

SPORTS



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Disterdick a fountain of youth

When I grow old(er) I want to be just like John Disterdick. I want to have his energy and enthusiasm. I want his determination and diligence. I really want his medals, ribbons and trophies.

Now 71, Disterdick is arguably the greatest senior athlete in Chattanooga history. The guy's won national honors in at least



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eight sports, everything from boxing to rowing to cycling to triathlons to swimming to something called speed (water) skiing during his much younger days in California.

But his greatest accomplishment may have come last month in Boston when he finished fourth among 12 competitors in his 70-74 age group in the World Indoor Rowing Championships at Boston University.

And it wasn't just the fact that he "rowed" 2,000 meters on a rowing machine in a time of 7 minutes, 24.4 seconds, though that would be pretty good for an experienced rower half his age.

No, what made Disterdick's latest achievement unbelievable was that he accomplished all of this a little over a year after having both knees replaced.

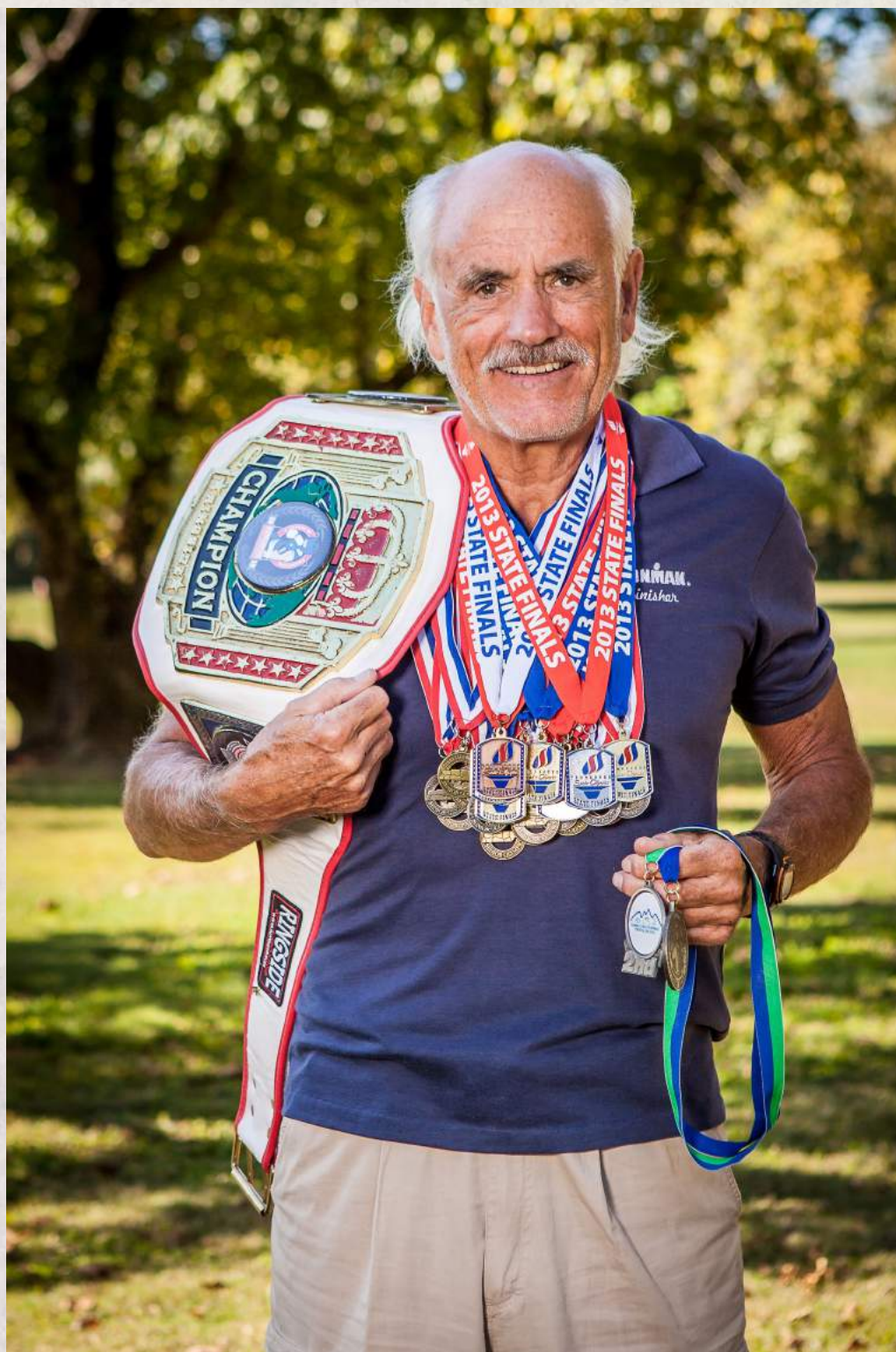
"Even if I hadn't had the replacements, those machines are just painful," Disterdick said. "You're working every muscle in your body. There's probably never been a better machine contrived for conditioning than those Concept 2 rowing machines."

