

Casual Approach, Exceptional Performance

By Dr. Cathy Utzschneider

Speaking with world-record holder and septagenarian superstar Libby James about her perspective on training, you might be struck by how similar it is to Olympic legend Zola Budd's.

You may know more about Zola Budd, 47, than Libby James, 77 – Budd being the Olympian who set world records (and junior world records in the mile, 2 mile, 2000 and 3000 meter races that still hold almost 30 years later) and the runner who collided at the 1984 Olympics with Mary Decker Slaney. As a master Zola won the silver medal in the 2011 World Masters Athletics Games in the 8K cross country event for women 45 – 49.

Meanwhile Libby James' accomplishments are outstanding – and getting much better with time on an age-graded basis. In her forties and fifties some of her fastest age-graded times fell in the seventy percent range. For example, some of her best results in her forties and fifties included a half marathon at 44, a 71.57% age-graded result and a 5K at 50 in 21:20, a 78.59% age-graded result. In her seventies, however, she has run “seven or eight” age-graded performances over 100% (meaning world record level performance).

She ran the highest age graded result overall at the 2011 U.S. National Club Cross Country Championship in Seattle (100.4%) and the highest age graded win – 103.95% -- and received the victory cup at the Denver Double Road Race this past July. There she ran the 10K in 49:43 and the 5K after that in 25:49. Libby's age-graded scores in that race surpassed those of Olympian Colleen De Reuck and world masters age-group 5K champion Christine Kennedy whose age-graded performances were 94.98 and 94.78 percent respectively.

Above and beyond those results, Libby set a world record in the half marathon for women 75 – 79 just this past January in the Disney Half Marathon where she ran 1:45:52, an age-graded performance of 103.75%. She also set national records in the 5K in both the 70-74 and 75-79 age groups as well as the 10K (75-79) and 10 mile (75-79). (In 2011 she was also named the Running Times Master Runner of the Year.)

Granted, the histories of these two runners are dissimilar. Zola began running as a girl while Libby began running at 35, running her first race at 40. “For the first 5 years I ran a mile a day,” she said. Zola was, clearly, very athletic when young. Libby was not. “I wasn't particularly athletic”, she said adding that she grew up in Seattle. “I played a little junior high softball.” Settling with her husband in Colorado, she loved to ski and play tennis. “My husband was a big tennis player. We played a lot of tennis.”

But the similarities in the approach and perspective of these two world-class runners in their age group is striking, particularly in today's world of world-class runners of all ages, whose training is augmented by many sources both human and technical, including Garmins, coaches, masseurs, chiropractors, and nutritionists.

First, they are quiet about their running. Talking with either of them, you might not know that either even ran. Running is a part of their lives, but just a part not the main part. As Libby said, “I don't think the people know the details of my running. They know I run – If they're interested and ask, I will tell them.”

Speaking with Libby and Zola, you'd probably hear not about running but about their families: Zola supports her children in their activities and that Libby shuttles back and forth to various family members. Libby has two daughters, two sons, six grandsons and six granddaughters.

"Three quarters of them are runners," she said, cheerfully. You might also hear about Libby's part-time job as a reporter for a small, rural Colorado monthly newspaper, about the children's books she has written or edited (she just wrote one about running), or about artwork she creates with teabags. "I process used tea bags to create note cards, book marks, and decorate wine bottles – it's goofy but fun – I sometimes add color but tea bags have interesting stains when they dry out...."

What is unusual and similar about Libby and Zola given their world-class success is that their training is simple, natural even casual – almost minimalist. Libby doesn't have a Garmin or heart rate monitor. "I've never had a nutritionist, massage therapist, chiropractor, or coach," she said. "Never.... "I'm not a very technical runner," she said. "I don't do 'Runkeepers' either. I like to go out and enjoy the scenery."

Like Zola, Libby's attitude towards speed work is consistent, yet informal. She doesn't go to the track regularly. "I'll take a half mile road near my house and run as fast as I can, she said. "Nothing planned or formal. I go out my front door I don't feel a sense of competition with others, only with myself. I train because I love to run." A member of the Fort Collins Running Club, she usually runs alone or with her children.

Her increasing success has occurred despite fewer miles to accommodate the aging process. Whereas she ran up to 70 miles in her 40s, she now runs 20 to 30 miles a week, even in training for a marathon. "Twenty-five miles a week is about as much as I can handle now," said Libby. "My usual run is 4 miles on the road, sometimes 5, and then I do a longer run on the weekend, up to 10 miles. It's pretty much the same every week throughout the year."

Like Zola's approach to weight training and stretching, Libby's is "casual. I stretch sporadically," she said. (Zola said running hills constituted her lower body weight training, and she tried to fit in push-ups and sit-ups occasionally.)

Nature and household chores provide some strength training, she said. "I do my own strength training and stretching on my own erratically," she said. A widow for 22 years now, Libby – who is 5'2" and weighs 99 pounds – said her strength training is built into every day living. "I have to do all the gardening, and I put up the storm windows.....and I have a little Pilates routine that I do on my own occasionally."

While her favorite races so far are 10 milers and half marathons, she said she's thinking about another, different goal. "Sometime I'd like to break the 1 mile world record for 75 to 79 – it's something like 6:54 or 6:55," she said. "I did a mile in 6:58 at altitude this August".

"Running is an important part of my life," she said, "and just a part of it. What's most important is consistency. Even on the days you don't feel like going, just go – you'll never regret that you went."

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