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Staff photo by Bob Hammerstrom

Watching for rocks, trail runner Rich Busa of Marlborough, Mass., sprints down a trail at Callahan State Park near his home recently. The 77-year-old former minor league baseball player has accumulated numerous awards for the marathons, ultra-marathons and snowshoe events he's competed in.

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Local/Regional

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78-year-old has completed many races and is still going

By **ANDREW WOLFE**, Telegraph Staff

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Rich Busa dropped out of his first race, in 1948, but he's more than made up for it since.

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Busa, 78, ran his first marathon in 1983, when he was 53 years young. Since then, he's finished 70 more marathons and 61 ultra-marathons, including eight years of the Vermont 100 (<http://www.vermont100.com/>).

For those unfamiliar with the event, that's 100 miles, non-stop, through the Green Mountains of Vermont. Busa was 61 when he first ran it, and he remains the oldest person ever to have finished, in 2002 at the tender age of 72.

"I finish first in my age group most of my races. That sounds impressive, but in many cases I'm the only one running," Busa said.

Busa races just about every week, year-round. In the winter, he runs and races on snowshoes. Excepting the Mount Washington Road Race, Busa races exclusively off-road, through the woods and over mountains all around New England (<http://www.mountwashingtonroadrace.com/>).

Busa's perspective on running is as unique as his abilities. On June 16, he finished first in his division (men, 75-79) at Mount Washington, running 7.6 miles up the mountain in 2 hours, 12 minutes and 44 seconds. The very next day, Busa drove out to North Adams, Mass., for the Mount Greylock Trail Race, a half-marathon, which he finished with a time of 3:06:58, 117th overall, and first in his division.

"Mt. Washington is nothing, because it's going up," he said. "Greylock you're going up and down. Big difference. If you had to come down Mt. Washington, I wouldn't be able to do that. It would kill you. As strenuous as it is going up, it takes nothing out of you. I mean, you wake up the next morning and never know you did anything. I know, it sounds crazy."

Before there were running shoes

People began running not too long after our species learned to walk, and the first footraces probably weren't long after that. The marathon, after all, was invented in ancient Greece.

Running wasn't always as popular as it is now. When Busa started running in 1945, most people would have considered recreational running an oxymoron.

"I ran at night a lot because I felt kind of funny. People looked at you running back then, they thought you'd committed a crime or something," Busa says. "I just liked to run, that's all."

Busa grew up in Belmont, Mass., not far from the Boston Marathon, but he remembers being inspired by athletes trying to break the four-minute mile. Runners had been trying for a long time, and many thought it impossible. Englishman Roger Bannister was the first to do it, in 1954. Busa remembers a runner coming close during an attempt at an indoor track in Boston.

"I had a course from my house... I've gone back and measured, it was right around a mile," he said. "I'd just fly around that loop and I'd time myself."

There wasn't much support for the sport, either. There was no specialized equipment, and few organized races.

"It's hard to explain to younger people. There weren't any running clothes. There weren't any running shoes," Busa said. "I ran in – and I don't even know where I got them – it was a shoe called the Randy boat shoe. It was used on decks of boats, and it had all these little gripping things underneath. They weighed a pound apiece, they were heavy. I would run in those, a pair of long khaki pants and a plain T-shirt."

"There was no poly stuff. You ran in cotton all the time, or in the winter time you used wool," he recalled.

Quenching one's thirst during distance runs was a challenge, too.

"What I used to do, I'd take an orange, you know, and break it up in sections, wrap it in wax paper and hold it my hand and run, and I'd eat one every so often," Busa said. "Kids today, they think plastic has been around forever. You couldn't run with a water bottle when I started running, unless you wanted to run with a glass bottle."

Busa logs his runs and races, but his notes from those early years got lost in a move. Busa remembers his first race well, though. Like many of Busa's stories, it starts with "This is funny...."

"My aunt and uncle lived in Hampton (NH), and in '48 they were having a 10-mile road race. Part of it went right along the beach, and it was in the fall. It was a really lousy, overcast, cold, very windy day."

His uncle had volunteered to help direct runners along the course, and suggested Busa give the race a try.

“I don’t even know if I had ever did 10 (miles). I think where I was running was probably about six miles,” at the time, he said, adding later, “Today, you have your choice of a 100 races on the weekend, there’s so many of them. There wasn’t then.”

