



Photo: Merle Robillard

MARATHON MEN



“Skipper” Mike Paulic, 75 years old, still gets to his jobsite at 7 a.m. and can swing his 22-ounce Stanley framing hammer better than a man half his age. He tried retiring once and found it boring. At 62, Richard Matonog, a renovator and finish carpenter, will still work 16-hour days for weeks at a time, when necessary. He says he isn’t planning to retire any time soon and would like to work until he’s 80. Canadian Contractor looks at the endurance, mindset and healthy lifestyles of two veteran craftsmen.

By Steve Payne

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Whether it’s a cottage overlooking a pristine lake, a warm, sandy beach or the untouched, white powder on the side of a mountain—for most of us, it’s going to take some serious financial security planning to reach our retirement goals. We can help you put a plan in place today that will put freedom and choice in your future.

—London Life “Freedom 55” advertisement

Retirement kills more people than hard work ever did.

—Malcolm Forbes

Retirement sounds like heaven sometimes. Sitting for hours on that cottage dock or walking endlessly along that golden sand. But retirement doesn’t always turn out to be as glorious as a Freedom 55 advertisement. Consider:

▲ Retirement can be hard on your mind. For many people, negative mental states—including loneliness, feelings of uselessness and serious clinical depression—are an unavoidable side-effect of leaving the workforce.

▲ Retirement can be hard on your body. Although exercise helps, most retirees become much more sedentary when they don’t have to show up at work any more. Rapid weight gain and loss of muscle tone and bone density are just a few of the accelerated ageing effects of sitting for too long on that cottage dock.

▲ Retirement can be hard on your wallet. Over the past year, most Canadian mutual funds have taken a 10 to 30 per cent plunge and millions of workers approaching retirement age are already rethinking their plans. Some of us are going to retire later than we thought (Freedom 85?). Some of us might never retire.

Everyone is different. People age at different rates and afflictions like arthritis can strike as early as your forties—or even earlier. But whether it’s their healthy lifestyles, good genetics, or both, some contractors are able to stay on the job well into their seventh and eighth decades. Let’s meet a couple of them.

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Photo: Merle Robillard

“Skipper” Mike Paulic

Sitting with me in his van at lunchtime outside a custom home jobsite in Oakville, Ont., where he’s been putting up siding since dawn, “Skipper” Mike Paulic, 75, waves his hand dismissively when I quiz him about his abandoned attempt at retirement. He looks about as interested in discussing this topic as a man

asked about the plot of a movie that he walked out of after 20 minutes. “I sit at home, that’s all,” says Skipper, in his Croatian accent. “I was making my music, yes, but I was bored.”

So, in 2002, at the age of 68, Skipper accepted an offer from his son, Rudy, owner of Oakville, Ont.-based Forestview Construction, to get back to work. He returned his lifelong musical hobby to his evening hours. (His retirement wasn’t a complete waste of time: he went into a studio and recorded three CDs of his own songs—he’s written 500 in his life, everything from traditional Croatian folk music to rock music.)

I ask Skipper if he’s back on the tools for the money or just for the feeling of working, or both. Neither, he says; it’s just good for his health. But he wouldn’t necessarily have gone back to work if he was a white-collar guy, he says. In fact, the way he looks at it, if he were an office guy all his life, he might be close to dead.

“Construction is good for your health, simple,” he says. “If I am (a) lawyer, or maybe work on a computer, not good. But in construction you are running, you are moving. I look like 55, no? If I’m not doing this, I might be like that...” He crooks his left hand into twisted claw-shape and hunches his head forward.

Skipper gets out to the jobsite every day at 7 a.m. and works many Saturdays, but rarely Sundays. Rudy, 39, relies on his father’s 50 years of experience in a number of ways, but in recent years Skipper has been doing a lot of the framing for his son’s firm. Doesn’t that hurt when you’re three-quarters-of-a-century old?

“No,” Skipper says, with a wave of his hand.

