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Vazgen Vartanian, a Metro software engineer, plans to run the Las Vegas Marathon in early December. He replaces his running shoes several times a year. Photo by Ned Racine.

The Older He Gets, the Faster He Goes: Metro's Vazgen Vartanian

- After completing 60 events, he now targets the Boston Marathon

By NED RACINE

(Nov. 21, 2006) Vazgen Vartanian runs. Running, particularly running marathons, remains his passion, his exercise, his pleasure. It's also good news for his children.

Vartanian feels so good after a run, he tells his three children, "Ask me for whatever you want after I run. The answer will always be 'yes.' "

Remarkably, Vartanian, 57, runs faster as he grows older. He recently finished first in his age group at the Long Beach International Marathon, with a time of three hours and 24 minutes (4:24).

Since he first ran the Los Angeles Marathon in 1994, Vartanian has completed 60 marathons, running the Los Angeles Marathon 13 times. He completes an average of five marathons each year, not counting the half-marathons he enters. No wonder he replaces his running shoes several times each year.

Vartanian, a Metro software engineer, displayed an early aptitude for distance running. He finished the 1994 Los Angeles Marathon, his first marathon, with a time of 4:33. "The second year, when I ran the same

marathon…I dropped one hour," Vartanian recalls. "It was amazing."

No Sweat: Runner Vartanian clinches the medal for Los Angeles Marathon XVIII in 2003.

Wasn't a distance runner

Playing soccer as a child in his native Iran, Vartanian never ran long distances. When he emigrated to the United States in 1986, the year he began working for the SRTD, he continued playing soccer. But as more players missed their soccer matches, Vartanian began looking for recreation he could pursue by himself.

When he first started, Vartanian could only run two or three minutes. He worked to increase the distance he ran, not the speed. "Probably in less than a year, I was able to run my first LA Marathon," he said.

What runs through Vartanian's mind while he runs a marathon? Scenery, perhaps? "I'm thinking about managing my pace and time," he insists "Believe me, I'm not thinking of anything else." He also carefully monitors his body's condition.

The Las Vegas Marathon remains Vartanian's favorite race, in part because he likes to run uphill. On his horizon awaits the United States' most famous marathon, the Boston Marathon, run in mid-April.

"I am very well qualified to run the Boston Marathon," Vartanian explains. "Once in my lifetime, I want to do it." Vartanian can qualify for the field of the Boston Marathon because his time is so low within his age group, 50 to 59.

Devoted to running

One reason Vartanian's finish times are dropping may be his devotion to his running.

"I try to run six miles every single day," he says. "But on the weekend, that is my long distance run. For instance, on Saturday I start at the regular hours, 5:30 or 6 a.m., and I run close to 20 miles, 18 miles. It depends on the time I have. Never less than 15 miles. Sundays, I run 13 or 14 miles."

Vartanian runs approximately 60 miles each week. He runs early in the morning, so he does not miss time with his family. If you live in the San Gabriel Valley, you might see him running in the mountains above Burbank, Glendale and La Canada/Flintridge.

Vartanian said he will run marathons until his body stops him. "Thank God, I have no problem with my knees or hips."