

# Columbus MONTHLY

## FEATURES

### Fitness freaks at 50

*Age is just a number to these adventurers, who are dedicated to mountain climbing, grueling marathons and world-championship triathlons.*

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Reflective shoe strips bob in the inky-black stillness at 6 am as three marathoners whip through a 13-mile endurance run.



Tracy DiSabato-Aust and her husband, Jim Aust, in their Team USA jerseys outside their Sunbury home. Photo by Lenny C. Lepola

While wearing sturdy hiking boots, two seasoned mountain climbers strap on 60-pound backpacks and trudge up and down 28 flights of stairs.

With cycling shoes clipped firmly into pedals, half-Ironman hopefuls tackle a 56-mile bike ride on the back roads of Ohio, then unwind with a nice long run.

These are just warm-ups for an elite group of Central Ohioans who practice some measure of extreme sports. And, perhaps even more impressively, they all have hit the half-century mark—the dreaded 50. But to them, age is irrelevant, defining little more than how far down they have to scroll to read their post-race stats, printed incrementally by age group.

Their bodies have held up remarkably well through some of the most punishing races and athletic endeavors across the U.S. and around the world. They agree that smart and consistent training, day after day, year after year, is the key. When they set a goal—an Olympic-distance triathlon, back-to-back marathons or a new mountain peak to scale—they cross-train, try to eat well and stay focused on the prize.

Plus, they all admit, it's just plain fun.

### Top of the world

The progression goes something like this: Shasta, Denali, Everest. The climbs at the end of the list require unimaginable courage and perseverance, given the statistics—Denali and Everest both rank in the Top 10 Most Dangerous Climbs—but none are beyond the realm

of possibility for 51-year-old Guy Worley.

Worley, CEO of the Columbus Downtown Development Corp. (CDDC) and Capitol South, has been climbing serious mountains for well over a decade. He's scaled peaks with wife Caroline, his son Jake, longtime friends and, most importantly, highly experienced guides. He's checked off lots of mountains out West—Adams, Hood, Rainier, St. Helens—and exotic, challenging peaks in foreign countries as well.

“You get such a great sense of achievement when you're done,” Worley says. “Then you look forward to your next goal.”

Rhett Ricart, 53, CEO of Ricart Automotive, has done a number of climbs with Worley. They did Mt. Kilimanjaro in 1998. “At 17,000 feet, I was yelling, ‘It's gonna get colder. Let's go, let's go!’ like a crazed football coach,” Ricart says, laughing. “I'm a real Type A personality.” Last year, it was an attempt on the Matterhorn. They trained at Red Rock Canyon in Nevada to perfect the rock-climbing technique Matterhorn demands, but arrived in the Alps near the end of the climbing season. For four days, they were snowed in, and the climb was a no-go. Disappointing? Ricart laughs again. “Yeah, I was really crushed. We're sitting in the Alps eating lamb chops and drinking red wine. Not like when I was crouching in some hut in Ecuador, waiting to summit Cotopaxi.”

“As a climber, Guy is analytical, focused,” Ricart says. “He plans it all out. He's always been that way, since our days as fraternity brothers at Ohio State.”

No surprise there. (Not the frat boys part, the huge planner part.) Worley served as Franklin County administrator and later as chief of staff for Mayor Mike Coleman before accepting his position at CDDC in 2006 to coordinate downtown development. “We don't have the large amounts of time it takes to do multiple climbs in a year, given our demanding jobs,” says Worley, speaking of the constraints that he and Caroline, 38, share. Caroline, an attorney specializing in small business and entrepreneurial law, recently formed her own practice, Worley Law LLC.

“With this new business,” Caroline says, “it's been a challenge to find time to work out at all.” She's used to three-hour sessions on the exercise bike and eight-mile runs two days a week—it's part of what she and Guy do to prep for races. If the weather cooperates on the weekends, a 60-mile bike ride is a must, heading to the Licking County trail that connects Johnstown with Granville and Newark. And when mountain climbing is on the docket, they tramp the gym's stair machines with 60-pound backpacks. “When Guy worked for Franklin County, we used to do the 28 flights of stairs in the courthouse building with our backpacks,” Caroline remembers. “Every floor looked the same.”

