

Cool

BY JEFF MERRON

Photography by John Ripley

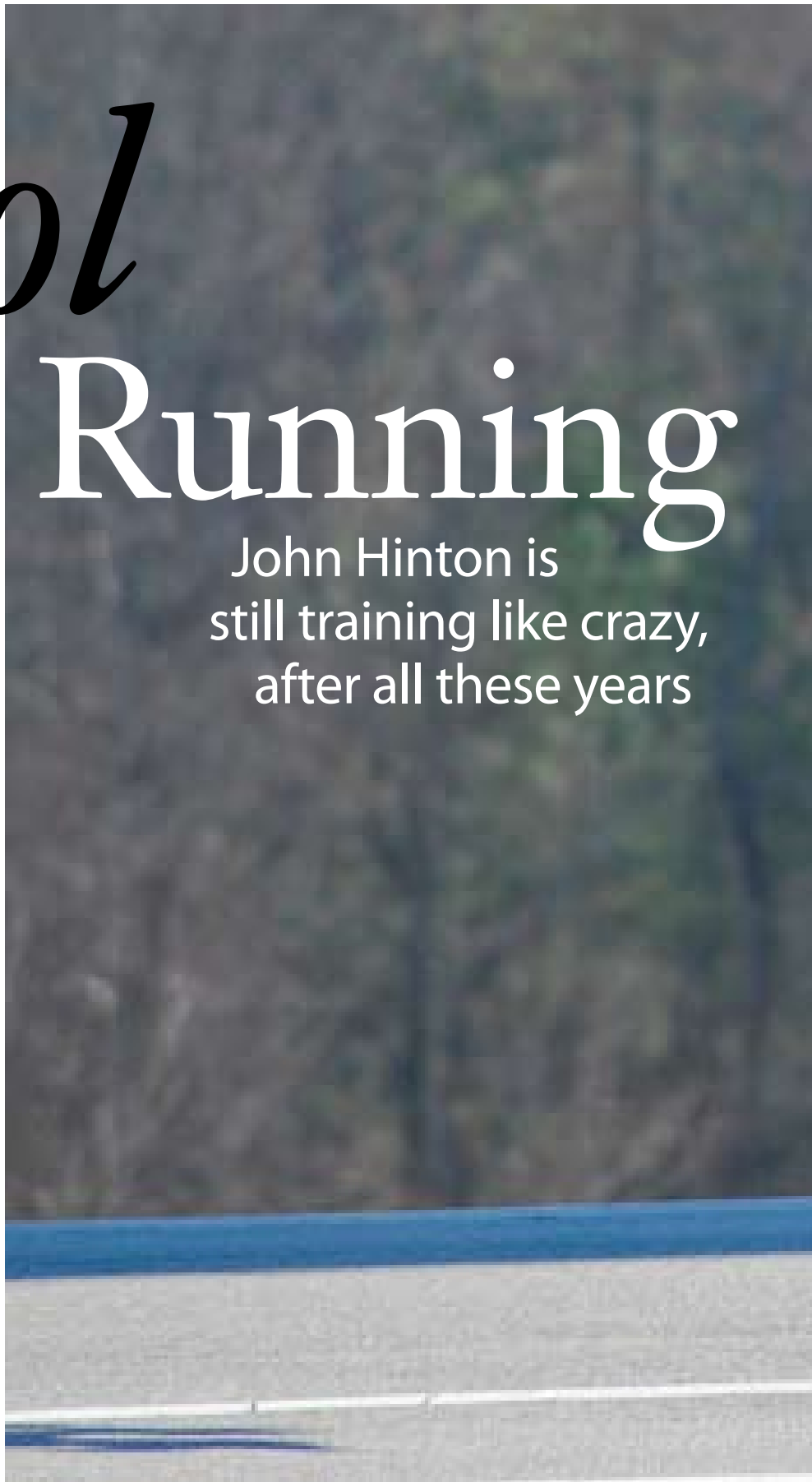
Twenty-six years ago, 19-year-old John Hinton of Dry Fork High School in

Virginia stepped onto one of the world's largest track and field stages: the elite high school mile at the Wanamaker Millrose Games in Madison Square Garden. Hinton finished third in a solid 4:15, not too shabby under the high-pressure conditions associated with the Garden's fabled wooden track.

