

# EAST OREGONIAN

## RUNNING: Local marathoner overcame obesity, kidney cancer

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Photo contributed by Darryl Houghtelling Darryl Houghtelling celebrates briefly on top of Maiden Peak, the 53-mile-mark of the Waldo Lake Ultramarathon and 7,818 feet above sea level. The race was August 16, 2014.

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CONDON — Not just because it took 17 hours did Darryl Houghtelling cry at the finish line of the Waldo Lake 100k Ultramarathon. This was Houghtelling's sixth such run in four years.

Nor was it the 62 miles of mountainous terrain, peaking and crashing like a distressed heart monitor, which wore him down so completely. Houghtelling sometimes runs 20 miles for a haircut.

And he didn't cry because a few days before doctors told Houghtelling and his wife they had found a cancerous growth on his left kidney. Against their suggestion, Houghtelling ran the race in the face of imminent surgery.

Houghtelling cried because two years ago he failed the course, limped off the trail without finishing. He needed to prove he could. Plus, he didn't get the beanie awarded to finishers, which he coveted.

"It's kind of silly, all that for a hat," said Houghtelling. "I don't even like hats."

Houghtelling, 44, is a retired trucker turned marathoner and hoarder of trophies. In his Condon home, he has a room full of medals and a Forest Gump-themed photo album filled with racing bibs. He records all his races and finishing

times in a notebook. In that room, too, are

times in a notebook. In that room, too, are pictures of his former self when he weighed more than 300 pounds.

A former track star from Dufur High School, the Portland-native Houghtelling held the 3,000-meter record for 24 years in Class 1A high schools before Alex Dillard broke it in 2010. After graduating, he went into the Marine Corps during the Gulf War and served as an anti-tank infantryman and aquatic survival instructor. Then he moved to Green Bay, Wisconsin to be with his first wife, and took a trucking job.

“Other than blowing people up or lifeguarding, I didn’t have many skills,” he said. “But that job — it kills you.”

The brutal driving schedule kept Houghtelling on the road for weeks at a time. He staved off boredom by gorging on food across 48 states. He quickly ballooned to 300 pounds while standing about five-foot-six-inches. His health and his marriage deteriorated.

Houghtelling then met Jennifer Husnick and, along with Houghtelling’s two kids, they relocated to Condon. Houghtelling fought his weight by dieting, but relapses eventually pushed him to 344 pounds. His blood pressure and cholesterol levels skyrocketed and sleep apnea kept him hooked to a breathing apparatus at night, which he described as a “Darth Vader machine.”

His father, who died in 2010, pleaded with his son.

“You know, son,” Darryl remembered his father, Harold, saying, “I’d wish you’d get back down to your jogging weight and be healthy.”

Doctors at Oregon Health and Science University told Houghtelling he was a perfect candidate for lap-band surgery, which affixes a belt around the stomach and limits food intake. His health insurance, however, wouldn’t cover it. He couldn’t pay \$35,000 out of pocket for the surgery in the United States, so Houghtelling and his wife flew to Tijuana, to the Centro de Ultrasonido y Radiologia del Pacifico where Dr. Huacuz offered the same procedure for \$8,000.

“I wanted to change,” said Houghtelling. “Doing simple things like bathroom stuff, it’s harder. You’re out of breath. It just takes so much more effort.”

He then began to walk around a local track with his pug, Chunk. Ten months later, in October 2009, he ran the Run Like Hell half marathon in two hours, and thus began his collection of marathon tchotchkes.

However, in early August of this year, Houghtelling decided to treat himself to a hamburger while his wife was away. His cinched stomach couldn’t handle the portions and Houghtelling found himself in the hospital. It was then doctors discovered a growth on his left kidney — renal cell carcinoma. They said it hadn’t spread far.

“I joke with people, but eating actually saved my life,” said Houghtelling.

Houghtelling was immediately booked for surgery to slice out nine centimeters of kidney, but in the meantime his wife urged him to retry the Waldo Lake run anyway, if only to take his mind off the surgery. It worked for a little while, until Houghtelling crossed the finish line and broke down in tears.

Six weeks after surgery, Houghtelling returned to running, completing the Portland Marathon in just less than four hours alongside his running partner, Natalie Irzyk.

“He’s a beast himself,” Irzyk said of Houghtelling’s journey.

Flipping through his album of racing bibs, Houghtelling has his sights set on running the New York City Marathon in

November, followed by the Boston Marathon in April. He still wants to expand his collection. Sometime around the bend, Houghtelling wants to run the Western States Endurance Run, a 100-mile ultramarathon in California.

“For that you get a belt buckle,” Houghtelling said. “I’ll wear a belt buckle.”

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