Although Worley estimates he's competed in more than 60 triathlons, and Caroline's done 5Ks to half-marathons to duathlons, the Miami Man International and Half Iron Distances last November was their first half-Ironman. It's a 1.2-mile swim, followed by 56 miles on the bike and then a 13.1-mile run. “It was a good experience,” Worley says hesitantly.

Sounds as if they may have run into trouble. “We trained hard here in Columbus, and October was pretty chilly, maybe 40-degree weather,” he says. “But race day—remember, it’s Florida—was 85 degrees and humid. Plus they were getting the remnants of a hurricane, so we had 40-mile-per-hour winds. The main thing was, we finished.”

Summer’s looking busy—they’re doing a 14,179-foot Mt. Shasta climb in June with Guy’s son Jake, 22, a standout athlete who played basketball for Jacksonville State University before transferring to OSU. “Shasta’s a glacier peak. It’ll be a good challenge—we’ll need the ice ax and crampons,” Worley says. In July, the Columbus International Triathlon is a given. “Last year, Mayor Coleman and I raced it. It was his first triathlon, and he’s hooked.” And finally, there’s a half-Ironman in September, possibly the new one up at Cedar Point.

The stakes get bigger in 2011: Denali looms on the to-do list. Worley’s friend John O’Meara, executive director of Columbus Metro Parks, summited North America’s highest peak (20,320 feet) several years ago and warns, “It’s physically and mentally difficult. Because it’s close to the Arctic Circle, it’s known for extreme weather. Took us 13 days on the standard route. Your brain gets oxygen-starved—that’s where the mental toughness comes in.”

And then there’s the roof of the world, at 29,028 feet. Caroline has been mesmerized by “Everest: Beyond the Limit” on the Discovery Channel—astounding footage that’s breathtakingly beautiful and patently scary: deadly avalanches, riveting reports from base camp, interviews with climbers struggling to acclimatize. Nothing says traffic jam like the pullback shots revealing a long line of climbers inching toward the top. You can’t afford to be the weak link in a place that has a one in 10 death rate, where stopping can be fatal for others. “We’re very conscious of the safety factor,” she says, speaking of a possible 2012 attempt on Everest. “You have to be in incredible physical shape, surround yourself with skilled guides and trust them.”

Worley would like to put a team together from Columbus for the 2012 Everest expedition. So far the short list includes Caroline, Jake, possibly O’Meara (they’ve talked) and Ricart (he doesn’t rule it out). Despite the odds on the mountain, chances are good that they’ll do it.

“It’s the ultimate goal,” says Worley.

### **Fifty-state marathoner**

Glancing around the early morning crowd at the Starbucks in New Albany on a recent Monday, you’d be hard-pressed to pick out the super-marathon man. The guy who’s run 26.2 miles in each of the 50 states and competed in tons of other races, including grueling trail runs and 50Ks.

A small, wiry blond—tanned face aimed at his laptop—would be your best bet, but no. The correct answer is the guy who's much taller than you'd expect (6-foot) and of average weight. He's fashionable in a brown leather jacket, with a kind face and glasses, but looking more computer wizard than grizzled überathlete. Gary Nuss—who, after 21 years of racing, can still run four marathons in four weeks and deliver, like he did last spring, surprisingly strong finishes in the first and third races—is your 50-stater.

“I know. It's crazy,” he shrugs, regarding his obsession with running. “But I have friends who are even crazier.”

At 50, Nuss balances a lot—his job as director of construction for Nationwide Realty Investors, an empty-nester life in Gahanna with wife Pam and the close ties they maintain with their daughters Julie, 25, who's married and lives in Virginia, and Megan, 20, an OSU student. Add to that his community involvement through their church and a crushing schedule of 10 to 14 marathons per year, and you've got a guy on the go.

Nuss took up running in 1989. His parents had been runners until bad knees forced them out—his mom, Patsy, ran the New York City Marathon once and the Columbus Marathon twice. Nuss says initially running was challenging—he was a smoker then. “The first mile was painful,” he remembers. “But I got out there and did it again. From the day I started running, I completely lost the urge to smoke.”

After entering 5K and 10K races and a few triathlons, Nuss had stepped it up to marathon distance by 1991 with the Columbus Marathon. The 50-state goal didn't take shape until 2000, when friend Craig Wanner announced plans to do it. Joining the 50 States Marathon Club was a smart move—10 certified marathons and the group will let you in to encourage the quest. The camaraderie is infectious, Nuss says, and its website keeps you pumped with stats on its 1,977 members. “It's where I've met most of my friends,” he says.