“Of course there were no highways then. You had to go up Route 1, the old Route 1. My brother-in-law had an old ’34 Plymouth coupe, so we headed up and we got totally lost,” Busa said.

“I get up there and the race was starting. I had a pair of khaki pants and a black navy mock turtle sweater, so I took off. I had no idea how to run. I ran like a maniac, and of course I totally burned myself out. Going along the beach, we ran into a headwind, honest to God, the only time I’ve run into worse conditions was a couple of years ago on Mount Washington when we had a really, really strong wind. It did me in, and I didn’t finish the race.”

“I never ran another race until, I think it was 1976,” he says.

And now for something completely different...

Between his first and second races, Busa pitched a season for a professional, minor league baseball team in Longview, Texas, in 1950, and then served three years in the U.S. Army, Airborne Division during the Korean War. He and his wife Carole married in 1962, and raised two children. They honeymooned in Hawaii and later lived there for three years, before moving back to Marlborough, Mass., where they’ve since stayed put. Busa found a career working for a Massachusetts micrographics company, helping to record history.

Busa had moved to Arkansas after high school, to attend a baseball camp run by Rogers “Rajah” Hornsby and try out for a team there, when a cousin passed along a tip about a team in Texas (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rogers_Hornsby).

“He called and he said, ‘Come on down.’ He says, ‘They really need a left-handed pitcher,’ so I left that place, got on a bus... it’s all a dream to me, I don’t know how I ever got any place, but we get down there, and back then it was all your own expense. They didn’t give you expense money or anything, not that expenses were high. So I tried out with them, and I was in spring training.”

“They had this one game, I forget who they were playing, but they sent me in in relief, and I went in with the bases loaded and nobody out. I got in there and I think the first guy I faced popped out. Anyway, I got all three batters out without a run scored, and we went on, we were losing, we went on to win that game, it was funny. And the first time I got up, I got the bunt sign, the sacrifice. I don’t think I could ever do it again. I lay down a perfect bunt. It was a sacrifice, but it went down the third-base line, and I beat it out.”

“Minor league ball players come and go all the time, that’s the way it is. You don’t sign a long-term contract. You’re there until they don’t want you,” he said.

Busa played just one season. By the next spring, he had other commitments.

“I came home and the Korean War had broken out, so I joined the service,” he said.

“This is really funny. We were in this little pool hall next to the movie theater, playing eight ball and one of the guys says, ‘Why don’t we join the service.’ You know, one of those spur of the moment things. So we said, ‘Yeah, OK.’”

“Nobody was drinking, we were just shooting pool,” he added later.

“We went into the Boston army base, and we were all going to join the Air Force. As we’re going down, I saw this big poster on the wall. It showed a paratrooper coming down, shooting, you know, and all it said was “Be One.” So they went in the Air Force, and I went in the Army.”

“The funny thing, at that time, the air force was four years, and the army was three, so I made a good decision. Of course, they all, they didn’t go anywhere. I ended up going to Korea, and they all stayed nice places.”

Busa learned to jump out of airplanes.

Join the race

One of the few trail races Rich Busa has never run is the one held in his honor: the annual Busa Bushwhack, in Callahan State Park, Framingham, Mass. This year’s race will be the fourth annual.

The race is sponsored by Busa’s home team, the Greater Framingham Running Club, and the park is Busa’s regular running grounds, just a few miles from his home in Marlborough, Mass.

The course includes both double and single track, and race director Barry Ostrow promises the shorter, 5.3-mile course is fairly flat. The 9.3-mile course is the 22nd race on the Western Massachusetts Athletic Club’s Grand Tree series of trail races.

WHEN: Sunday, Nov. 4; registration opens at 8 a.m.; race starts at 9.

COST: Free (donations accepted).

WHERE: Callahan State Park, Framingham, Mass. Start and registration at Brophy School, 575 Pleasant St. (Route 30), Framingham, Mass.

ONLINE:
gfrcrun.org/bushwhack/bushwhack.htm.

“To this day, I can’t stand height. I get in a tall building and walk up close to the window and I get this sensation,” Busa said. “I’ll never know how I got out of a plane, but I did, somehow.”

Busa made corporal and then sergeant while serving in Korea. With a little encouragement, he recounts stories about following a communications wire back to base while leading a patrol, and about feeling the need to relieve himself while artillery was whizzing overhead.

