

Distance running Granny's cup of tea

Freihofer's 5k competitor Libby James strong at 75

By Mark Singelais

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Libby James makes art out of empty teabags, which sounds like something a 75-year-old grandmother would do.

James will run two road races in the next six days, which definitely does not sound like something a 75-year-old grandmother would do.

James, of Fort Collins, Colo., is competing in the Bolder Boulder 10k in her home state on Monday, then traveling to take on her first Freihofer's Run for Women 5k in Albany on Saturday.

"I've been very fortunate that my knees have been holding out and I'm able to do it," James said of her remarkable longevity as a runner. "At one point, I thought, 'Well, I'll quit when I turn 70.' And then when I turned 70, I thought, 'This is so fun, why should I quit?' So I didn't."

She named her teabag art business "Old Bags," a joking reference to her septuagenarian status. But her resume shows that she's any adjective but elderly.

James, a mother of four and grandmother of 12, has broken national records in the 5k in the 70-74 age group and 5k and 10k among runners 75-79. Last year, she set an age group world record in the Aetna Park to Park 10-miler in Denver with a time of 1 hour, 19 minutes and 22 seconds.

Not that she meets a lot of runners her age.

"It's pretty lonely out there," James said with a laugh.

She was inducted in April into the Colorado Running Hall of Fame, which in turn got her an invitation from Freihofer's athlete recruiter John Tope, who offered to pay her way to Albany.

"He said, 'We want to beef up our master's (over-40) division, and would you be interested?'" James said. "I said, well, sure, a trip to New York sounds good to me."

James believes a reason why she's kept her zeal for running at her age is because she got a late introduction to the sport. A native of England who moved to the United States after World War II, James began running a mile a day when she was 35 years old and then was inspired by a exchange student from the United Kingdom who lived with her family and was an avid runner.

She didn't run her first race until a 10k in Fort Collins after she turned 40 in 1977.

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"When I look around at runners I know, the ones that have been very fast when they're young, they get into their 40s and they go, 'I'm getting slower and it's not as appealing for me,' " James said. "I was just getting started."

James, a widow who's outlived her husband by 20 years, was at something of a loss to explain her great health. While she eats sensibly and moderately, she also drinks wine and beer. She said her parents weren't long-lived.

"I just think I'm fortunate," she said.

She's been running long enough to be accompanied by her kids and grandkids. She did the Tokyo Marathon in February with her oldest son, Kurt, who lives in Japan.

She did the Bolder Boulder the past two years with her oldest grandson, Adam. She's run frequently with her daughter Jennifer, who also lives in Fort Collins, though Jennifer has rarely finished ahead of her mother.

Jennifer marveled at her mother's pain tolerance. During an 8-mile run, Libby James told her daughter, "There's something in my shoe," only to get home and find her foot covered in blood. A staple had gone deep into her foot.

"I would have been crying like a baby," her daughter said.

She broke her pelvis in a fall and didn't go to the doctor for two weeks.

"She has that iron will," Jennifer said. "She's quiet. She's tiny. She's understated."

Unlike some runners who are obsessed with training, Jennifer said she admires her mother for being well-rounded.

James spent 15 years working with low-income single teen mothers. She still teaches writing class at a local jail. She writes a running column for her local newspaper and spends time on her art business, ironing and decorating used teabags.

Even with all that, she still finds the time to run four miles on most weekdays and eight miles on weekends.

"Maybe I'm a little bit hyper," James said.

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FREIHOFER'S RUN FOR WOMEN

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Where: Albany

More information: <http://freihofersrun.com/>

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