Only 570 marathoners have done all 50 states. And there are rules. You have to prove you completed the marathon by showing published results or the bib number and finisher's medal combo. Don't think if the course covers more than one state you can double-dip—count just the start or the finish state. “Some states have only one marathon, so you have to plan around that,” Nuss says.

And sometimes the race you ran in a certain state doesn't end up counting, such as the Michigan Trail Marathon Nuss first attempted in 1997. “I'm embarrassed to admit I dropped out,” he says. “It's a single track, double loop, but the trail was straight up and down. It was too hard, so I said this is crazy, and quit.” But the next year Nuss returned, and despite temps in the 40s, high winds and driving rain, he finished. Unfortunately, the finisher's prize was a pine sapling. (“I planted it. It died,” he says, shaking his head.) No medal, no stats, no proof. He had to pick another Michigan run for his 50-states qualification.

Pam joined him in the “fun states,” as he calls them—Hawaii, Alaska and Florida (the

Disney World Marathon)—and witnessed his banner day on Oct. 20, 2007. That’s when Nuss completed the Green Mountain Marathon near Burlington, Vermont, and became a certified 50-stater. “Yeah, by 2004, my wife said ‘Get it done.’ Although she’s very supportive, I think she meant, then you’re done running marathons. I took it to mean running the 50,” Nuss says with a laugh. “My wife—and my parents—are worried I’ll destroy my knees.”

He’s been through his share of injuries: a torn Achilles tendon that sidelined him for the better part of a year and a diagnosis of “runner’s knee,” requiring cross-training and gym work to strengthen the thigh muscles. Then there’s weight creep. He stopped running for a bit in 2008, about the time of his daughter’s wedding, and saw the pounds pile on until he topped out at 238. He even went to Weight Watchers. “But what really made the difference were core exercises, cardio and weightlifting. In three months, I was back down to 200 pounds,” Nuss says.

Local running buddies, such as Dublin resident Scott Williams, 41, a software sales rep with Computer Associates, train with Gary. It’s a mutual motivation thing. “I train five days a week,” Nuss says. “It’s hard. Boring. I surround myself with people who run marathons at about my pace.”

Williams agrees, and adds, “Gary is so welcoming to those just getting in the sport. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for him. He’s a good guy.”

Nuss’s ultimate goal is to run 100 marathons before age 60. He’s done 79 so far. His philosophy sounds reasonable enough. “Training for a marathon is 90 percent of the pain, so why waste it all on just one marathon?”

As for those buddies who might rank just a little crazier than Nuss, Williams recounts the 2009 Rattlesnake Trail 50K (31-plus miles) in West Virginia, where he, Nuss and Larry Macon, the 64-year-old San Antonio attorney who in 2008 ran a record-setting 105 marathons in a single year, all finished together.

“Midway through the race,” Williams says, “Larry turns to us and says, ‘I gotta hurry up. I’ve got a plane to catch. I’ve got a marathon in Montana tomorrow.’”

### **Team USA triathletes go international**

As the American flag was carried in during the Parade of Nations and Official Opening Ceremony, the 350 members of Team USA followed in their red, white and blue warm-up suits, waving to the spectators. “It felt just like the Olympics,” says Sunbury resident and nationally recognized garden expert Tracy DiSabato-Aust. It probably felt even more so once the competition got underway—she and her husband, Jim Aust, went head to head with former Olympians and national champions from 42 countries last September as they competed at the 2009 ITU Triathlon World Championships in Gold Coast, Australia.

DiSabato-Aust, 50, placed 11th in her age group of 70 world-class competitors, missing the top 10 by fewer than five seconds. (“I was busy smiling and enjoying the finish line. Geez!” she winces.) Aust, 52, finished 41st in his age group, out of a field of 90. The Olympic-distance race—a .93-mile swim, 24.8-mile draft-legal bike race and 6.2-mile run—began in the harbor and moved to the scenic Gold Coast Highway. Aust describes the mass-start, open-water swim in Southport Harbour: “It was the most physical, testosterone-charged swim ever. The men used their elbows and bodies the entire way.”

