

Published: Dec 20, 2005 12:30 AM
Modified: Dec 20, 2005 04:23 AM

Masters athlete Bob Boal dies at 93

NED BARNETT, Staff Writer

Bob Boal was born in 1912, the year Jim Thorpe became world champion in the decathlon. Eighty-five years after his birth, white-haired but thin and limber, Boal became a world champion in the decathlon, too.

That was Boal's life. He stretched time as if it were a muscle and leapt over the notion that athleticism is limited to youth.

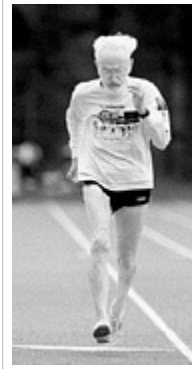
On Sunday, the retired N.C. State economics professor who was reborn as an athlete in midlife and competed in track and field until he was 90 died at Duke Health Raleigh Hospital. He was 93.

His decathlon world record, set in 1997 for men 85-89, still stands. Boal's records also include various U.S., state and meet marks in running and hurdling. But what he coveted setting most was an example. Boal, who was 5-foot-7 and 125 pounds and learned to pole vault at age 70, said in a 1999 interview, "I'm not quite a missionary, but I do encourage people to show an interest to take off weight and feel better."

In 1968, at age 56, Boal became inspired to get back in shape after reading the book "Aerobics" by Ken Cooper, head of the U.S. Air Force's physical fitness program. Boal had run cross country for two years at Penn State, but he had become inactive, smoked cigars and pipes and was 35 pounds above his college weight. He went to a track and was alarmed to find he couldn't run around once without stopping.

From that first breathless stop, he pushed on, often running along the streets near his home in Wake Forest. In the early 1970s, he was a jogger before joggers were common. "He was always running around here," said Boal's daughter, Marjie Boal of Raleigh. "Everybody knew him. Little kids knew him because he was the guy who ran. It was a very unusual sight because nobody did it then."

While visiting San Diego to welcome his son back from Vietnam, Boal saw his first masters track meet, an event for athletes 40 and over. He brought the idea back to North Carolina and founded the Southeastern U.S. Masters Track and Field Association. The annual Southeastern Masters meet is now entering its 36th year and is the oldest continuous masters meet in the country. Boal became an international leader in masters track and was inducted into the U.S. Track and Field Masters Hall of Fame in 1998. "It's always rewarding to see something grow after you've worked so hard at it," Boal said in 1995. "It shows everyone else that getting older doesn't mean getting worse. Sometimes, you can get better."



Robert Boal competes in 1995 at the age of 83. His 1997 decathlon world record for men 85-89 still stands. News & Observer File Photo

Don Lein, 71, of Pittsboro, president of Southeastern Masters, said Boal once went to the doctor for a treadmill test and saw a newspaper story about himself tacked on the wall. The doctor explained that he put it there to inspire patients who had heart attacks in their 40s or 50s and thought their active lives were over.

Lein told that story when Boal was honored at the 2003 USA Track & Field convention in Greensboro for his work on masters track.

Marjie Boal said her father pushed the masters competition as a way of motivating older people to stay fit. "That definitely was what he was about," she said. "Not the winning, but the doing."

Staff writer Ned Barnett can be reached at 829-4555 or nbarnett@newsobserver.com.