But that was just a warmup to Disterdick's next competition — the Ringside Masters World Tournament next month in Kansas City.

"I've won eight boxing championships," he said. "They have two of these a year. One in March and one in August. I'm hoping I can win 10, then retire."

It's hard to believe, of course. A 71-year-old man on artificial knees climbing into a boxing ring and walking away with a championship belt after besting fighters from all over the world.

And unlike the narrow age group he competes in at the rowing championship, Disterdick's boxing opponents can be anywhere from 10 years



older or younger than him, as well as 10 pounds heavier or lighter. So Disterdick, who weighs about 180, could be fighting a 61-year-old who weighs 190 as easily as he could be confronting an 81-year-old fellow who carries around 170.

"They did it to widen the opponent pool," he said. "Last time I won a beat a guy from China. There will be boxers from 15 to 20 countries in Kansas City. It's the largest boxing tournament in the world. It will be a huge challenge."

The challenge is keeping up with the recently divorced father of six. He works out at least 90 minutes a day, sometimes doubling that. He won 19 medals last summer at the local Senior Olympics.

Yet if you assumed that he grew up a natural, a California surfer's version of Bo Jackson, genetically gifted at everything, you'd be wrong.

"I was the skinny kid nobody ever picked when I was growing up," Disterdick explained. "It was very frustrating."

But upon enrolling in Purdue, he met Bob Inpyn, a Boilermaker swimmer who encouraged Disterdick to come by the school's swimming pool after hours and improve his strokes. By Disterdick's senior year he and Inpyn were co-captains of Purdue's swim team.

Boxing didn't become a focus until he became a member of the 82nd Airborne and met Sonny Shields, whose son, Randy, was once the No. 4 welterweight in the world, holding his own

against such boxing legends as Sugar Ray Leonard and Tommy "Hit Man" Hearns.

"If I was going to be in the military," he said, "I just felt like I needed a better way to defend myself."

Back home in California after serving his country, he became smitten with triathlons, competing in several Iron Mans in Hawaii. There was also the speed skiing, where you race for time on water skis while being pulled behind a "700-800 horsepower boat," according to Disterdick.

But after seeing his Northridge, Calif., home damaged by an earthquake two decades ago, Disterdick and his former wife moved to Chattanooga, where he's remained ever since, running his own video production company and encouraging anyone who will listen to live a healthier life.

"I have a big passion for this," he said Wednesday afternoon. "I feel it's like smoking used to be. We finally turned the corner on it. We finally convinced most people that it's bad for you. I'm now getting the sense that most people are beginning to appreciate the necessity for exercise. And like smoking, it's not just about your quality of life. It's also about economics, because if your unhealthy you're going to have to spend so much money on medicine as you grow older."

Then he was off to a gym in Red Bank to train for the boxing championship.

"I'm so blessed to have these two new knees," he said. "The good Lord willing, I have the sense I'll always be doing something."

And probably doing it far better than most.