

GARY PATTON

# STILL A MASTER

## Rock Rapids athlete, 71, claims four medals at world indoor games in Daegu, South Korea

BY SCOTT BYERS  
SPORTS EDITOR

**R**OCK RAPIDS—Gary Patton has become a N'West Iowa Energizer Bunny — he just keeps going and going and going.

The Rock Rapids resident once again proved he is one of the best runners in his age group in the world, winning four medals at the World Masters Athletics Indoor Championships track and field meet March 19-25 in Daegu, South Korea.

Patton won a gold medal in the M70 3,000-meter run. He was second in his age group in the 800-meter run and the 1,500-meter run. He also ran on the Team USA 800-meter relay team that placed second.

Those are some pretty lofty accomplishments for a 71-year-old who did not decide he would participate in the event until mid-January.

"I had just been in Australia last October competing in the WMA Outdoors Championships," Patton said. "The time commitment, expense and long flights made the decision a difficult one, but I hadn't been to a WMA Indoor Championships event since 2010. I was also curious to see a little of Asia, as I had never traveled there before."

### Athletic adventure

Patton's journey started with a flight from Sioux Falls, SD, to Chicago. From there was a 14-hour direct flight to Seoul, South Korea, then a one-hour flight to Daegu, which is at the southern end of the Korean

peninsula. Daegu is Korea's third-largest city with a population of around 2.5 million.

"The city's land area is probably about the size of Des Moines, including the suburbs, but with several times the population," Patton said. "Most people live in high-rise apartments."

He was immediately struck by how easy it was to get from place to place in the city.

"The country impressed me with its modern road and rail systems and public transportation," Patton said. "Rush hour traffic can get as snarled as any other large city. I was reluctant to try and navigate the public transport and the taxi service was very inexpensive. A 20-minute ride across town costs about 10,000 won, which is only a little over \$8."

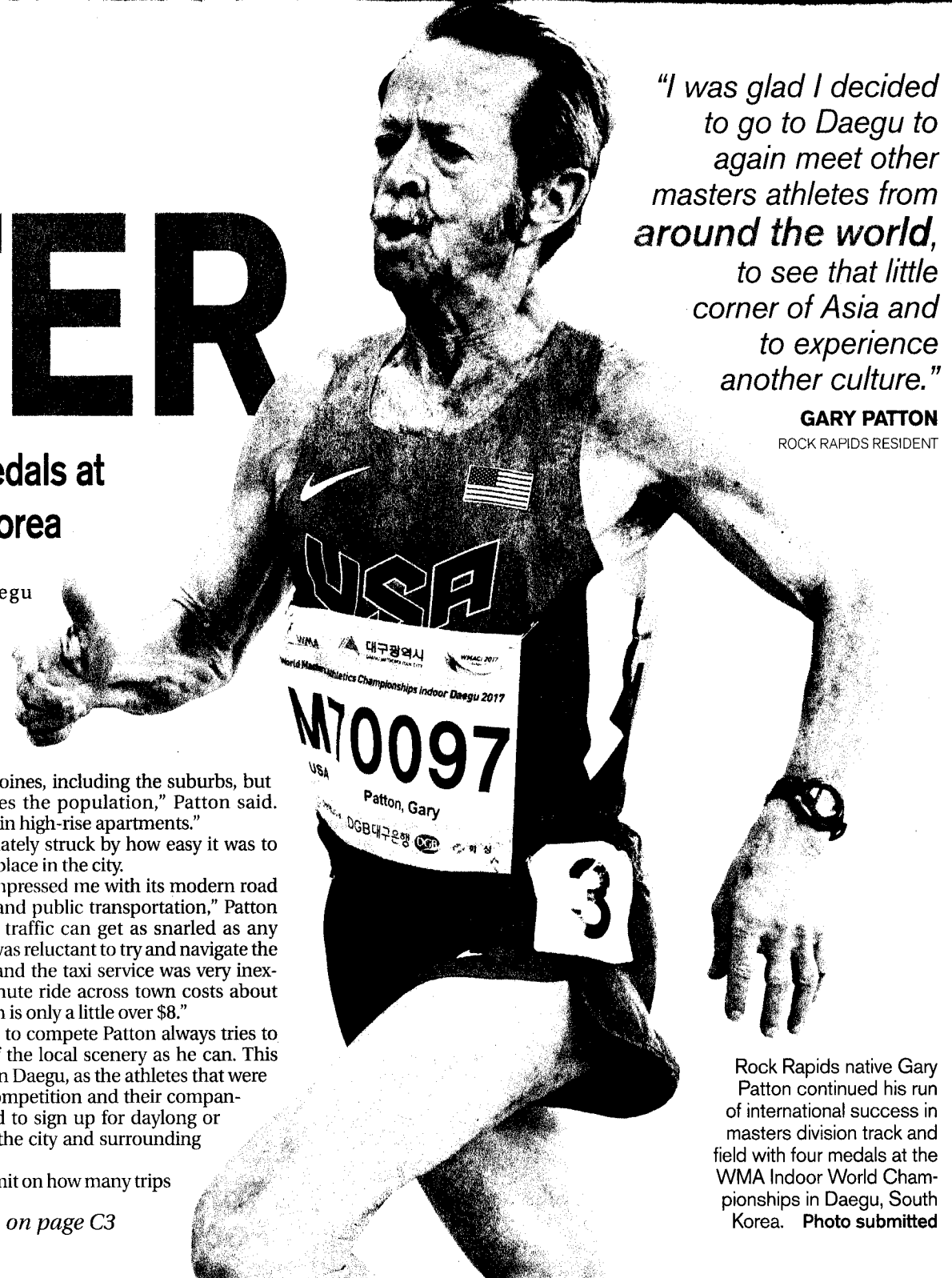
During his trips to compete Patton always tries to catch as much of the local scenery as he can. This was made easier in Daegu, as the athletes that were in town for the competition and their companions were allowed to sign up for daylong or half-day tours of the city and surrounding province.

