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Posted May 2, 2003

Stephen Robbins (at left in photo) and longtime friend and rival Harold Morioka dominated the M60 sprints at the 2003 Boston indoor masters nationals.

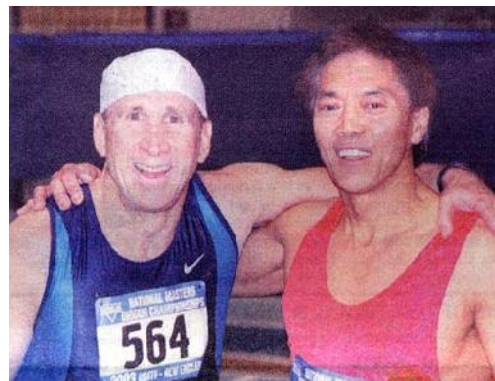
Dr. Robbins is considered the world's best-selling textbook author in the areas of management and organizational behavior.

Managing to excel at the sprints: An interview with Stephen Robbins

Dr. Stephen Robbins of Seattle, Washington, is a textbook example of a sprinter pushing the envelope. Recently turned 60, this [management expert](#) and author is quietly intent on rewriting the record book. But that's assuming he's healthy. A former business professor, Robbins has become a student of the body's limits. His injuries are almost as awesome as his dash marks, which include 11.34 for 100 at 52 and 22.98 for 200 at 53. His 51.63 for 400 at age 52 is yet another single-age world record.

He added another chapter to his legend at the 2002 world masters championships in Brisbane, where after a long absence from competition Robbins won the M55 100, 200 and added gold in the 400 relay. In March 2003, he claimed national M60 titles in the indoor 60 and 200 in Boston – winning the 2 by nearly 2 seconds.

In college, Robbins ran 100 yards in 9.5 several times and the 220 in 20.7. And he even lined up against the world's fastest human, **Bob Hayes**. When not injured, Robbins trains on the track three times a week and lifts weights three times a week. "We have a new, 300-meter all-weather indoor facility at the University of Washington," he says. "This makes living in Seattle tolerable in the winters. I typically work out there from November through March." Married since May 1997 to [artist Laura Ospanik](#), he has two grown daughters by a previous marriage. This interview was conducted in early 2003.



Jerry Wojcik photo / permission from [National Masters News](#)

By [Ken Stone](#)

Masterstrack.com: At age 58, you were among the oldest sprinters in the M55 field at the [Brisbane WMA](#) world meet, yet you won the 100 in 12.18 and the 200 in 24.76 as well as gold in the 400-meter relay. Even more amazing was that you did this coming off some devastating injuries. Could you describe in detail these injuries and how you rehabbed yourself to become a world champion again?

Robbins: You haven't got enough space for me to detail all my injuries. (Not that I'm unique. All of us have to deal with it. I often joke that the best way to bond with someone you just met at a masters meet is to ask: "So, tell me about your injuries?" They'll go on for an hour!).

Here are the lowlights on my injuries the past six years:

May 1997: Injured my right Achilles. So I was out of shape for Durban.

June 1998: Severe groin injury. Season over. Operation to repair in December 1998.

February 1999: Another surgery. This time to repair torn meniscus in left knee.

April 1999: Return of right Achilles' problem. Severe pain through Oct. 1999.

August 2000: Tore left hamstring at nationals in 100m heat.

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August 2001: Kidney stone operation.

The latest: At the [2003 indoor nationals](#) in Boston, during the 200, I pulled something in my right shoulder just as I was entering the second turn. I had trouble pumping my right arm as I drove for home. Just when I think I've had every injury a sprinter can have, I come up with a new one.

I went through a battery of tests May 1. I do have a torn rotator cuff. But they think I have about a 60 percent chance of being able to run in Puerto Rico. They're putting me on a rehab program and I can't sprint for about 5-6 weeks. I won't be in great shape for PR, but maybe I can at least be competitive. I'm hopeful.

Re: rehab. I see a lot of specialists -- sports medicine, pain, physical therapists, chiropractors, acupuncturists, etc. I think regular massage is essential for managing injuries, so I get deep-tissue work done at least twice a week.

Brisbane was a real surprise for me. I came in knowing I wasn't in shape. Because of lack of conditioning and my age, I just hoped to make the finals. Then on the morning of the first 100 heats, I started having this severe lower-back pain. I thought I threw out my back. I barely made it through the qualifying heats of the 1 and 2. By the finals, I felt OK. I later learned I had a kidney stone.

When [Bob Hayes](#) died in September 2002, you must have felt a special sadness. He was the same age as you, and you competed against him in the mid-1960s. Can you recall your races with Hayes? What was your reaction to his death?

