

WHAT A SENIOR MOMENT

Canuck marathon man, 74, smokes his rival, 71

MORE THAN 50 minutes after Jimmy Muindi sweeps smoothly to victory in the Rotterdam Marathon, in an impressive time of 2:07:50, the cold and rain of an April day by the North Sea have scattered his welcoming party. The city's smiling mayor, Burgemeester Ivo Opstelten, last seen presenting flowers to the top three finishers—Kenyan to a man—is nowhere to be seen. Nor are the jostling photographers who fought to capture the final sprint. Now the halt, the lame, the crumpled over with dry heaves or diarrhea, and the just plain also-ran, stagger across the finish line. Then, as the clock ticks ominously closer to three hours—the cut-off point for *serious* marathoners—Ed Whitlock hoves into view.

At 2:58:40, Canada's unlikeliest star athlete—all five feet, seven inches and 112 lb. of him—crosses the line, sporting his ancient running shoes, shock of white hair and a huge grin. Whitlock, 74, from the Toronto suburb of Milton, is the only man over 70 ever to have broken the three-hour mark. Now he's done it again, for the third time, in the most prestigious race he's ever run. What's more, he's crushed his only serious rival for the over-70 crown, Rotterdam hometown hero Joop Ruter, 71, who arrives 14 minutes later. Back comes Burgemeester Opstelten, with a fresh bunch of flowers, along with an entire Dutch TV crew and several photographers.

Whitlock is a star entry in one of the world's Top 10 marathons—in another first for over-70 runners, organizers paid his way to Rotterdam and reserved an elite starting position for him ahead of the 11,000 ordinary racers. When he finishes, the PA system goes back into operation, trumpeting Whitlock's age and time. "I'm still



Whitlock is the only septuagenarian to have finished marathons in less than three hours

recovering—it was a tough last k," a disconcertingly relaxed Whitlock tells the media. "I left Joop after about four kilometres. Then I spent much of the race in a large crowd, try-

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ing to hide from the wind; I'm a bit of a parasite that way. I was aiming for 2:57, so I lost a minute somewhere," he concludes, a flicker of displeasure momentarily dimming his smile. "But a good result anyway."

And not one Whitlock could ever have

predicted when he emigrated to Canada from his native England in 1952, part of an almost forgotten trickle of British draft dodgers who wanted to avoid a two-year National Service stint. He was a good, but not world-class, middle-distance runner in the era of Roger Bannister's Miracle Mile. Becoming a busy mining engineer and father of two sons (both now runners), he abandoned competition until his 40s. Twenty years later he moved into long distances.

Whitlock takes no supplements or vitamins, refuses to stretch before races, trains by running in circles around a local cemetery after a breakfast of tea and bread, and hasn't had a regular physical in 30 years.

So that late start in marathon life—which presumably has limited the wear and tear on his body—is observers' best explanation for his success. Whitlock's having none of it, though. "I've been a serious runner my whole life." He will allow for the luck of good genes—his mother died at 91, and an uncle recently passed away at 108. The real answer likely has more to do with his mind. Hours after the marathon, Whitlock declares, "It would have been a disgrace if I had lost to Joop. I'm the one with the record time, he's the one who should be intimidated by it. Obviously I have a competitive streak, but I'd have been very upset if I felt people had any reason to think I hadn't run well."

As for the future, there's the anticipated rematch with Ruter at September's Toronto Waterfront Marathon. Shrugging off age and possible injury, Whitlock's sure it will take place. "Joop said he'd come, and so did I. Besides, I said I'd take him to Niagara Falls." ▮

ON THE WEB For more photos documenting Ed Whitlock's remarkable performance at the Rotterdam Marathon, visit www.macleans.ca/gallery