

Vern Christensen Comments at 2025 UTTC Masters Holiday Party

Thank you very much, Mike, and thanks to all of you for agreeing to listen to an hour's discussion about my running journey over the past 85 years!

Even though I've been with UTTC Masters for only a relatively short period of time (less than 15 years), I don't have a lot of experience from the past with lots of other Running Clubs. I'll try to give you some highlights from my running life, which has been a large part of my life, and hopefully you'll see what I mean. I was only kidding when I mentioned an hour a few seconds ago, I'll try to make sure I keep it well below that time!

One of the reasons why I can keep it under an hour is that I haven't really been running that long, having taken a lot of time off, as you'll see a little later. I did run a little in High School, but without any coaching or training. The coach was really a Hockey and Football coach, he'd just tell us to go and jog around the field a few times, and that was about it.

But at University, I had a really good coach, a volunteer who was on the University staff and a former runner himself. We had what we called the Cross Country Team, but we took part in road races and cross country in the Fall and Winter, and distance races (one mile and three miles) on the track in the Spring. When I referred to the Winter a second ago, we didn't have any such thing as Indoor events, nor any indoor location where we could train. I was at Mount Allison University, which is located in the small town of Sackville, New Brunswick, which is about 20K from the NS border. In that border area, they get a lot of snow, and our Winter training area was on the shoulder of the Trans-Canada Highway between NS and NB. Our coach measured a Half Mile route, so we did Mile repeats by going out and back, as he stood there in the cold timing us with his stopwatch.

Jumping ahead a little, you'll realize that I took commerce at university, but you might not know that my oldest grandson also took Commerce in University, in his case at Guelph. He was even more into sports than me, but team sports, hockey and baseball. As part of his Commerce course, he took a course in Sport and Event Management. In my day at University, there were no such courses, but I've often thought: If I had been able to take a course in Sport Management, I might have been able to have a successful career in Sports Management! But I guess we can't have everything.

Somehow, at University, I gravitated to become the Manager of the XC team. Without the course my grandson took, I learned to do it through experience! As the Team Manager, I had to make up a budget to get funds from the University, do a schedule of events, and I also reported on our events for the University Newspaper.

After university, you realize that one of the ideas of masters athletics is to try to make sure that when athletes have finished their active involvement at University, High School or Open athletics, they don't stop training and competing. We tend to get busy with additional education, jobs and families, so we stop, but being able to take part in Masters encourages us to continue being active. Unfortunately, I didn't get that memo, I didn't run or train for 28 years! But at one point, I used to drive my daughter from the Beaches to High Park where her high school XC team went to train. While they ran, I sat in my car and read the newspaper or listened to the radio. But I said to myself "I can run like these kids." So I brought my running gear and ran with them. But I found that I definitely couldn't run like them, just as we see the U of T Varsity kids running like the wind, and they left me behind. So I decided I had to start training on my own, by working out a 5K route on the streets in the Beaches and Scarborough and started running a few times a week. There was also a small cinder track at the local high school down the street, and I worked out a 200m distance on that track, and I did some speed sessions between my 5K runs.

After I had done that a little, I saw in 1989 (28 years after I graduated from University) in the local paper that the city was having a low-key run down by the boardwalk, so I decided to go down to it. It was called the “Turtle Run”. The city emphasized participation, so they gave Turtle chocolate candies as prizes, but they gave them to those who finished **last** in the race! I didn’t win, but I met some runners from a masters running Club called Scarborough Masters Athletic Club. I joined that club and started training with them, and ran road races, XC events and a lot of Track with them for many years. I actually was with that club for around 20 years, became President and in charge of memberships. I recently found in my files copies of computer printouts of a couple of our membership lists from 1996 and 1998, with about 100 members on each list. Of the very few members on those lists who are still competing, three are UTTC Masters members: me; Michael Goodstadt; and Armand D’oliveira.

The runners in the club trained mainly outdoors, either running on roads in Scarborough and the Beaches, or at Birchmount Track. However, in really bad Winter weather, we ran indoors in Variety Village, and often did 8K on the track there (35 laps on its 230m track). Many of our members were very active in competing in masters events in Ontario for many years. However, the thing I would like to impress upon you isn’t what that Club or its members did back then, but what happened after the Club closed down. Because of the passing away of some members, and other personal changes over a period of years, the Club eventually folded. And it could happen with any Club that it doesn’t last forever. But even though that Club closed down, there are half a dozen or more members who still get together a few times a year for a dinner, and some still go walking almost every Sunday. So, staying in touch that way is a testament to the camaraderie that we feel and the wish that we have to remember the activities that we enjoyed back when we were actively training and competing together.

Many of you will know that I’ve been involved with Canadian Masters for many years, and I can’t (nor do I want to) ignore that involvement as part of my running journey. Sometime in the late 1990s, my wife at the time put her hand up to volunteer for a position at a CMAA Annual Meeting. After the initial “Are you sure you want to do that?”, I ended up volunteering as well. Things progressed, and I’ve been involved in one capacity or another continuously from about 1998 until now, and I’ll finish my involvement only at the end of this year. As part of my involvement with Canadian Masters, I’ve competed in 25 World Championships, held in many different countries from around the World.

In being involved with masters, I’ve had contact with members of many running Clubs, including UTTC Masters. Eventually, after the Scarborough Club closed down, I heard about UTTC Masters from some of its members, some who are still members, so I joined it and started training with the UTTC Masters Club. I experienced the welcoming atmosphere for which the Club is known. Now I don’t necessarily expect UTTC Masters to close down any time soon, not at all. However, various of us will no longer be with the Club, because of passing away or moving because of jobs, family or education. When that happens, I want those here to remember those who have gone, and those who move to remember the Club and to come back to visit the Club on training nights, on one of our Pub Nights, or at an annual holiday party. This will be a way of remembering what the Club meant to each of us, and to remember the “camaraderie” that we felt when we were training together with UTTC Masters. So, could you please each lift a glass of whatever you are drinking and toast UTTC Masters and the friendships that you have built up in this Club.

Thank you,

Vern