

Competitors at masters track meet young at heart

By NEIL AMATO, The Herald-Sun
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Just as international-caliber sprinter Phil Raschker came to run, so, too, did first-timer Beth Ballard.

Bill Benson came from Valley Stream, N.Y., to Duke's Wallace Wade Stadium to run the mile in the 35th Southeastern Masters Track and Field Meet. He came away with an American record for his age group.

Anthony Fleg of Chapel Hill also ran the mile Saturday, but he didn't have any records in mind. He was happy just to be on a track again.

That's what the Southeastern Masters meet -- and masters track in general -- is all about. These athletes may go slower as their years add up, but they still love the competition and camaraderie, even if the set of goals for one runner is drastically different from that of another.

"We're all one big happy family," said Raschker, one of nearly 300 competitors.

Phil Raschker, 58, is one of this meet's celebrities. She -- yes, she; her full first name is Philippa -- is the owner of 48 masters gold medals, and she is the fastest 50-year-old woman of all time. She holds records for the 50-54 and 55-59 age groups in the 100 meters, as well as world standards in the 200.

She was defeated in her 100 heat Saturday, though by a woman in her early 40s, and said a bum leg was one of the reasons. But Raschker is certain to be primed for two meets later in the outdoor track season -- the Senior Olympics in Pittsburgh in June and the world masters meet in Spain in August.

"I always like to push it to the limit," the Marietta, Ga., resident said. "It's challenging to see what level you can take your performance to."

That's exactly what the "Tekelec Four" did on Saturday. Ballard, Kim Braschwitz, Anne Jones and Mary Szymkowski had no idea what would happen in their 1,600-meter relay. Tekelec paid for their entry into the meet -- the company provides each employee with about \$500 for any fitness-related expense -- and the four practiced their baton handoffs in the grass before their run.

It didn't matter that they were alone in competing; they're already considering a return for next year's meet.

Szymkowski, the one runner in the four who is not employed by Tekelec, met Braschwitz through Wednesday night runs in Cary and Durham. It was Braschwitz who recruited coworkers to join the relay.

"Kim is a runner, and she has inspired us to get in good shape," said Ballard, who trained two months for her Saturday lap around the track.

Fleg couldn't wait for the first lap of his race. Fleg, who just completed his second year of medical school at UNC, visited Africa last summer and didn't feel like his same old self as his running performance dipped. "I chalked it up to being a head case," he said. "Med students are good at self-diagnosis."

But he felt worse in the winter and finally learned, after a February trip to the hospital, that he had malaria. His return to regular running wasn't until two weeks ago.

"I'm happy just to be out here for the fun of it," said Fleg, who sped out to a first lap of 63 seconds before finishing his mile in 4:46.83. "I guess you could see the excitement. I was running way too fast."

Benson was one of several competitors to set records Saturday. The 85-89 runner shattered his own standard in the mile, dropping nearly 40 seconds to 9:18.42.

But Saturday wasn't about the records; it was about testing one's own limits and renewing acquaintances.

That's why Raschker keeps coming back to this meet, in its 35th year. That's why Ben James of upstate New York came down for the first time, going to Kingstree, S.C., first to see relatives in the town in which he grew up. The 200 and 400 runner had heard good things about the meet, and he wanted to see it for himself.

James came for the competition, but that wasn't everyone's reason for coming.

"This has always been a great meet," said Raschker. "It doesn't really matter what level you are."

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