

## 2021 Relay Team Profile: The Old Men of the Mountains

It's October, which means State College runner George Etzweiler has a familiar task at hand.

As captain of a running relay team known as The Old Men of the Mountains, Etzweiler's charge is to make sure the team has a full roster on Oct. 31 for the Tussey Mountainback 50 Mile Relay and Ultramarathon.

This year's event will mark the 15th time on the course for this relay team, all age 65 or older, and Etzweiler, their ever-youthful ringleader, has passed the milestone age of 100. Now 101 years old, the



retired Penn State engineering professor may run at a slower pace than in previous years, but he clearly has a glint in his eye when the subject of the relay event comes up.

Since filling out the 8-person roster involves recruiting senior runners, there are several variables involved, including schedules, general health and readiness to run. And also throw in Etzweiler's interest in keeping the team members' average age as high as possible.

Several of the group have trained together for years, often running the ascending switchbacks of the course's first leg on Rothrock State Forest's Laurel Run Road in preparation.

Tragic circumstances have intervened in the team's plans this year. In September, one long-time runner on the team, Steve Liadis, died of a heart attack, and Etzweiler's daughter, Shirley Fye, died after a months-long battle with cancer. Her father spent as much time as he could caring for her.

Another regular team member is not able to run this year. And Etzweiler suffered a broken shoulder in June.

But plans for the team's participation are still on, said Larry Etzweiler, George's son, who has also run for the team in the past.

"Doctors are persuaded that Dad has made a full recovery from the broken shoulder," said Larry, "and

that the break healed very nicely. Dad's view is that his shoulder is still a bit stiff and it's hard for him to lift his left arm as high as he used to lift it, but basically he agrees with the doctors."

George Etzweiler plans to run Leg 5 of the 12-leg course, a 3.5-mile, mostly downhill and flat section of gravel road ending at Alan Seeger Natural Area. George's wife, Mary, came to Alan Seeger with her oxygen tank in 2010 to see George finish his leg that year.

"In 2010, Shirley brought Mom to Alan Seeger," recalled Larry. "When Shirley told Dad that Mom was in the car, Dad ran to the car and met Mom, who told him, 'I'm so proud of you.' Mary died less than a month later.

"I'm having my cheering section meet me there," said George by phone on Saturday. "I ran two miles today on Laurel Run Road, and that felt pretty good. I finished standing up," he added, and you could hear his smile.

"The problem, if any," said Larry, "with his completing the 5th leg is not his shoulder. Rather it's that his shoulder, plus the time he and the family spent caring for Shirley, took away from his training, and age is catching up."

As soon as the doctors stated that George Etzweiler could run again, which was in August, George started exercising, walking and very slow running with Steve Liadis and Jay Maynard.

"They usually came to his home to go out with him," said Larry. "He didn't start doing much with Laurel Run Road or the Tussey area until about three weeks ago, after Shirley died."

Larry Etzweiler, at age 75, said he is a potential teammate for this year's race.

"But if Dad can find others who want to join - and there are several - then I'll be happy to volunteer rather than run. I'm 25 pounds lighter than I was in April, and that should help. But I've also run very little since April. I spent most of my time caretaking for Shirley."

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.

**Tussey Mountainback 50 Mile Relay and Ultramarathon**