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SPORTS

Runner, 81, leaves stereotypes in dust on way to records

By **Ron Kroichick** | March 19, 2015 | Updated: March 19, 2015 9:55pm

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Irene Obera has carved out an impressive second career in sports. She played softball at Chico State, moved to the track and ran in the 1960 and '68 Olympic trials and then dominated Masters sprinting in her 40s and 50s.

And her most impressive feat might be what she's doing right now.

Obera, who lives in Fremont, will compete in the Masters Indoor Track & Field Championships starting Friday in Winston-Salem, N.C. She will show up with designs on duplicating her sensational 2014 season, when she established six world records for her age group and was named U.S. Masters athlete of the year, an award for the



Photo: Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

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Irene Obera of Fremont stretches during training at Chabot College in Hayward. The 81-year-old holds several world records.

country's top track-and-field performer 35 and older.

Oh, we neglected to mention: Obera is 81.

This would seem like an improbable age at which to enter seven events in one meet. But that's the plan in

North Carolina, where Obera will chase medals in the pentathlon (comprised of five events itself), 60 meters, 200 meters, 400 meters, 800 meters, long jump and 60-meter hurdles.

The ambitious schedule doesn't seem so improbable upon meeting Obera, a retired teacher, counselor and administrator in the Berkeley Unified School District. She's spry and energetic and easily could pass for being her mid-60s. Only her dignified gray-white hair offers a hint of her age.

Obera is simultaneously stretching athletic boundaries and leaving her footprints all over the Masters record book. But she acts as if she's simply taking a leisurely stroll around the block.

"I don't ever feel old — I'm a young 81," she said last week at Chabot College, where she typically trains twice weekly. "I don't think about age, like most people do. I'd run against a 5-year-old or a 20-year-old. It doesn't matter."

The path to track

Obera grew up in San Bernardino and became passionate about softball. She mostly played center field and envisioned stealing bases long into adulthood.

Instead, while teaching physical education in her mid-20s, Obera attended a conference and watched a movie about female track athletes. She soon joined a small track club in San Francisco, planting the seeds for several decades of running swiftly.

Obera specialized in sprints until late in 2012, with her 80th birthday about a year away. That's when her coach, Alan Kolling — a track enthusiast and former attorney in the chancellor's office at UC Berkeley — suggested she expand her repertoire, knowing many age 80-84 world records were within her reach.

She promptly set several records last year, including her longtime favorites of 100 meters (16.81 seconds) and 200 meters (36.80 outdoors and 36.53 indoors). Obera also

lowered the 200-meter hurdle record by more than 20 seconds (to 42.24), set a U.S. record in the long jump (9 feet, 7¾ inches) and established the 60-meter indoor mark (10.37).

'Blows me away'

Her willingness to try new events, and then excel at them, made an impression on Kolling.

“She absolutely blows me away,” he said. “She loves a challenge. I find it so refreshing — she keeps me young and on my toes.”

Kolling, 63, met Obera (who once ran against Olympic champion Wilma Rudolph) in the early 1970s, soon after the Masters track movement started. Kolling was a student in Berkeley and Obera was teaching in the city, so they began training together at Edwards Stadium.

They remained friends through the years, and Kolling watched in wonder as Obera outraced other Masters competitors for more than two decades. She competed in the world championships every two years, typically winning at 100 meters and 200 meters — and also sometimes at 400 meters and in relays.

“She would come back with all these gold medals, but it got boring for her,” Kolling said.

That’s why Obera retired from competition in 1999, three years after she was inducted into USA Track & Field’s Masters Hall of Fame. She became interested again in 2005, while planning a trip to Spain to watch friends in the world meet. She also decided to run in the meet, despite little preparation. She didn’t win, which only stoked her competitive juices.

Plus, her father, Francisco, always told her, “Don’t put limits on yourself.”

Octogenarian goals

She got back on the track in her 70s, and then found renewed motivation as she approached her 80th birthday in December 2013. Obera trained with Kolling three times per week in preparation for this year's Masters indoor meet, usually twice at Chabot and once at Edwards.

She was initially skeptical about adding the hurdles, but she quickly adapted. Obera got tips from good friend Cherrie Sherrard, who once competed in the hurdles in the Pan Am Games (and is the mother of former 49ers wide receiver Mike Sherrard).

Obera is a rare breed, not only to compete at 81 but also to stretch herself in so many events. Meet officials in North Carolina are combining age groups in selected events, so Obera will go against several women in their 70s and some as young as 60.

Asked about her ambitious schedule, she said, "It's just the challenge. This is really a check to see where I am and what I can handle. I'll find out a whole lot about me at this meet."

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