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Phillipsburg rodeo's pink fund helps world champion runner win his toughest race

Phillipsburg, Kan. (July 13, 2026) – John Mason is a runner.

He's run races across the globe and has won; he's run against polio and won, and now he's run the race with cancer and beat it.

A resident of Phillipsburg, Mason was diagnosed with an aggressive form of bladder cancer in May 2025. If he'd chosen to not treat it, his doctor said he would have three months to live.

So Mason chose the second option: a neobladder, where doctors remove the diseased bladder, put in a new one, and "replumb you," as Mason described it.

He underwent six months of chemotherapy and immunotherapy, spending much of that time in Kansas City at the Kansas University Medical Center.

It was tough. He had internal bleeding after the bladder reconstruction surgery, so bad that he spent more than 20 days in the hospital and received 31 blood transfusions.

But his life story is so much more than cancer.

At age 11, in 1956, he got polio. In those days, there was no physical therapy for survivors. So his dad encouraged him to run, and he did. "I would race my sisters around the block," he said.

"I found out I liked running, like Forest Gump." Even now, at age 80, he walks five miles a day.

He also found out he was a fast runner. Mason is a fifteen-time collegiate All-American runner and won nine collegiate national championships. In 1968, he was the U.S. Champion in the 1500m and the cross-country, with a record in the cross-country that held for 21 years. He won the World Games in Stockholm that same year, and ran in and won numerous contests around the globe: from Europe to Southeast Asia, Russia, Canada, and in the U.S.

He trained for the 1968 Olympics, which were to be held in Mexico City that year.

But he never got to run in them. After the race in Stockholm, he contracted typhoid fever, and was so sick when he got off the return flight in Denver that an ambulance met him and took him to the hospital.

Mason retired from running in 1971, because of problems with his knees.

He lived in Phillipsburg with his wife, Juanita, and was a hot tub salesman for 25 years. After retiring 17 years ago, at the suggestion of his daughter, he began work as a custodian at Phillipsburg High School.

It was a job he loved. "I liked it so much," he said. "I loved the kids so much, I ended up working there 17 years. If it wasn't for cancer, I'd still be there."

Jolly Ranchers and a listening ear were his gift to the students. He always had the candy ready to hand out, and was always willing to listen. "I was like their grandpa," he said. "And I think I helped a lot of kids. They could talk to me. I'd give all of them the same amount of attention."

Mason received financial help from the Hope in the Heartland fund, a philanthropic arm of Kansas Biggest Rodeo. Each year, the rodeo raises money on its Tough Enough to Wear Pink night. For every fan wearing pink on the Thursday night of rodeo (this year, July 30), one dollar is donated to the fund by the Phillipsburg Rodeo Association.

Seven local businesses and organizations match the rodeo's donation: A&A Coors, Amber Wave, B&B Redimix Inc., Farmers State Bank, W.B. DesJardins Fund, Rodgers and Associates and Witmer Drug.

The money was welcome, Mason said.

"It helped a lot. My doctors were 320 miles away, and gas is not cheap. It helped pay for gas and other expenses," including medications not covered by insurance.

Mason's grandfather, John Voss, was one of the first rodeo stockholders, and that stock has been passed on to Mason's daughter, Tara Overmiller.

He loves coming to the rodeo and the parade, often bringing friends from Kansas City. "They think the Phillipsburg rodeo is one of the best."

For his eightieth birthday, his sister made a t-shirt for him. It says, "I beat polio, cancer, and the 4-minute mile. Going strong since 1945."

And Mason is still going strong.

The Phillipsburg Rodeo has hosted a Tough Enough to Wear Pink night every year since 2006. In the past 20 years, the rodeo has raised over \$186,000 for people in the area undergoing cancer treatment. One hundred percent of donations are distributed; nothing is held back for administrative costs.

This year's Kansas Biggest Rodeo will be held July 30-31-August 1. Shows start at 8 pm nightly.

Tickets are available online at KansasBiggestRodeo.com and at Garrett Insurance (685 Third Street, Phillipsburg) or by calling 785.543.2448.

Tickets range in price from \$13-\$22.

For more information, visit the website or call 785.543.2448.

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Cutlines:

All photos courtesy the Mason family.

1 John and Juanita Mason. John had cancer and received funds from the Phillipsburg rodeo's Tough Enough to Wear Pink night.

2 John Mason with the t-shirt given to him by his sister. He broke the four-minute mile in 1970 with a time of 3:58 at a race in Berkeley, California. The Phillipsburg man had polio as a child, recently beat cancer, and was a track champion.

3 Phillipsburg's John Mason was a fifteen-time All-American at Ft. Hays State University and won nine collegiate championships in track. He's benefitted from the Phillipsburg rodeo's cancer fund.