



Slow, steady, still a winner

At 97, Kathryn West ready to participate in Freihofer's Run

By **BRIAN ETTKIN**, Staff writer

[Click byline for more stories by writer.](#)

First published: Wednesday, May 28, 2008

The wavy gray hair and well-worn skin can't conceal the vitality 97-year-old Kathryn West may yet outlive. She won't be the fastest competitor in Saturday's 30th annual Freihofer's Run for Women. She won't even be running.

She'll walk the 5K course, flanked by her personal trainer, Mary Rhinehardt, and almost certainly will finish last. Only the police car that sweeps the field will not pass Kay West.

And yet when West crosses the finish line, she'll hear applause and feel the admiration wash over her, as it did when she completed last year's Eliot (Maine) Festival Day 5K in 1 hour, 28 minutes, 53 seconds. Spectators cheered and whistled. Someone set out a chair for her, and then children ringed her and fussed.

"They like to see you cross that line standing up, so your trainer doesn't have to carry you over," she said.

They like to see Kay West.

She's not a runner. Never has been. A knee replacement scuttled any thoughts of that. And yet she finishes every race she starts.

"There was one that was hard for me to finish because it was a very, very hot day," said West, a former Kinderhook resident and New York State Department of Motor Vehicles employee. "I thought I'd never get through. Mary wasn't there that day. She said she would've stopped me if she'd been there."

But she wasn't. And she couldn't. The walker is a runner of renown, you know. The USA Track & Field Foundation named West the 2007 Masters Long-Distance Running Outstanding Athlete in the 95-to-99 age group.

How could a walker win a national distance-running award, for the second consecutive year, no less?

"There's not anyone in my age group," said West, who will turn 98 on June 30. "I've never competed with anybody that was over 90. Never."

West lives in a first-floor apartment ("At my age you don't want to worry about having property, mowing the grass, shoveling snow -- come on," she said, her New England accent vibrant.) in a house on Cape Porpoise, a tiny fishing village in Kennebunkport, Maine. She drives her Ford Taurus and walks on a sidewalk with views of the Atlantic coastline. When training for a race, she works out three times a week at the gym with Rhinehardt. Sometimes when they cross-train, West throws punches at Rhinehardt's punch pads.

The Golden-gloved Girl.

Some people become more inflexible as they age. But West isn't like most people her age. On the computer West's three children bought her, she Googles and e-mails regularly. She travels frequently with her children, in recent years trekking to Hollywood (one of her 11 grandchildren, "As the World Turns' " Maura West, won a Daytime Emmy in 2007 for Outstanding Lead Actress), the Canadian Rockies and Ireland.

"She doesn't let time catch up with her," said West's son Rob, of Fairfield, Vt. "So many people get to a certain age and they retire and they basically sit down and wait on death. They take the loss of their friends very hard, but she's got a faculty of meeting new people so she isn't a lonely person or a (shut-in).

"If you go down to Florida, they call it 'God's waiting room.' That's a mind-set."

It's just not Kay's mind-set. She's an eternal optimist.

"If we were in front of a firing squad," said Rob, "you'd see her say one of two things: 'Nice day for a firing squad' or 'Don't miss.' "

She has type 2 diabetes and mild arthritis in her fingers, which doesn't bother her. She eats a lot of fish and watches her carbohydrate and sugar intake.

Some competitors will be aiming to break their personal record Saturday.

West's primary goal: to finish. If she inspires a few people along the way, even better.

"A lot of people don't get out and do, and they don't exercise, and they should," she said. "I think there would be half as many people in nursing homes if they had gotten out and exercised. Get out and keep yourself going."

Brian Etkin can be reached at 454-5457 or by e-mail at bettkin@timesunion.com. Check out his blog at <http://blogs.timesunion.com/ettkin>.

Freihofer's Run for Women

When: 9:15 a.m. Saturday

Where: Empire State Plaza

This week: The Times Union will have a story on the race every day and special sections Saturday and Sunday.

Coming Thursday: Race makes effort to go "green."

All Times Union materials copyright 1996-2008, Capital Newspapers Division of The Hearst Corporation, Albany, N.Y.

[HOME](#) | [CONTACT US](#) | [SUBSCRIBE TO NEWSPAPER](#) | [HOW TO ADVERTISE](#) | [PRIVACY RIGHTS](#) | [COPYRIGHT](#) | [CLASSROOM ENRICHMENT](#)

HEARST *newspapers*