I raced against Hayes only once or twice. I wasn't in his league. I was a good college sprinter but not outstanding. For instance, I never made it out of the heats at the NCAA. I did run all the time against [Henry Carr](#). He was at ASU when I was at [Arizona](#). But I never beat him. I knew that Hayes was seriously ill. Nevertheless, his passing hit me hard. I read about it while we were in Paris.

That day, I thought about all his talent and how his life had turned out rather sadly. He never seemed to adjust to life after track/football. It made me realize how important it is to keep sport in perspective.

Was Hayes the fastest sprinter you ever saw? What times would he been able to run on today's tracks and in today's shoes?

Hayes had unbelievable leg turnover. His [anchor leg](#) on the 4x1 at Tokyo has to make you think there have been few to compare with him. I have long thought that Tommy Smith, in high gear, was as fast as Hayes. The difference was that Smith's style was deceiving. He didn't look like he was covering ground like Hayes did.

In addition to tracks and shoes, don't forget about motivation (there's real money in the sport now for elites), diet and coaching. I would guess that if Hayes had all these factors correctly aligned, he could have run in the 9.60s electronic.

You were running sub-23 in the 200 as late as age 53. Do you consider the 200 your best masters event?

Yes. My explosion out of the blocks isn't very good anymore. So my 100 suffers. I seem to be able to relax better in the 2. And I love running the turn.

Tell me how you first became aware of masters track. Where did you first compete? At what age?

I have my good-buddy [Ed Oleata](#) to blame for all of this. I was living in San Diego and Ed

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Back in 1993, you had just retired as a business professor at [San Diego State University](#). Later you moved to the Seattle area. Did you move to accommodate your book-writing career or your masters track career?

I moved for a change of lifestyle. I had been single for nearly 20 years; I was sick of meeting "Valley" women; and I thought I needed a change in locale. I wanted to live in a more urban setting. Also, there were tax implications to the move. Washington has no state income taxes.

You once told a newspaper: "You've got to be disciplined to be a writer. I've been up at 5 o'clock every morning, writing. That's every morning for 20 years. That discipline runs to track. That's not management, though. That's obsessive-compulsive behavior." Are you still obsessed about training for track?

I think I said that in about 1994. The answer today would be: No. I train diligently, but I have to admit I'm not as "hungry" as I was in the mid-1990s. I had something to prove then. I had accomplished everything I had wanted in my professional life but not on the track. I got lucky in 1995. It was the first full season EVER that I went without injuries. I doubt that will ever happen again.

You earned a doctorate from the University of Arizona and [your books](#) on business management, power and politics in organizations, as well as the development of effective interpersonal skills have become required reading in thousands of business schools around the world. What attracted you to this field?

My undergraduate degree was in finance. And I have an MBA. It was only natural to study business for my Ph.D. But I have never been enamored with business per se. I was more interested in organizations (profit and nonprofit) and the psycho-sociological side of organizational life. So when I began writing, I wrote about what interested me -- organizational behavior, politics, power, interpersonal skills. I just finished a trade book on decision-making.

It amazes me that people make so many consistent errors in judgment and decision-making. I think I can help people improve their decision-making skills. When I see something that interests me, and I think there might be a market for it, I start thinking about writing a book on it. Sick, eh?

You also travel a lot to give seminars and talks. How do you combine training with these trips?

I try to keep travel down to 3-4 day trips when I'm in serious training. I keep the long trips -- Europe, Asia, Latin America -- to years when there are no world championships. But I've been injured so often lately that it hasn't mattered. If I'm hobbling around at home, I might as well be hobbling around in New York or Paris (and the food will probably be better!).

Do you consider yourself a retired college professor, or a full-time business writer and consultant?

I consider myself a writer. I've been writing books since 1974. By the early 1990s, it had become a big business and I decided to give up the teaching so I could write full time. I liked teaching but I love writing.

What occupies your "day job" time?

When I'm home, my day is highly standardized. I research and write from about 6:30 am to 10:30 a.m. Monday through Friday. I have lunch at 11:30. I nap from about 12:30 until 2. I work out from 3-5. I still work out at around the same time that I did in high school and college. I'm not what you'd call a "flexible guy!" Oh yeah, and I get a deep-tissue massage

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My work is basically my hobby. I love writing and I can't think of anything I'd rather be doing. It's a great way to kill the mornings! I read quite a bit, but mostly on issues related to management and human behavior. We also travel a lot. I'm a living example of job specialization. I can basically only do two things well: write and run fast for a short distance. So I've stayed focused on those two activities.

You've lived in Seattle for a while -- the same area that produced USATF Masters Chairmen Ken Weinbel and George Mathews. Have you ever thought about emulating them and getting involved in masters politics?