He kept running, too.

“In the Airborne you run all the time anyway. You fall out in the morning in shorts and combat boots and that’s it. It’s already 90 degrees and 90 percent humidity, and you run in formation, so you’ve got to be in step with everybody.”

Busa recalls the drill sergeants with a smile, but not exactly fondness.

“They were nasty people, no kidding. You know, you’re running in that humidity... you can’t look around or anything, look straight ahead, and they’re constantly making you count cadence. Sometimes the sweat gets in your eye or a bug, and you go like this,” he said, wiping his brow.

Such an egregious lapse of self-discipline brought immediate condemnation, he said.

“Fall out,’ you know. So you fall out to the side of the road. You’ve got to do 10 pushups and you’ve got to run to catch up, and then when you catch up to them you’ve got to do loops around them while they’re running. That doesn’t sound like much, but you know, when you realize that they’re moving at a pace, and then you’ve got to catch up to them and then go around them... I don’t know how many times they made you go around.”

“In the Airborne, in training, everything you do, ‘Fall out and give me 10.’ You couldn’t get through the day without doing a couple hundred pushups,” he says.

Back where he started

Busa ran his second race, a 10-kilometer road race near his home in Marlborough, Mass. By 1976, running had become popular.

“They had running shoes, they had shorts,” he said, and there were running clubs and races all over. Busa started running 5 and 10-kilometer road races, and then signed up for his first marathon, Dec. 3, 1983, in Foxborough, Mass.

“Everything is progression. It’s all progression how you start. You know, you start doing 5Ks, and then 10Ks,” Busa said.

Busa ran more marathons, and somewhere along the way, he saw an application for a race in Ashford, Conn., called the Nipmuck Trail Marathon (<http://www.marathonguide.com/sites/nipmucktrail/>). Nipmuck is one of the oldest trail races in New England; next year will be the 25th annual. Busa has run Nipmuck every year for the past 19 years.

“I’m hoping I can go at least one more year and get 20,” he said. “People have streaks on road marathons, but this is different.”

Nipmuck race director Dave Raczkowski warns people about his race.

“He says that no matter how careful you try to be, you’re going to fall at least twice, and most people do,” Busa said.

“The first year I ran it, I think there was some kind of a storm. They had a lot of rain prior to it, so it was really... Nipmuck, when it’s wet, it’s pretty muddy. People lose their shoes in some spots,” Busa said.

“It doesn’t have a lot of elevation, but it’s very technical. You can really wipe yourself out.”

Busa kept running both trail and road races for a few more years, but he’s since switched over to trail racing entirely.

“Trail racing, you do it and you fall in love with it, and you don’t want anything to do with the road, or you do one and you say, ‘No more,’” Busa said.

“Most (road) marathons, they’re relatively flat,” Busa said. “It was like being on a treadmill and getting nowhere. All you could see was people ahead of you. It’s boring, too. When you’re in a road race, you’re looking around and everything. You do that in a trail race, you’re going to plant yourself... On a trail race, if there were naked broads on either side of the trail I’d never see them.”

The tougher terrain takes longer to run, of course. Busa recalls bringing a road-racing friend to Nipmuck. His friend had finished the Boston Marathon in 2:48, he said. He finished Nipmuck in 4:11.

The steeper climbs in trail racing sometimes slow runners to a walk.

“If you’re going to walk, you power walk,” Busa said. “When you power walk, you’re actually resting your body, your legs especially.”

“Especially in trail races where it’s really tough climbs, you have to get in the habit of saying, ‘When I get to that point, I’m going to start running again.’ Because if you don’t, it gets more and more comfortable to walk. Next thing you know, you’re walking, you don’t even realize it. You have to kind of kick yourself in the butt and say, ‘Get going.’ You have to be your own motivator.”

Busa compared trail and road races in an article on the Web site of his home club, the Greater Framingham Running Club, with a graphic showing the elevation of a trail marathon compared to the Boston Marathon. http://gfrcrun.org/bushwhack/rich_on_rich.htm

Trying to stay the course

Trails can be tough on the body, too.

“I’m really lucky, because with very few exceptions, when I fall, you know, trip on a trail, there could be steel spikes, rocks, and roots; I manage to fall in between them. I don’t know what it is.”

On the other hand, Busa notes, “You’ll never see a trail runner with shin splints. You get shin splints from pounding on the pavement.”

