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LU Professor David Horton goes the extra mile

July 29, 2008 | Eric Brown

Physical exercise comes in many forms — biking, jumping rope, weight lifting or even a brisk walk. For Dr. David Horton, his favorite heart-pumping activity is of a slightly different breed. No, he does not spend countless hours practicing yoga or doing Pilates. He is an ultramarathon runner, competing in footraces that cover distances of 30 miles or more.

When people ask the 58-year-old why he runs, he gladly explains.

“That is a multi-factorial answer. The simplest version is because I can,” Horton said. “This is the talent the Lord has given me.”

Horton is one of three children, born to Ezra and Lois Horton. In 1971, he married Nancy Paladino. Together, they have two children in their 30s.

Horton attended the University of Arkansas and received his doctorate by the age of 28. He ended up at Liberty University after attending a convention and speaking with representatives who were looking for Christian professors to teach at their university.

Horton served as chairman of Liberty University’s kinesiology department from 1983-2003 and has taught at the university for 29 years. He now instructs two classes, Physiology of Exercise and Exercise Prescription. These classes allow students to develop an appreciation for healthy exercise while running on some of the unique trails near campus.

In 1995 Horton began the task of establishing miles of trails on Liberty Mountain using chainsaws and snippers, even getting his students into the act by requiring trail maintenance work as part of their curriculum.

“I’ve been a trail runner for many years and there used to be a few old sort of logging roads ... I kept thinking, ‘I wish we had more trails up here,’ and I thought, ‘Well there’s one way to get more trails — build trails.’”

Throughout his illustrious career as a runner, Horton has covered about 107,000 miles of terrain, including 30 marathons and more than 170 ultras. He has won 40 races since completing his first ultra in 1979.

Horton is no stranger to setting speed records on trails covering thousands of miles. His first big endeavor occurred in 1991, when he ran the entire Appalachian Trail (AT) in 52 days, nine hours, breaking the previous record. Since then, two men have surpassed the barrier, making him the third fastest of all time.

Four years after running the AT, Horton participated in the Trans America Footrace, finishing third overall.

The days of being the third-fastest runner came to an end in 2005. At the age of 55, he attempted the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), a 2,650-mile voyage stretching from Mexico to Canada. Horton reached the final trail marker in just 66 days, shattering the old record by a little more than two weeks.

Over 25 years ago, Horton started a 50-mile race in the Central Virginia area known as the Mountain Masochist Trail Run (MMTR). The course is a challenging combination of roads, jeep trails and single track trails.

After winning the MMTR its inaugural year, he began serving as the race director, growing it into an event that now features more than 300 runners from around the country.

For more information about the 2008 Mountain Masochist Trail Run visit www.eco-xsports.com.