The transitions from one sport to the next are timed, too. “The fourth sport,” as DiSabato-Aust calls it. Shoes are clipped into bike pedals ahead of time, flying mounts onto the bike are quickest (unless you become tangled up) and one-pull-and-you’re-done elastic shoe laces are preferred. “It was like poetry in motion at Worlds, unbelievably fluid,” she says. “Takes practice!”

This is not their first time sparring internationally. In 2008, they represented Team USA in the run-bike-run at the ITU Duathlon World Championships in Rimini, Italy.

It’s off to Budapest in September—both are back in this year’s ITU Triathlon World Championships. They qualified by finishing in the top 18 in their age group last August at the National Championships in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. The swim portion in the river was particularly rough. “They had opened a levy upriver, so we were swimming against this massive current,” Aust recalls. “I felt like I was out there two days. They were actually pulling people out of the water.”

Their rise in the triathlon world has been undeniably extraordinary. Both have achieved upper-level status—DiSabato-Aust is in the top 2 percent of USAT-ranked triathletes, and Aust is in the top 8 percent. “This is only our fifth season of competition,” says DiSabato-Aust. “We’re still newbies.” While they’ve both always been athletic, swimming was new to the couple when they started triathlons, and biking had been no more than a leisurely pastime. “And now Jim is an *animal* on the bike,” she says.

What’s even more extraordinary is they both maintain such demanding professional lives. Aust has a dental practice, Gentle Family Dental Care, in Columbus. “I have a terrific partner and a great staff who fill in at the office when I’m not there,” he explains. “Tracy and I schedule these races way out on the calendar, so everyone knows what’s coming.”

DiSabato-Aust is at the top of her professional game as a renowned horticulturist, lecturer on the international circuit and author of such books as *The Well-Tended Perennial Garden* and *The Well-Designed Mixed Garden*. “It’s about time management,” she says. “I write in the morning, train two to three hours every afternoon, with one day a week off. Even when we travel for pleasure, we incorporate training.”

“We didn’t start racing until our son Zach was in high school,” she adds. Zach, 20, a student at Eastern Kentucky University, was a three-time All-State cross-country runner at DeSales High School.

Last year began badly for DiSabato-Aust. The family was skiing at Deer Valley, Utah, in February when the unthinkable happened. “I was just skiing along, nothing fancy, and turned,” she says. “I felt it snap.” She had torn her ACL, requiring surgery and extensive rehab. Remarkably, her first race back was the Wendy’s Sprint Distance Triathlon in mid June. “Because they start the age groups at different times, you never know how you’ve done in the race until the results are posted. But I had friends coming up after the race saying, ‘Tracy, I think you’ve got this! I think you may have won.’ Sure enough, I was first overall female and Jim was third overall male.”

The couple trains together 90 percent of the time—this month they’ll do a triathlon training camp in Tucson, Arizona. Plus they work with a professional coach—Brian Grasky—and a nutritionist year-round. “It’s a good business move and frees up time for other priorities,” DiSabato-Aust says. “We can’t afford to over-train or under-train.”

Attaching their bikes to a bike trainer indoors gives them realistic workouts on bad-weather days—a computerized system simulates specific race courses. The swim is trickier. “We swim at the Westerville Rec Center, and in the summer, Alum Creek. Plus we do the 7 am Saturday swim with the Columbus Sharks masters swim team. But it is harder to fit in,” Aust says.

So, what do people like this eat? “Lots of lean protein, whole grains, good fats, protein shakes,” DiSabato-Aust says. Their nutrition coach, Rick Kattouf, has helped fine-tune their food intake (six to eight small meals a day) and they eat clean 98 percent of the time. The only admitted vice is DiSabato-Aust’s penchant for Monster Energy Drinks. “I buy them by the case,” she whispers.

Their athleticism has actually increased as they’ve gotten older. “We’re still getting faster,” says Aust. “I’ve had no serious injuries—maybe just a calf-muscle pull—because we increase training volume by no more than 10 percent per week. So many muscle groups are required for the sport; injury prevention is built in.”

For those considering their first race, DiSabato-Aust advises, “Think of yourself as an athlete—it moves you from just exercising to real training.” Aust adds that any bike, even an upright, will do to get started.

He pauses. “The guys just have to be OK with a little spandex.”

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