Busa recalls a recent 20-kilometer race, Breakneck Trail Race, in the Bigelow Hollow forest in Connecticut.

“You go on all single track down to this pond, it’s like 4.2 miles, and then you go around the pond which is another four miles, and then you go back,” Busa said. “Going around the pond, you come to a section where there are massive boulders. You’ve got to go up and over... They’re really monsters, really huge.”

At another point, runners have a choice between crossing on a long, active beaver dam or wading up to waist deep, he said.

“There isn’t any solid ground, very little solid ground. You’re going over rocks and roots,” he said.

Trail racers get used to it, he said. “After a while you kind of develop a sixth sense. You know if a rock is solid or not, you know if it’s going to move.”

During that last Breakneck, Busa took a tumble, and was fortunate a friend was running along just behind him.

"I slipped on this (right) foot off a rock. There were like three rocks together and just a little opening. My foot slipped down and I dropped down to here," he said, pointing to his hip.

He scraped up his left leg, too, and hit the side of his head on a rock when he fell.

"Fortunately where it hit was flat. Everything kind of went (snaps) instant black," but just for a moment, he said. He found himself with one leg stuck in the trail.

"I was at an angle where I couldn't pull myself up. If she hadn't been there, I'd probably still be there," he said, chuckling. Busa showed the scabs on his legs, and then hastens to add, "I was fine."

They hadn't finished, yet, though. After recovering from that mishap, Busa and his friend, Marie Leigh, got lost. Breakneck takes place on existing trails, but it's an unmarked course. They eventually finished, but too late for the time to be recorded.

Trail-race courses are usually marked, but not always well enough to keep runners on track. Busa got lost on the Wapack Trail race four years ago, he said. After realizing he'd gone off course, he decided to bushwhack cross-country rather than retrace his steps back up a long hill. He found the trail eventually, and then went several miles in the wrong direction. Such experiences make him appreciate a well-marked course, he said.

"You should never make an assumption in marking a trail. You've got to assume that everybody's a dummy like me," he said.

Busa's trail racing trophies are his most prized mementos. They include short lengths of logs, from Nipmuck, a piece of granite from Soapstone, a gold-painted sneaker from his running club and photograph of himself, snowshoe racing bare-chested, framed in a toilet seat.

"In trail racing, you don't get fancy stuff, you know," he said.

"Of course everybody has a toilet seat hanging on the wall," Carole Busa quipped. "I've been hiding that and it always comes out again. Disgusting."

Busa's other "home" club is the Western Massachusetts Athletic Club. He runs every race in the WMAC's Grand Tree and snowshoe series.

<http://www.runwmac.com/>

Busa rates Escarpment (30K, Haines Falls, NY) as the toughest trail race in the northeast (<http://escarpmenttrail.com/>). Runners up would include Wapack (<http://wapack.freeservers.com/>); Seven Sisters (<http://www.7sisterstrailrace.com/>); and the Hairy Gorilla Half Marathon in Voorheesville, NY (<http://www.albanyrunningexchange.org/hgh/>). The most scenic race on his schedule, he said, is the Monroe Dunbar Brook Trail Race, early October in Monroe, Mass.

Reaching 100

Busa ran his first 50-mile race, the Vermont 50, in Essex Junction, Vt., in 1989. He'd picked up the application while he was in Burlington, Vt., for the marathon there, he said. He wondered if he could run 50 miles, so he gave it a try. <http://www.vermont50.com/>

"It was five miles up, five miles back, five miles up, five miles back. Part of it was on the road, and then you hit a dirt gravel road... All of a sudden, I realized that I was at mile 35. And I finished," he said.

A few weeks later, he finished his second 50-miler in Maine, and added seven marathons and one more 50-miler later that year.

"I have good recovery. I don't know why. It's nothing I do, it came with the genes or something," Busa said.

In 1991, at 61 years old, Busa tackled the Vermont 100 for the first time. <http://www.vermont100.com/>

"I did the same thing. I said, 'I'll go see how far beyond 50 miles I can go.' Because once you do a distance, you know you can do it. The first time you're always apprehensive," he said. "Once you do it, you want to better it."

Obviously, running for 100 miles gets tiring. People wonder when runners sleep, Busa said. They don't. The race starts at 4 a.m. on a Saturday morning, and they have 30 hours to finish or quit.