You don’t get tired?

“I go home when I’m tired.”

When is that?

“At my age? Whenever I feel like it.”

Skipper plugs away for exactly the same long hours as the rest of the Forestview guys. And he doesn’t call in sick. He was off three days last year with a sore back. That was it. When I ask him about other ailments, he just laughs. “Flu? Then you feel better outside, working!” When I hear all of this, I think of Gordie Howe playing professional hockey past 50. But this would be more like Gordie Howe playing hockey at 75. How does the man do it?

I look for clues in Skipper’s lifestyle, and there are some, starting with his diet. When I phoned Rudy to set up the interview for this article, I asked if he and his dad might want to meet me in a restaurant. Rudy replied that his dad wouldn’t eat anything that Jelena, Skipper’s wife, hadn’t personally prepared from him. That means Skipper gets a regular diet of unprocessed, home-cooked food: lots of vegetables, fruits, very little from a can, most of it made from scratch. “No McDonald’s,” Skipper says. “Everything prepared in the old way.” His favourite food? Jelena’s cabbage salad.



The Forestview Construction crew
Foreground: Mike "Skipper" Paulic
Back row, left: Kyle "Marco" Bartlett,
Jimmy Sparfel, Rudy Paulic

Photo: Merle Robillard

"CONSTRUCTION IS GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH, SIMPLE," HE SAYS. "IF I AM (A) LAWYER, OR MAYBE WORK ON A COMPUTER, NOT GOOD. BUT IN CONSTRUCTION YOU ARE RUNNING, YOU ARE MOVING."

When I ask him whether he smokes, Skipper looks at me like I've tried to grab his wallet. "Not since I got cancer—1966," he replies. That was indeed Skipper's major wake-up call for healthy habits. Thirty-two at the time, he was given "three weeks to three months" to live. The surgeon took a tumour the size of a softball out of Skipper's stomach. He required no radiation, no chemotherapy, just the knife. "I prayed then and I still pray," Skipper says. "So, it's thanks to God. I had no control."

Alcohol? Okay, he's not a saint. "I drink sometimes lots," he laughs. "But no slivovica." (Croatian plum brandy so strong you could use it to clean the road tar off the side of your truck.) "Jack Daniels."

What else does he do for his health? I ask. "I have chamomile tea every morning, good for healing, makes everything soft in your system," Skipper says. "And five digestive cookies for breakfast, every day." He also takes daily Vitamin C and E tablets ("I just hear they are good for you") and he restricts himself to a single cup of weak coffee a day.

Mental toughness

As much as you look for diet and lifestyle factors to explain Skipper's longevity, it's his mental attitude that seems to be the real story. He wants to do it his own way.

You see that over and over again in his life story. In 1959, hell-bent to get out of communist Yugoslavia, Skipper escaped across the border to Austria at night—his third try. He'd done jail time for his previous attempts. He lived in a refugee camp in Austria for six months, then gambled on boat fare to Canada—one of some 30 countries that many Croats were emigrating to. He sailed here on the MS Seven Seas, from Bremerhaven, Germany to Quebec City, and then took the train to Winnipeg.

The first trade Skipper learned there was plastering, but he was making just 85 cents an hour (equivalent to \$6 an hour in today's dollars) when Jelena was finally able to join her husband in Canada after almost four years apart. The couple decided to move to Toronto and rented a single room with a kitchen in the west end. Skipper found a job on the rails at Union Station making double his Winnipeg pay. He then moved into factory work until his cancer appeared.

As he recovered from the surgery, he decided to completely change his lifestyle. He'd already quit his three-pack-a-day Export 'A' habit, now it was time to work on his diet.

"I decided to work for myself so I could eat properly," Skipper recalls. "At the factory you had to eat fast. I wanted to eat slowly, eat properly. It was all because of my health that I went to work for myself. I wanted to change the way I lived."