Just a few months ago – on May 6 at the Duke Twilight meet at Wallace Wade Stadium, the now-45-year-old Hinton hopped onto another brightly lit stage in track and set a world record in the 1500 meters for men in his 45- to 49-year-old age group. He finished an impressive seventh in a race loaded with 24 runners, most collegians. But more importantly, he ran a 3:56.39 and broke the existing record for his age group by about two seconds. It had stood since 1995. He eagerly awaits turning 50 – the dreaded AARP-eligible milestone – because it represents more chances for him as he enters a new age group to make his mark. ➤

Running

John Hinton is still training like crazy, after all these years





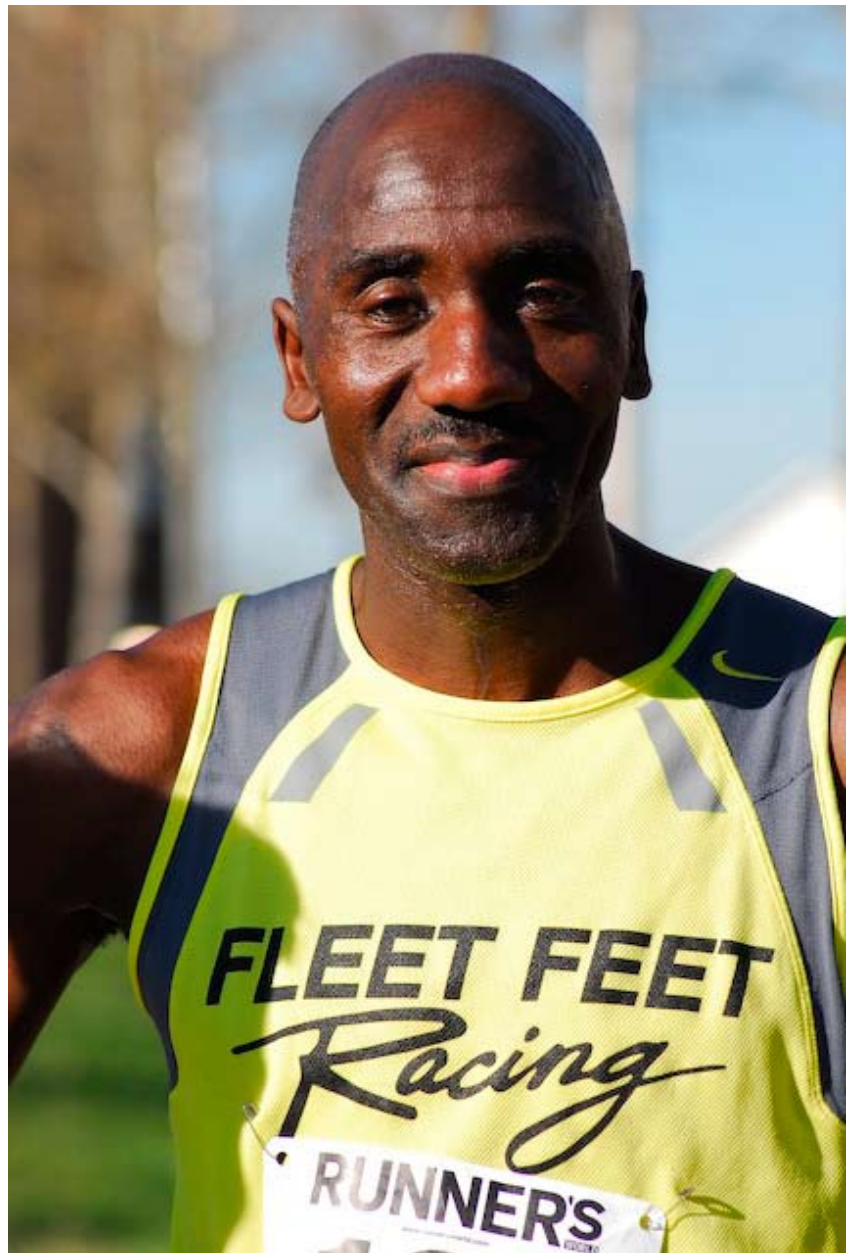
After more than a quarter-century as one of the nation's top middle-distance runners, Hinton, who's been coached by Chapel Hill's Joan Nesbit Mabe (who set the women's 45-49 world record for the indoor mile in January) for the past 10 years, is still looking ahead. He wants more world records in his age group. He wants to keep competing against the college kids.

Hinton, who lives near University Mall and is a produce manager at Harris Teeter, gets to work by 6 a.m. and is off by 4 p.m., which gives him plenty of daylight time to train with

"How fast can a 50-year-old man run? Can [I] still break four minutes for the 1500 at age 50?"

