchen cooking a turkey."

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> See complete marathon coverage, including full face results, starting on page D1

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