The best self-employment he could think of was renovating houses. He bought a \$24,000 house in Toronto's west end, gave it a facelift, and sold it six months later for a \$4,000 profit—more than he was making in a year at his old factory job. Skipper had other jobs along the way but he stayed in the buy-renovate-and-sell business for almost 30 years, working his way through 45 houses.

When he first took the plunge into self-employment, plastering was the only trade Skipper really knew. How did he know he could renovate an entire house? "You have to be prepared to learn. I'm always learning. If I want to do anything, I'm going to learn how to do it," he says.

By 1968, Skipper had saved enough to buy 100 acres of land up in Shelburne, Ont. Success story complete, you might think. No, it was a perfect time to take another chance, and he did. He decided to trade all that land, straight-up, for a Toronto shoe store ("including 600 pairs of shoes").

What was Skipper thinking? "Business opportunity!" he says. He kept going with his renovation business while the key employee at the store, an old-world shoemaker, kept International Shoes going. But, eventually, Skipper had to close the business when the local Ukrainians and Poles, his main customers, began to move out of the neighbourhood.

For the final 15 years before his "retirement," Skipper worked for a large Toronto developer: Kaneff Construction. At 60, his toughness was tested one more time. He plunged 20 feet to the ground while he was installing a sign at a golf course. His ladder had kicked out at the base. He landed on the ladder—or rather his groin landed on the edge-up ladder, one leg on either side. The stuff of nightmares.

"I had to pee through a tube for a year. I was told, this could be forever," he says. Ultimately, it took a six-hour operation to restore Skipper's ability to go to the bathroom normally, and, for the only time in his career, he had to stop working for an extended period of time. That was 15 years ago. Today, Skipper shows no residual effects of the trauma. But then, it happened when he was only 60. Kids heal faster.

Richard Matonog

Although they don't know each other, Toronto-area renovator Richard Matonog, 62, has a lot in common with his fellow contractor across town. Like Skip, Richard came to Canada from Eastern Europe (Poland), looking for better opportunities. Like Skipper, Richard looks about 15 years younger than his age. And, like Skipper, he has no interest in retiring.



Photo: Stephen Ferrie

“RICHARD MADE HIS OWN WINDOWS, FULL SASHES, AND CRAFTED HIS OWN WALL PANELLING. THERE WASN'T A BUILDING SUPPLY STORE WHERE YOU COULD JUST WALK IN AND ORDER THIS STUFF READY-MADE.”



Photo: Stephen Ferrie

Richard Matonog and his son Pawel.

I sit on the floor with Richard and his son (and business partner) Pawel (pronounced with a 'v') at one of their current jobsites, the interior renovation of an upscale Yorkville condo. Their Mississauga, Ont.-based company is called Archer Fine Construction. On their business cards there is a quote from Aristotle that speaks volumes: “Excellence is not an act, but a habit.” Looking at their work, they walk their talk.

I ask Richard the same lifestyle-and-diet questions that I asked Skipper, half-hoping that he would answer that he's a heavy smoker and a fast-food junkie.

But, obviously, this stuff does matter. Coincidentally (or not), both Richard and Skipper butted out in the mid-1960s. (In 1965, more than 80 per cent of Canadian men were smokers.) And that home-cooked, most-everything-from-scratch diet that Skipper likes? That's what Richard eats, too. He gets lots of vegetables from his own backyard and avoids fast food. “Do you think about your diet a lot?” I ask Richard. “No, but my wife does,” he says. “Don't tell him you eat kielbasa in the morning,” his son jokes.

Diet aside, Pawel believes it's his dad's mental attitude that drives him on. “First of all, my father's generation was not brought up on dreams of retirement and taking it easy,” he says. And post-war Poland was a hardscrabble place. “You could probably never get the money to have a house built for you, so you had to build your own,” Pawel says.

Richard was only 24 when he built the family's first home. There was very little being manufactured in Poland at that time, so he made his own windows—with full sashes—and crafted his own wall panelling. There wasn't a building supply store where you could just walk in and order this stuff ready-made. This is how Richard learned his trade.

