



2019 Personal Best Athlete Profile

Don Wright, 78
Stillwater, Minnesota

A Message of Hope

Don Wright is literally running for his life.

The Minnesota native enjoyed many successful years as an engineer, attorney and father of three. He ran cross country in high school, but career demands kept him from regular exercise and his weight grew as he approached 60. His brother-in-law and wife were runners who got Don's wife Ardis involved, and in turn she convinced Don to run a 5K with them. He struggled but finished, and that led to a goal to run a marathon in his home town, which he accomplished within a year.

Two weeks later, in 2003, Don was diagnosed with [multiple myeloma](#), an incurable blood cancer that resides in the bones. He was advised to prepare for only five more years to live. Instead of being devastated, Don decided to set a goal to run the Boston Marathon, and then to run a marathon in every state. He would enjoy traveling the country but also tell everyone that there is always hope, even for cancer patients like him.



After 50 marathons, Don met a public relations professional, who told him he should organize a foundation to make it possible for his message to be spread much wider. The result was eRace Cancer, a campaign to educate patients about advances and innovations in treatments through its [social media page](#) and traditional media relations efforts.

With the help of newly-discovered treatments, Don's myeloma was kept in check, and when the hundred marathon milestone was reached he needed a new item for his bucket list. After the National Senior Games came to the Twin Cities near him in 2015, Don decided he wanted to transition to track running and take his message to a new audience. The plan was to travel to as many qualifying games as he could in 2018 to share his message on the way to competing in Nationals in 2019. The eRace Cancer team generated local publicity at almost every visit to seven different state Senior Games, and that caught our attention.

As the following informative interview shows, Don and wife Ardis are excited they have both qualified and will run in Albuquerque at the 2019 National Senior Games presented by Humana. Their 48-year-old daughter Sarah can't wait to reach 50 and join them on the track. We are just as excited to have the Wrights as part of the Senior Games family. After all, you can't spread too much hope around!

Welcome to the Senior Games Movement, Don! Let's start by asking you to explain what myeloma is.

Most people discover they have multiple myeloma when they break a bone, or more than one—that's why they call it multiple. Myeloma isn't in the bones, it's a blood cancer in the bones throughout your body. A lot of people feel fatigued, but I didn't have any real symptoms before it was found. Mine was actually found early by accident. I was complaining about a bone pain to my doctor and he ordered a test called protein electrophoresis that is pretty reliable. He said you probably don't have this, but let's just check it out. Then I got the call.

And so it began.

Yes. I told the doctor my blood tests are always strange because I'm a runner. He replied, "Not like this" and referred me to an oncologist.

I was told myeloma was incurable but not imminent. It would be two to five years before it would take me. So I wasn't scared at first, it was more like curiosity. You know, let's get our arms around this. I started running marathons thinking it might help in some way.

The increased activity and fitness must have helped you.

The fact that I'm alive is only partially owing to the fact that I've run over 100 marathons and am now competing in Senior Games. It's more credit to the new medications that have come along because of innovation since I was diagnosed. I was given two to five years, and I'm still going 15 years later.

Right now my cancer is at the lowest level it's been. I would like people to know that you don't have to run 100 marathons to be able to have hope if you are a cancer patient. Things are coming along fast, so hang in there! I want to bring a message of hope to others, that's why I am doing this.

There are two support groups in the Twin Cities, and I go to both of them and they know my story. They are aware better treatments are coming down the pike.

With all of the medical breakthroughs, cancer is no longer an automatic death sentence as it once was. Are there advances in treatment for myeloma?

There is some hope on the horizon that your white blood cells can be trained to actually go after the cancer and get rid of it once and for all, but we won't know that until patients live on for a few years. People used to have to go through bone marrow stem cell transplants that put them into the hospital for weeks and months, but I've never had one. That is increasingly going to happen.

Many of those people who went through that came out no better than before. It's still not a curable disease at this time. There's one doctor that said that the cure for myeloma is to live long enough to die of something else. [Laugh]

Many treatments were not even available when I was first diagnosed. What I'm taking now fights the cancer but doesn't interfere with my ability to run competitive races. My survival is not just a feel-good story, again it's also a message of hope. That's what I want to get out there.



Tell us more about the message of hope you are spreading.

Not everyone with cancer can or should run competitive races, but I hope my message of possibilities after a difficult prognosis provides encouragement for anyone battling this disease. We should be excited about maintaining this medical momentum, until we reach a cure.

I want to fight for all patients to have affordable access to the treatments they need. I'm not talking about the cost of these amazing therapeutics. I can't put a price tag on being able to move on with my life, my family and my work as an attorney. The competitive running symbolizes that. I am talking about good insurance and manageable copays. That's what has allowed me to get the treatments I need, and all patients should have the same opportunity.

