

Race statistics show age attrition

By Bill Shaw

The Facts

Published August 3, 2009

The late Dr. J. R. Jackson, the first president of Brazosport College, responded to statistics by saying, "There are liars, damn liars and statisticians." The point is obvious: statistics can be used to prove anything, no matter how far from the truth.

In the Hermann Memorial Sprint Triathlon on June 28, I placed second in the 70 and over competition. I won by default because of attrition: no other triathletes in their 70s showed. The statistics say I was the second best triathlete over 70 in the race.

"Attrition is "a reduction or decrease in numbers, size, or strength," which is true for runners of all ages; older race participants decrease in numbers and strength.

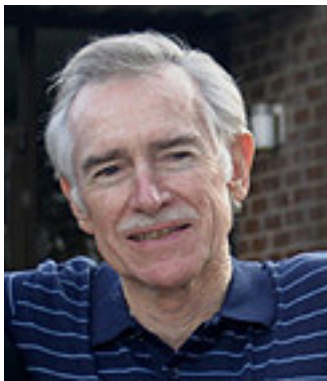
Local statistics and running demographics in area 2009 races suggest some conclusions you may accept or reject.

Only four 70-plus runners finished the seven local races in 2009—The Spectacle Spectacular 5K and 10K, the Race for the Cure 5K, the Gator Gallop 5K, the Flapjack 5K, the Firecracker 4 and the Mosquito Chase; none was female. Here, of course, is where the statistics in this category and all the age groups are skewed: those four finishers were the same runners in the cumulative statistics, as are the

runners in the other age brackets.

What age groups ranked first, second and third in local races although, as noted above, many of the runners in the age brackets are repeat participants.

For the men, it's a tie; 22 percent of the male participants were 30-39 or 40-49. The 50-59 males were second at 15 percent; the 13-19-year-olds were third at 13 percent, even though that age group has the most high school youngsters in it.



For the women, the 20-29-year-olds were first at almost a third, 30 percent. The women 40-49 were second in participation at 25 percent, and the women 13-19 were third at 20 percent.

Cumulatively (male and female), the 40-49 year olds were first with 23 percent of the finishers, the 29-20 group second with 20 percent, and the 30-39 third with 19 percent.

What about the "Baby Boomers"? This is a difficult demographic to determine because I don't have all the specific ages for all participants. Most demographers agree that the baby boom started in 1946, nine months after the end of World War II, and lasted for 19 years. The youngest baby boomer was born in 1965 and is 34-35 if we accept this demographic statistic; the oldest is 53. By my very rough estimate, boomers made up about 50 percent of the local race participants. This is a guess rather than a verifiable statistic.

The attrition rate in the races I studied seems to favor men. Six percent of the male finishers were

60-69 as compared with only one percent of the women. No women 70 and older finished the races I studied; four male finishers, four percent, did. I am in this category. If you check the starting lines of local races, you will most likely see the same 70-year-old faces: Orville Kremmer, Cliff Wilson and me. I am the slowest by far.

I have no idea why men outnumber women in local races after 50. The projected life span of men is 75.7; the projected life span for women is 80.8. Running is not nor has it been a "men's" thing for many years. Female participant attrition is a statistical and demographic mystery.

Perhaps men are shameless and don't mind exposing their old, saggy, wrinkled bodies to public view, and women do.

Take my projections for what they are, statistical speculations. One thing, however, is true: if you want to fight age attrition in road racing, get out there and run. A finish at any age is a victory and heroic.

Bill Shaw's running column appears every other Monday in *The Facts*.