Never! I'm not a politician. This even applies to my academic life. For instance, I have never sought office in my professional organizations. I never even ran for office in high school or college. Again, I think this reinforces my narrow focus. I want to race, not get involved in running politics. I want to write but not get sucked in to the politics of academia or publishing.

Back to track: In spring 1993, not long after you turned 50, you ran a hand-timed 10.83 for the 100 in Santa Ana, California. Do you expect a similar outburst in 2003 in M60?

I wish! Fast times come when you combine an absence of injuries, good training opportunities, lots of competitions and luck. I'm hopeful that 2003 will be a good year for me. But I hoped for that in 1998, when I turned 55, and I was laid up most of that year. It typically takes about three years or so to get into top condition after long layoffs.

I began training hard in 1992 but didn't peak until 1995 or 1996. I consider 1997 through 2000 as a layoff period because I couldn't maintain follow-through. I've now had two years where -- while I've had some injuries -- I've still been able to get in a few meets. If I can stay healthy through August (a big if), and additionally get the mental toughness to do the workouts necessary for my base, I think I can run well in 2003.

Are you pointing for any specific times this year -- or just titles in [Puerto Rico](#) or [Eugene](#)? What events will you enter?

I'd be lying if I didn't tell you that I had specific goals. I always have goals! In 2003, I'd like to run 11.85. **Ron Taylor's** 11.70 WR is out of my league. I think I'm capable of sub-24 in the 200, but I would need some breaks.

I hate the 4. I hate the training and I hate the race itself. But it's a challenge. I'm fortunate to have God-given speed. That carries me in the 1 and 2. The 4 requires cardio-capacity. I've signed-up for the 4 in Puerto Rico. If I can get into shape, I'll run it.

My goal in 2003 is to make the M60 records just a bit tougher so it'll take **Bill Collins** more than one meet to smash them when he turns 60.

Who's your biggest rival on the track? Harold Morioka? Courtland Gray?

Harold is always a factor. We're only two days apart in age, so I guess we're permanently linked "until death do us part." Depending on the year, other major competitors would include Courtland, **Stan Whitley**, **Paul Edens**, **Joe Johnson**, **Roger Pierce**, **Ed Roberts**, **Stan Wald** (of South Africa), **Peter Crombie** (of Australia) and **Kozabu Kaihara** (Japan).

I should add that I really don't focus on rivals. It took me 35 years to learn this: I have no control over my competitors. I can only control elements of my performance. The reality is that if some M60 guy comes out this year and runs 11.50, I'm gonna get beat. If I'm healthy and in shape, and the best guy runs 12.40, I can win. I don't understand why we spend so much time focusing on who is in a race and how fast they can run. It's irrelevant because we

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How did this start? Is this a superstition, or are you vain about hair loss?

They're painters' caps. I wear them because my dermatologist told me not to let the sun hit my head. I wear them in workouts, too. I'm prone to [nonmalignant melanoma](#), so I cover up. At indoor meets, I guess it's superstition.

You've had serious injuries at various points of your masters career -- halting some record attempts in various age groups. What times would you have been capable of had you not been hobbled at various points?

I really can't guess. The fact is that no fast guy gets the luxury of having an injury-free career. Injuries come with the territory. How fast would Collins or Whitley have run if they didn't get hurt? **Joe Johnson** from New Jersey has incredible leg turnover, but he gets hurt a lot. I can't think of any top-10 sprinter over 50 -- who has been competing for more than a few years -- who hasn't had to deal with the injury problem.

In masters sprints, the bottom line is not who is the fastest. It's who is the fastest among those who are able to compete. What we could have done doesn't count.

Have doctors ever advised you to give up track?

Yes, in 1996 and again in 2001. I have arthritis in my hips and my Achilles problem is chronic. I tell them: "I'll listen to my body," then I go out and do what I want. I enjoy working out. It allows me to eat poorly and not gain weight. I don't want to give up competition. But I also don't want to be in a wheelchair at 70. So if or when it looks like my aches and pains are going to undermine my lifestyle, I'll quit.

[Erwin Jaskulski](#) of Hawaii recently ran world records of 36.49 for 100 and 1:27.85 for 200 in the M100 age group. Yet according to the [WMA Age-Graded Tables](#), those records are relatively soft. What do you think of EJ's marks -- and what will you be running at his age?

[Woody Allen](#) said: "90 percent of success is just showing up." I'd love to be able to show up at the 2043 nationals! Seriously, if my body holds up, I'd like to compete into my 80s. But I've noticed an interesting phenomenon: Records seem soft from a distance. When you get to that age, suddenly they're not so soft anymore.

When I was 50, the M55 records looked easy. When I was 55, the M60 records looked easy. As you close in on those ages, you come to respect them a great deal more. I guess I'd say: Over 80, there are no soft records. Any guy over 80 who can still finish a 100 or 200 is one tough dude.