What is your treatment like now?

I currently go in for an infusion once a month and I'm only down for a day or so afterwards. Besides that, I also take a pill every night for three out of four weeks each month, and that has worked for me for years. I was in a study for that one. The Mayo Clinic is only two hours away and that has helped get me into these new treatments. Mayo is as good as anywhere in the world. So I guess I'm lucky about that.

I was selected for two other studies that didn't work at all-my bones lit up pretty good. I also was in a study about use of the PET scan. It turns out to be by far the most significant diagnostic tools, and nobody knew that ten years ago.

Maybe you've also been a good candidate for studies because you got yourself fit and have been a good patient doing whatever was needed. You make it easy for Mayo to say, "Let's call Don."

Oh yeah, maybe. I'm a little bit of a celebrity there because of running all the marathons.

People are living longer, and in larger numbers. We wonder whether they are going to keep their bodies healthy and fit, or will they just feel miserable longer or cut their lives short anyway?

That's really a primary question. My mom lived to age 100, and two years later my dad lived to be 100. That is my goal, and I know how they did it. They did it by staying active. They didn't run, but they walked all the time. They changed over time to be more healthy, eating well and exercising.

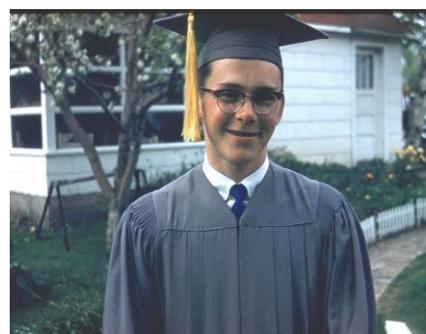
There's a certain amount of luck involved. Sure, genetics help, but doing the right things probably helped them get to 100. That's what Ardis and I are doing now. We eat very well, lots of organics. We can't tell for sure that eating like that helps with cancer, and we can't say for sure that going out and running will beat cancer. There are a lot of things that might be helping, we just don't know where the myeloma comes from. I can think of several possibilities.

Better to hedge your bet and do the right things!

You betcha. I may be lucky to have good genes, but I was unlucky to get myeloma. But I'm really lucky that they are working on treatments for myeloma. That's why I'm alive now.

Well, thanks for educating us about the disease. Let's talk about how your running history started.

When I was in high school I went out for cross country. I did pretty well, and at the beginning was the best on the team since the other guys were not as in good shape as I was. They got into better shape and I became just one of the best. But then I quit in favor of girls. [Laugh] That was probably a poor choice at the time.

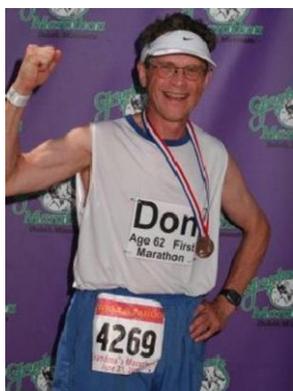


Don as a high school graduate

Cross country was all I did for sports before I got on with my life. After my college years at the University of Minnesota I was an engineer for a long time and got into computers and software. I realized after several years that what I was doing was not going to last much longer, and rather than learn a new technology I went to law school. I haven't practiced law a lot though.

When did you take up running again?

Much later. I was busy with my career and raising three kids. It all adds up. So no, I didn't do much and didn't think I could run. I tried it when I was about 40 and my knees hurt. I did a lot of walking and stair climbing though.



Don celebrates his first marathon with a smile

I started running again at age 61, a year before my diagnosis. I found I did actually have some natural ability at running and decided I would try a marathon. My theory was if you run three miles most days it will keep you healthy, but I wanted to try the distance. I did the Grandma's Marathon in Duluth, and it was a good one. I wanted to see if I could qualify for the Boston Marathon, even though I didn't really expect to go. Anyway, my time wasn't good enough, and two weeks later I found out about the myeloma.

What was your motivation to run at that age?

To get stronger, get the fat off of me, and be healthier. I was overweight. My brother-in-law, Pastor Calvin Thoresen, and his wife Blanche had started running, and they got my wife and daughter into it. Then, Ardis got me going. So, I entered a 5K they were all in. I came in all red faced and huffing and puffing and decided I didn't want to do that anymore. I did keep running, and the next year I trained hard and beat my brother in law's time in the 5K. But Calvin was the catalyst that got us all moving.

Then, after the diagnosis, I decided I did want to run the Boston Marathon. That would be a big item on my bucket list. I ran in two more marathons and did qualify. One was a downhill marathon in Tucson, which I figured would help. The other was in the Twin Cities, and that one wasn't so easy.

