

His next step is a big one

Not long after his first race walk, Marty Fox trains for the National Senior Games

BY JOHN HANC
Special to Newsday

Arms pumping, hips, swiveling,

Marty Fox powers down the straightaway on the outdoor track at Ward Melville High School in East Setauket. This is no leisurely stroll. Fox is race walking — a demanding and highly technical sport that has been a part of the Olympic Games since 1904.

Fox, 62, has been engaged in this activity for the past year, and, based on his result in a recent statewide competition, he's become proficient at it.

"I love it," he said.

"It's great exercise."



Fox trains on the track at Ward Melville High School in East Setauket. He has also found ways to incorporate training into commuting time.

The gaitway to success

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COVER STORY from E23

Race walking also represents a new lease on the athletic life of the Setauket resident. The previous chapter came to a halt in July last year when he fell during a basketball game and hit his head hard on concrete. Fox had been a B-baller since he was a kid in Howard Beach. Growing up, he played on Catholic Youth Organization and Police Athletic League teams. He continued to play competitively as an adult, working in the budding information technology industry.

When he and his family moved to Syosset in 1992, Fox's involvement with the game took on a new dimension. His then-young son, David, who is now 26, got involved with the Syosset Basketball League. Fox volunteered to coach and later became league commissioner.

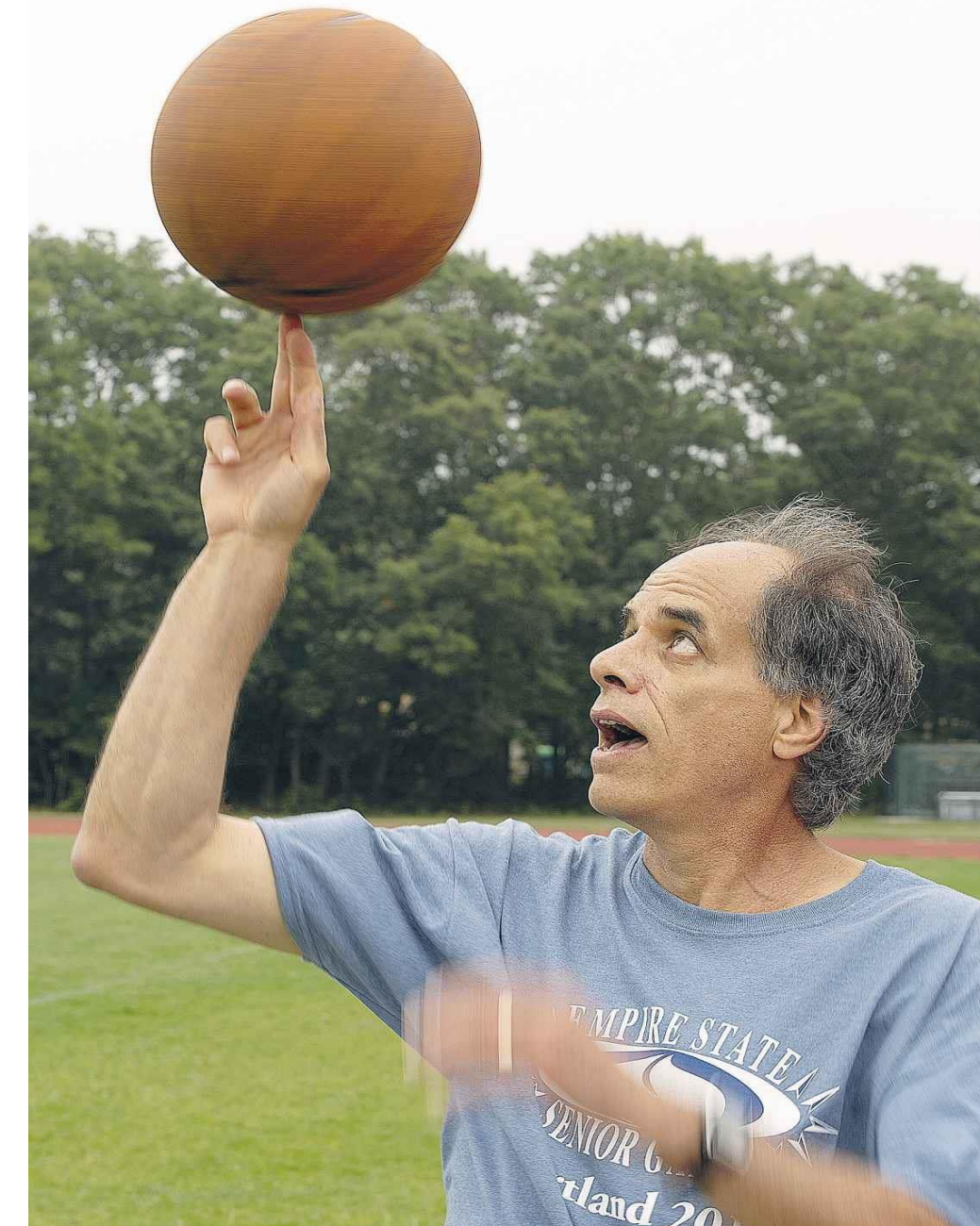
'HIS WAKE-UP CALL'