In his country of origin, Richard had a full-time desk job as president of the local farm collective while he did countless renovations on the side. It was only when he came to Canada, in 1988, that Richard was able to work full-time in the renovation field, a decision he has never regretted.

His workload varies, but, in his seventh decade, Richard is still capable of long, long hours. Just before this interview, the father-and-son team had been working 16-hour days for two straight weeks. “We'd get up at 5, start work at 7, get home at 10:30 at night,” Pawel says. “He's got more energy than me, and I'm 30. I don't think I've ever seen him take more than 15 minutes for lunch. He walks around the site, measuring, planning—talking about what we're going to do after lunch. ‘Eat and get to work,’ he says.”

Like most contractors, Richard has been to the emergency department on more than one occasion. His most serious accident was just three years ago. He was trying to join two pieces of solid maple together with a nail gun and held the wood against his stomach, thinking that he had much shorter finishing nails in his cartridge that would easily and safely go in. But he was mistaken. He had longer nails loaded, and the gun, set on bounce-fire, kicked back off the wood and drove its next shot deep into his stomach cavity. The two-inch projectile just missed his colon. Had he perforated that, Richard could have died from the infection. Working alone, Richard phoned Pawel. “I just shot myself,” he said. Obviously, a bad day.

Richard has had four other major accidents—three serious falls (two from stepladders and one from scaffolding) and a table saw mishap where he lost a piece of a finger. Yet he's not currently hurting anywhere, he says. “Nothing worth mention-

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ing. Sure, when I came here I was 40 years old and was stronger, I did everything myself. Now, I don't do drywall." The two-man team subs out the heavier work and Richard has moved more into his woodworking and finish carpentry specialties, which he thinks he can continue to do indefinitely.

How long will Richard work? "As long as I can." So at least until 70? "Yes, longer." 80? "I might retire then. But I always have a lot of projects at home that I never had time for, so I'll probably still be doing this."

Freedom and choice

Without disparaging the fine folks at London Life, who first brought us the Freedom 55 concept over 30 years ago, and without negating the importance of saving for retirement, maybe it's worthwhile to think about why Richard and Skipper are still showing up for work.

If retiring at 55 is an exercise in "freedom and choice," as London Life tells us, what does working at 62 and 75 repre-



sent? Try telling a couple of Canadian contractors who came here from Eastern Europe that they lack freedom and choice as they happily plug away on the tools in their seventh and eighth decades. This is their freedom. These are their choices. Gentlemen, long may you run. **CC**

HOW THEY DO IT Healthy habits, leaps of faith... and Lady Luck

"SKIPPER" MIKE PAULIC, 75
Forestview Construction, Oakville, Ont.

Healthy habits: Non-smoker for more than 40 years; tries to avoid fast food; eats lots of greens and fibre; takes vitamin supplements; restricts caffeine intake; has an all-consuming hobby (has written 500 songs and recorded three CDs) that relaxes and invigorates him.



Leaps of faith: Left behind everything and everyone he knew when he defected from communist Yugoslavia in 1959. Prayed to God he could beat cancer in 1966—and did so. Recorded his first CD of original music when almost 70.

Lady Luck: Survived a potentially crippling fall off a ladder when he was 60. Long-term side effects: none.

RICHARD MATONOG, 62
Archer Fine Construction, Mississauga, Ont.

Healthy habits: Non-smoker since the age of 19; likes farm-fresh, everything-from-scratch foods including home-grown fruits and vegetables; likes to keep moving—famous for his short lunch breaks.

Leaps of faith: Decided to build his own house at the age of 24. At 41, he left a respectable desk job in Poland to come to Canada and work as a full-time renovation contractor for the first time in his life.

Lady Luck: Has survived three falls and once accidentally shot a 2-inch trim nail right into his stomach cavity. Took off part of a finger on a table saw. Long-term side effects: none.