"When you get past the first 50 miles in a 100-mile race – and anybody will tell you this that's done them – the first 50 miles is physical. The second 50 is up here," he said, pointing to his noggin. "People that drop don't drop out because of an injury in most cases. They drop out because this (the head) talked them into it," he said, pointing again.

"All the aid stations, they have a cut-off. All the manned aid stations, you have to be in by a certain time and you have to be out by a certain time," Busa said. The last aid station is at mile 83. "Once you get past that, you feel good because you're on your own. You know you can't get pulled."

One time, Busa recalled, he napped for a few minutes in someone's front yard. In general, though, he doesn't stop. At aid stations, he stays on his feet.

"I've seen it before. A guy will plop down and never gets up. I'm on my feet the entire time. A couple of times I might sit on a stone wall and get something out of my shoe, but other than that I'm on my feet the whole time."

Runners start together, but after a while they tend to drift apart. Pacers are allowed to accompany runners only in the later stretch, so Busa ran most of those miles with only his thoughts to keep him company.

"It's really an experience. There's so many things that go through your mind," Busa said. "You start out to think about something and your mind just drifts, and you never know what you're going to think about.... Lately I just think about how screwed up the world is."

The Vermont 100 includes both dirt roads and trails, and a good deal of the race is run in the sort of pitch dark that can be found only in rural areas.

"They hang these light sticks on trees to guide you," Busa said, but it's necessary to carry a flashlight or headlamp, too.

"Running late at night like that, you don't get very many positive thoughts. You start thinking about a shower, and going to bed," Busa said.

Fatigue and darkness can mess with one's mind, Busa said. He recalls seeing a whole pack of raccoons that transformed into a pile of firewood when he got close.

As Busa recounts his adventures, Carole drops in to check on a guest's well-being. "You're still talking? Does he ever stop? No, he never stops," she teased.

It's an astute observation. That's the thing about Busa's running; he doesn't stop.

"There was one where the temperature was almost 100. They had the lowest percent of finishes that year, and I finished. I mean people were just stopping in the middle of the night, going down to the streams and just laying in the water," he says, recalling one of his Vermont 100 runs.

Busa can tell similar stories about Nipmuck and other races. When the going gets tough, he keeps going.

‘You learn to live with it’

Busa is in good health for his age, or most anyone else’s. His regular doctor, a heart specialist, called colleagues to come watch him trot off the charts during a treadmill test some years back. More recently, his chiropractor asked his permission to show off his X-rays to incredulous colleagues.

Still, Busa has been plagued with lower back pain off and on throughout his adult life, and he has some disc deterioration in his upper spine that causes what he would call “discomfort” in his upper back.

“I have a high pain tolerance,” Busa said. “I always call it a discomfort. To me, pain is, it’s a response that you have no control. Like when you’re hammering a nail and you hit your finger – that’s pain, to me.”

“I’ve had a lifetime back problem, but you know, when you have a problem you learn to live with it,” he said. “I could be a better runner if I didn’t have it. It restricts me a little bit.”

“For whatever reason, I was always able to run. My back didn’t bother me that much when I ran. It was afterwards it would tighten up for a couple days. I don’t know. And I never took anything, because I’m kind of a purist. I think if you take aspirin you’re cheating.”

“On a long race, I’ll carry an Advil, in case it really kicks up,” he said.

Busa has cut back on his ultra-running, of late, and this past summer he actually skipped a few races, because of plantar fasciitis, a common runner’s injury.

“This year is the first year since I’ve been running that I’ve missed a race because of an injury,” Busa said. “I ran with it, because I’m stubborn. I ran with it from April to July, but I had an incident where I had to stop, so I took a month off.”

Busa hopes to keep racing for many more years. His older brother, 95, is still active in his bowling league, Busa noted. He’d like to finish one more Vermont 100, to further secure his record.

“I want to go back, because I want to make it real hard for somebody (to beat),” he said.

“I’m probably one of the few people, my race miles will exceed my training miles,” Busa said. “I’d be dead if I trained like a lot of people... I did Vermont one year, and this is including my races, with less than 20 miles a week.”

Busa knows he can’t beat most of those whelps in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, though he routinely picks off younger, slower runners. The thing is, he’s always out there, and he never stops.

“I never go into a race and say I wonder if I can finish anymore. I know,” he said. “I don’t know what my time’s going to be, but I’m going to finish.”

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