

2021 Runner Profile: Don Halke

Don Halke has started the 50-mile event of the Tussey Mountainback 50 Mile Relay and Ultramarathon 14 times and finished 11 times. In runner parlance, the three times he didn't cross the finish line are called DNFs, for "did not finish."

Halke has had his share of setbacks, major ones. But he keeps coming back. That may be his secret weapon.

"I have had many wonderful moments at the race," said Halke, "including meeting people along the course and the aid stations. But my very favorite moment was on October 16, 2010, exactly one year from my heart attack, two stents and quadruple bypass surgery. On that date, I set my 50-mile PR [personal record]. And I have finished fifty-two 50 milers!"

As a runner, Halke's medical history is a tale like no other.

"I had a heart attack on October 16, 2009, two weeks after running a sub-10-hour Tussey 50 miler and two months after running the Burning River 100 miler," said Halke. "I have damage at the bottom of my heart and I had two stents and four bypasses and was in the hospital for 11 days. In 2016, my doctors implanted a pacemaker and told me not to run, hike, climb. I fired them and have a team supporting me at Penn State's Hershey Medical Center."

Halke, now 62, admitted that his current team of medical professionals have mixed views on his busy running regimen.

"Some are amazed and don't know how I can run and exert myself like I do, but they tell me to keep exercising!"

Halke, who lives in Newport, PA, is quick to answer race director Mike Casper's question about what brings him back time and again.

"You, your volunteers, the challenging course and most importantly, the community-based charities that are selected to benefit from the race proceeds."

A graduate of Penn State, Halke worked as a CPA and director of auditing for the PA Public School Employees Retirement System. He and his wife also operate the Lost Horizons farm, which was at one time the second largest sheep operation in Perry County.

Though Halke has retired, that hasn't slowed him down.

"I'm retired now, but I do a lot of other things, including operating our sheep farm—it used to be larger, with over 200 breeding head—and volunteering with the Tuscarora State Forest to perform trail work. But running and hiking are what enriches my soul."

A social animal, Halke rarely returns to the Mountainback alone.

"I love bringing new folks to Tussey. I like to support races that are not run for profit, but with a purpose. Tussey does that and seems to touch my old heart. The folks at the

aid stations make you feel welcome, [Mike makes] the runners feel welcome, the course has big climbs, but they are not technical, the views are spectacular, and the Rothrock State Forest is just beautiful!"

As has been the case for most runners due to the pandemic, Halke's year thus far has not included many races.

"I have run a few races and several long runs I created or organized. I did a 20 miler, an unofficial 50K, and ran in the Grand Canyon twice, recently running about 26 miles Rim to Rim. I have not run any 50 milers this year."

Over the years, Halke has done his share of races.

"I have completed over 130 marathons, fifty-two 50 milers and eight 100-mile events, including finishing Western States twice!"

With such dedication to running, one might wonder if that has rubbed off on others.

"My sons and daughter-in-law have all run half marathons or marathons," said Halke. "My wife runs/hikes and has completed a marathon and the 18 miler in the Big Horn mountains. Last year, I encouraged several folks to come run the Tussey 50 as their first 50 miler. Yes, I have helped and encouraged many friends to begin running. I have helped and encouraged many friends to run their first race and even ran a full 100 miler with a friend who was running her first 100."

Halke said these experiences have also enriched his own world.

"I have been blessed by the folks that I have met through running. Some have seen me and my bright shorts and recognized me at other races. Two years ago, I was spotted in Scotland, while running the Loch Ness Monster Marathon, by a woman from Connecticut. The following year we met up for the Pine Creek Challenge!"

Halke's own view of life may hold a nugget of wisdom for us all.

"None of us knows how long we will be here and able to play in the woods, running with our friends. Don't waste a minute...go do it. Make memories you will cherish to carry you through when you no longer can."

The Mountainback event welcomes both recreational and competitive runners to participate on relay teams of 2 to 8 runners, as well as offering the solo ultramarathon option.

Proceeds from this year's event will support CommonFood Centre County, a non-profit, all-volunteer group whose key mission is to resource underserved and under-employed elderly, single parent families, and low-income families in Centre County and neighboring areas with nutritious food and related services.