I ran in Boston in 2004, and it became a family thing. My wife Ardis and our daughter did the half marathon in Tucson while I ran the full one. We liked traveling around to do this, so we picked off the low hanging fruit and started going to marathons close enough to drive to from Minnesota, like Iowa, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota you know. We like the one in Fargo because it was so nice and flat. [Smile] We just kept going.

At what point did it get into your head to start the E-Race Cancer foundation and take it to the next level to spread your message?

We got up to about 50 marathons in 30 states when I met this public relations professional for a major patient advocacy organization. He said he liked my message and could help with my expenses to keep going to share my story with many more people. So it grew from there.



It's good to have people help you in your quest. We were impressed with the publicity you've earned as you visited several of our Games around the country in 2018. Are you surprised with your press success?

We've gotten a story on some form of media almost everywhere we have gone. We were on CNN twice, with Dr. Sanjay Gupta in one of them. That was a big surprise for me. Runner's World did a feature after my 100th marathon two years ago [and ran a follow-up story on my Senior Games tour this year.](#)

Why did you transition from distance running to doing track sprints at Senior Games?

Well, I had finished my bucket list, so I needed to start a new bucket list! I completed 100 marathons and thought, 'OK, now what do I do?' I didn't figure it out for some months, and when the National Senior Games came to Minnesota in 2015, I heard about it and decided "Why don't I do that now?"

My daughter Sarah who lives with us is 48, a couple of years away from Senior Games. But she now plans to do it. It's kind of new for Ardis, too. She wasn't sure about it at first, but realized it's just on a little track and Sarah could sit and watch. Her first Senior Games was in New York, and she's qualified in the 200 and 400 and will be in Albuquerque. I'm looking forward to it. I ran a marathon there and enjoyed the visit.



Still smiling after 100th marathon

Since running puts stress on your bones, have any doctors told you to avoid the marathons and track for fear of breaking bones?

It's a funny question, because every doctor I talked to has encouraged my running because it strengthens your bones. I have one doctor who is not a cancer doctor. She's half my age and acts like my Grandma. "Take it easy now, Don." [Laugh]

You want people to do the right things to take care of themselves. Regular physical activity is a big part of that. What do you tell others who think they aren't as athletic as you and can't run, let alone race?

The most important thing you can do is walk. The faster, the better, but any speed is good. A mile is nice, two miles is even better. You should do that every day.

Something like "an apple a day" advice?

Walking is more important than an apple. By quite a lot. Dr. Oz would agree.

Speaking of food, how has your diet changed?

My younger son lives in Minneapolis and he is a runner. He and his wife are trying to get us to go on a vegan diet, but we have another plan that is not vegan. We eat a combination of paleo and Mediterranean. We eat high quality food, don't eat any more sugar than what is in the plants and fruit. We do believe that protein from meat is important. We also joined Weight Watchers several years ago and we're still members.

Is there anything you gave up that you miss eating?

It's been awhile so let me think. [Pause] I used to really like a jelly donut, but I've sworn off both the gluten and the sugar in that. I don't really miss those things, it's actually more of an inconvenience on others because you have to tell them you can't eat that loaf of fresh baked bread they made for your visit.

Some people really are reactive to gluten, like my number one son. We don't test reactive to gluten, but we still think it makes us healthier.

Your stated goal now is to qualify and compete in the National Senior Games in Albuquerque, and to visit as many state games as you could to spread your message of hope. What future goals will you have after that?

I don't know yet. Maybe I'll try high jumping. I think I could do OK at that. I know what I'm not going to do - pickleball. We have a really nice running track at the local high school and it has four basketball courts in the middle where they play pickleball. When I get close to where they are playing I pick up my pace a little. [Makes sound] Pa-tick...pa-took...pa-tick...pa-took! [All Laugh]

One continuing goal must be to keep spreading your message of hope to others dealing with cancer and advising fitness and health for everyone.

You betcha. I do want to reach many people. But if even one person who feels negative about their life could feel positive, that would be enough for me. If it's more, so much the better.

What hope do you have for yourself?

There's a saying somebody had about wanting to die sliding sideways into the grave. Boom! That's my idea of how life should be lived. [Laugh]

You have looked death in the face, and that usually brings a different perspective on life for people. How has your experience affected you?

I do see life differently now. Every day is a free day. It enabled me to do things I might not have done, like run 100 marathons. I guess having the myeloma made that a reasonable thing to do. Otherwise, why spend the money and the time to do that many? I will tell you that the travel kinda makes up for that. We have been to 50 states since I took this up, and we always allocate a day or two to look around.

I have to say there's never been a better time in my life than right now. [Smile]



Don, daughter Sarah and wife Ardis

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