Meanwhile, he continued to play, usually against guys who were much younger, he said. An Achilles tendon tear suffered while playing a few years ago left him in a cast but didn't deter him from returning to the court. Even when Fox and his wife, Debbie, moved to a 55-and-over development in Setauket in 2014, Fox sought local competitive games. The head thump that happened when he tripped over a player's leg during a game in Port Jefferson was the last straw for Debbie, who is 61. When her husband came home that night and told her about his fall, she was upset. "I was hysterical and mad at the same time," she recalled. "He said he kept on playing. I was like 'What? You didn't go right to the ER?'"

A doctor later determined that Fox hadn't suffered a concussion, but, his wife said, "I think that was his wake-up call."

Fox agrees. "That was definitely the 'a-ha' moment. I only knew how to play at one speed — intense — and I could no longer safely do that," he said.

He thought about what he could do to stay in shape and scratch his competitive itch. "I



Marty Fox took up competitive race walking after decades of playing competitive basketball. After taking a nasty fall on the court, he turned to race walking to stay in shape.

was always a fast walker," he said. "And I often took wonderful, long walks through Setauket, Stony Brook and Port Jeff." He had seen stories about top local race walkers including two-time

Olympian Tim Seaman, a North Babylon High graduate, and Farmingville's Maria Michta-Coffey, 30, who is coached by Seaman. She won the Olympic trials in June and is scheduled to

compete in the 20k race on Friday. "That interested me," Fox said. "I read everything I could about the technique and practiced it."

In race walking, Fox discovered not only a competitive sport, but also a vigorous physical activity that burns more calories than even brisk walking. According to a study published in the Harvard Health Publications newsletter, a 155-pound individual will burn 242 calories in 30 minutes of race walking, compared to about 149 calories burned by walking briskly for the same period of time.

And race walking is lower impact than running. "I think it's less pounding on the knees and ankles," Melville-based orthopedic surgeon Dorothy Scarpinato said. However, she added, "Race walking is not just walking fast down the hall. You need to learn how to do it right"

Fox found creative ways to get his training in. He began commuting by train from Stony Brook to Syosset, and would then race-walk the one mile to and from the Syosset train station to his office, where he works in IT for a large wine and liquor distributor.

COMPETING WITH RUNNERS

Once he began to get the hang of the wiggle-walk that has strict regulations on the way it's done at official events, he looked for competitive outlets. But there are few dedicated race walking tournaments on Long Island. Instead, Fox entered some local 5k running races and race walked the distance, equivalent to 3.1 miles. "The event organizers were very welcoming but suggested I start each race in the back of the pack," he said. Eventually, he gained the confidence to enter a true walking competition: the 5k race-walk at the 2016 Empire State Senior Games. The night before the race, held on June 16, he stayed in the SUNY Cortland dorm along with many of the other older competitors in the games. "They gave me a credential that said 'Athlete,'" he said. "I felt like I was in the Olympics."

More than 30 walkers were competing in the 5k. Fox decided to go out with the lead

pack of five, assuming that some of the others would eventually overtake him. They didn't. At the halfway point, he said, he was still within the lead group. "I said, 'I feel good, I'll just push through.'"

Fox clocked 33 minutes, 11 seconds, and took second place in the 60-64 age group, and fourth overall. His time translates into an average pace of 10 minutes, 41 seconds per mile, faster than some people run.

"I was so proud of him," his wife said. "It's a great accomplishment." Now, when her husband goes out for his walks through the Three Village area, she's not worried. "Race Walking is much safer," she said, "It's perfect for him."

Fox has already set his next goal: the National Senior Games 5k race-walk in Birmingham, Alabama, in June 2017. "I have a year to go," he said. "But I want to be in the top three."

Achieving the mission will take a lot more training and refinement of his race-walking technique. But he welcomes the challenge, just as he once anticipated the tipoff of another game of hoops.

"This is like I'm 15 years old again," he said. "Everything is new."



Fox placed second in his age division and fourth overall at the Empire State Senior Games in June. He clocked a time of 33 minutes, 11 seconds for the 5k, a pace that's slightly faster than 10:45 a mile.

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