

Doyel: 'The runner's lifestyle' extended Tom Magill's life to 93, and he'll race this week at Indiana State Games

INDIANAPOLIS – Tom Magill is ready to run right now. He'll take your call, he'll do your interview, but he's wearing a T-shirt and shorts and those blue Brooks running shoes, because he has places to go. There's a trail course a few minutes from his home in Chesterton, Indiana, and he's training for the Indiana State Games, so let's get started.

To that end, before you can ask a question, Magill has things to say. You can almost hear him unruffling a piece of paper as he clears his throat and begins. This is a serious man – a delightful man, to be sure, humble with a dry wit, but he's organized and efficient. When he got his foot in the door in dairy sales at Dean Foods in Franklin Park, Illinois, it was 1955 and he was 27 and the company had annual revenues of \$25 million. When he retired in 1986, he was 58 and vice president of a billion-dollar business.

You going to interrupt Tom Magill? Not me. He'd like to talk about the benefits of running, and about the heart attack that nearly ended his life and started his running career. He'd like to talk about the mechanic in Valparaiso and the woman in Saugatuck, Michigan, and his long-term goal of running the Chicago marathon.

And we're going to get to all of that, Tom Magill and me, but let's slow down here. Let's do what Magill's done for the better part of 60 years, and pace ourselves.

[The Indiana State Games](#), a qualifier for the 2023 National Senior Games in Pittsburgh, start Thursday in Evansville. Tom Magill, 93, will be the oldest

athlete there. He'll enter four or five events in his age group, win all of them, and then go to nationals in Pittsburgh where he'll probably win a handful of gold medals. But that's not his long-term goal.

Didn't I tell you, his long-term goal is the Chicago Marathon? Tom Magill wants to run that race in 2028.

When he's 100.

Death by expense account

The first time he tasted milk, Magill's telling me, it was delivered to his Chicagoland home by horse-drawn cart. To which I say: Seriously?

"Seriously," he tells me. "I'm really showing my age now, aren't I?"

Yes, and it's about time. Understand, Tom Magill lives near the shores of Lake Michigan, so we're talking by phone and I can tell you he doesn't sound 93. Hell, what does 93 even sound like? How many 93-year-olds do you know? Of those, how many run three times a week, entering 15 or 20 races a year – he prefers a 5K – and training for the Indiana State Games' 400, 800 and 1,500 meter runs?



Holly Schneider, director of the Indiana State Games, sent me a photo of an athlete with a gold medal around his neck, and she says it's Tom Magill, but there seems to be a mistake. This guy can't be 93. He's trim with muscled legs and a thick head of hair, and while his skin has some wrinkles and sunspots – the man's been running for 60 years – if you offered me the chance right now to look that good at 75, I'd jump at it. Probably pull a hamstring in the process, but we can't all be in the same shape as Tom Magill.

"Yes," he says, "you can."

That's why he agreed to speak with me, by the way. This story wasn't his idea, and he's not interested in estimating the number of miles he's run over six decades or the number of races he's entered, much less the events he's won or placed or any of that. He wants to talk about what he calls "the running lifestyle."

"That's my big thing," he says. "Not only for myself, but to spread the word to others. I'd like to try to make a difference in someone else's life. To get them into the running lifestyle, and get them to take care of themselves. I'm so upset to see people so out of shape and doing nothing about it. They can run."

Out of shape? Tom's been there, done that.

"I was in terrible shape in my mid-30s," he says. "Way overweight."

How, I'm asking?

"An unlimited expense account," he says.

Magill was a hotshot salesman for Dean Foods, specializing in evaporated milk and powder products, and to understand where this story goes next, you need to understand the times. In those days people weren't leaving the office for a latte at Coat Check Coffee or Calvin Fletcher's Coffee Company.

They were brewing coffee in the office, and dairy salesman Tom Magill saw an opportunity.

“We made a list of 35 food-service coffee companies that might be most interested in our dairy products,” Magill says. “I had in effect every coffee salesman in the United States selling my product. How’s that for a sales force? From there it spread to England. They use more creamer in their coffee than we do.”

Magill’s work took him around the world. He wined and dined customers at the finest restaurants – unlimited expense account, remember – and enjoyed a good martini. He was at a food-service convention in Las Vegas in the early 1960s when he took ill. He struggled outside to a cab and told the driver: “I’m in trouble. Get me to a hospital.”

Magill remembers begging the driver to run through red lights, and then staggering into the emergency room. Next thing he remembers is waking in the Intensive Care Unit, wires everywhere, doctors talking about a heart attack. He spent four days in the ICU, and eight days total in the hospital.

“Gives you a lot of time to think about your life,” he says. “When I came home after eight days my doctor said: ‘Tom, you can do more for yourself than any doctor can do for you. You’ve got to take care of yourself. What are you going to do?’

“I tried running.”



Turned 90, celebrated with 8-mile race

It wasn't exactly love at first step.

Magill didn't have running shoes, so he popped on his sneakers and took off.

"I didn't make it the full block," he says. "I turned around in agony."

After purchasing running shoes – Brooks – he started jogging loops around his neighborhood, going farther and farther until he was running the Indy Mini-Marathon too many times to count, then marathons in London, Chicago (twice) and Los Angeles. He was a loner in those days, training and competing by himself, waking six times a week at 4 a.m. to run before work.

Here's a story, one you'll understand if you've ever been a runner: Once when Magill's business took him to Sydney, Australia, he arrived at 2 a.m. local time and realized he'd lost a day because of the huge time zone difference. He checked into his hotel, put on his Brooks and jogged up and down the empty street for an hour, just to get in his run.

Running hasn't just changed his life, but helped define it. Forty years ago he was in Saugatuck, Michigan, the week of a race when a mutual friend introduced him to another runner, Carol, who teaches vision-impaired children in the Gary school system. They've been married more than three decades, running in the [Calumet Region Striders](#) club.

"Our social life has been built around running," he says.

Like this: He celebrated his 90th birthday in the Michigan upper peninsula in 2018, entering the Mackinac Island 8-Mile Road Race with about 35 friends. He finished second in the 85-89 age group that year, but aged into the 90-95 division in 2019 and won it.

He loves running and wants others to experience it, like the mechanic at the repair shop in Valparaiso. Magill took one look at him and sized him up as a former runner.

"The more we talked about it, he made the decision to get back into running," Magill says. "Now he sends me diagrams of his daily runs and total miles."

Some runners are like that, logging their distances, but not Tom Magill. For him the journey continues into the great unknown. Well, mostly unknown.

"I have no idea how many races I've run, and I don't know how many more I have left in me," he says, "but the big major inspiration – in my mind, what I'm working toward – is running the Chicago Marathon at the age of 100."

Age groups for the Chicago Marathon don't go that high, so Magill will be competing with whippersnappers in their early 80s. Doesn't matter where he places, though. His victory is another day with Carol by his side, the sun on his face and Brooks on his feet.

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The Indiana State Games will be held primarily June 9-19 at various locations in Evansville. For more information, visit [www.indianastategames.org](#).