– John Hinton

other members of the elite Carrboro Athletic Club. Sponsored by Fleet Feet in Carrboro with help from New Balance, the club pays his expenses to some meets and also provides him with equipment – shoes, spikes, shorts and the like. Every little bit helps since he certainly doesn't run for the money. Hinton only wins money in road races,



maybe \$100 to \$250, and he'll run only five or six road races a year. Perhaps once in a while his entry fee will be waived at a local meet or he'll get a free hotel room for an away event, but that's it.

Being a member of this club, which is overseen by Mabe, is crucial to Hinton in other ways. "We all have similar goals," he says of the club's members. "One runner may be looking to make the Olympic team. I may have a goal to set a world record or win a national

masters title."

But winning isn't everything. "[Masters runners] set time goals for ourselves. For me, the goal this year was the world 1500 meter record. The world record in the mile is 4:15, so now the goal next year is to break that. And this coming indoor season will be my first as a 45-year-old, so I'll try to break the mile record indoors, and maybe the 800 meter indoor record also."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Merron is a freelance journalist who has contributed to ESPN.com, the *New York Times Magazine* and many other publications. He lives in Chapel Hill and is an announcer at UNC track meets.

Benchmarks

HOME Hinton moved to Chapel Hill in 1985, after graduating from UVA, following his coach at Virginia, Dennis Craddock, who had just taken a position as head of UNC's track program. Save for a few years, he's been living in Chapel Hill since.

AGE 45

PBs

- Four-time All-American at UVA
- Personal best in 800 meters: 1:47
- Personal best in mile: 4:01
- Personal best in 1500 meters: 3:40 (equivalent to 3:57 mile)
- Qualified for and ran in 1984, 1988 and 1992 Olympic Trials
- 2003 World Champion in 40-44 age group in 1500 meters
- Defeated world-class milers Ray Flynn and Peter Rono to win mile at Sherbrooke (Quebec) International track and field meet in 1989

John Hinton, a divorced father of recent Virginia Tech graduate Traci Hinton, may not look younger than his 45 years, but he certainly looks fitter. His legs are pure muscle, and there doesn't appear to be an ounce of fat on his 5-foot-8-inch, 138-pound frame. But if you spot him running his usual route, which begins on the east side of town and winds through the Botanical Gardens, the UNC campus, and the Tar Heel cross-country course, he'll appear younger – because he's running fast. An athlete who has run national-class times at distances from the 800 meters (1:47) to the 10k (sub-30) easily lopes along at a pace that would exhaust most fitness runners within a few minutes.

It looks easy (from a distance), but Hinton not only works hard, he's also talented and smart, says Mabe. "He has

an innate wisdom about his limitations," she says. "He can get the most out of his body without getting injured. And he's willing to change habits as his body's changing."

Perhaps most important to Hinton are the friendships he's forged during his decades of competing. "Everybody [in track] knows and loves John Hinton," says Mabe. "He's burned no bridges in his life. People want him to succeed. People want him to keep running. They would be sad if he retired."

The saddest people, no doubt, would be his training partners. Keith Mathis, a top middle-distance runner at UNC from 1988 to 1993, had decided to come to UNC primarily because Hinton was a volunteer assistant training coach for the Tar Heel track team, and Mathis wanted to soak up his knowledge – and train with the best.

"[John] has an innate wisdom about his limitations. He can get the most out of his body without getting injured." – Joan Nesbit Mabe

But after college, Mathis had one more goal: to qualify for the 1996 Olympic Trials in Atlanta.

It was 1994. Hinton had decided to retire.

"But I needed a training partner," says Mathis. "So I told John, 'Look man, I need someone to run with.' He said, 'No, I'm retiring.' I said, 'Well, you can't! That's not an option!' He said, 'Leave me alone. I'm retiring.'"

"That was Saturday night. Sunday morning was my usual day for a long run and I was knocking on his door saying, 'Wake up, John!'"

Hinton didn't respond, so Mathis went to his bedroom window and banged on it until Hinton didn't have a choice. "I told you you can't retire because I've got to make it to the Trials in '96. So get your running shoes, get your shorts, and let's go. I made him go on a run. This routine went on for at least five or six weeks. After that, he said, 'Okay, I'll give it another two years.'"

"From that experience, I would never have guessed he would have stuck around this long."

Hinton's not surprised; more curious and energized, actually. "How fast can a 50-year-old man run?" he wonders. "Can [I] still break four minutes for the 1500 at age 50? So once I get to 50, I've got some new goals." **CHM**