There was no limit on how many trips

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*"I was glad I decided to go to Daegu to again meet other masters athletes from around the world, to see that little corner of Asia and to experience another culture."*

**GARY PATTON**  
ROCK RAPIDS RESIDENT



Rock Rapids native Gary Patton continued his run of international success in masters division track and field with four medals at the WMA Indoor World Championships in Daegu, South Korea. Photo submitted

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## SPORTS

# Patton proud to represent USA

**PATTON**  
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the athletes could take. Patton went on three day tours and one of the half-day tours.

"The tours concentrated on Korea's history and culture," he said. "They included several Buddhist temples, several museums and two traditional villages that have been restored to their appearance in the 17th-19th centuries."

Eating was another lesson in culture as Patton had to be careful what he consumed with the competition still looming.

"The daylong tours each include a traditional Korean meal at a small local restaurant. It was served on a low table and we sat on cushions," Patton said. "Our tour groups were mostly Europeans, so we had to ask for forks otherwise the meal would have taken a very long time. The food was mostly rice and vegetables, with only very small meat portions. I tried everything, but very carefully, as some of the spices can be

hot."

The diet explains why Koreans in general seem in better shape than Americans.

"I can see why most Koreans are slim, although you see a few very chunky people who have evidently adopted a more Western diet," Patton said.

### Time to compete

Of course, what Patton was actually there for was to compete. Right away he was struck by the facility.

"The track venue was the most modern and well-designed indoor facility I've ever competed in," Patton said. "The WMA organization pulled off the event flawlessly."

Age groups are separated by five-year intervals, so Patton still is on the young side of his group. However, there was an even younger competitor he knew was a threat.

"I knew my toughest competitor would be Hans Smeets of the Netherlands, who just turned 70 a month before the event," Patton said. "I'm in my

second year of M70 competition."

It's not just age that made Smeets someone to keep an eye on. After all, Smeets still was ranked in the top three in the world in both the 800-meter and 1,500-meter distances in the M65 division last year when he was 69.

The first head-to-head race between Smeets and Patton was the 800-meter run on March 22. The top-ranked Smeets finished first in 2:33.09. Patton was next at 2:34.75. Ronald Pate of the United States, who is 70, took bronze in 2:43.17.

The next dual was in the 3,000-meter run on March 23. The American ended up with a significant advantage there. Patton won the race in 11:30.59. Smeets was almost seven seconds behind him. They were both well ahead of the bronze medalist, 70-year old Soonok Jo of Korea, who finished in 12:03.09.

Smeets specialty is the 1,500-meter run and he showed

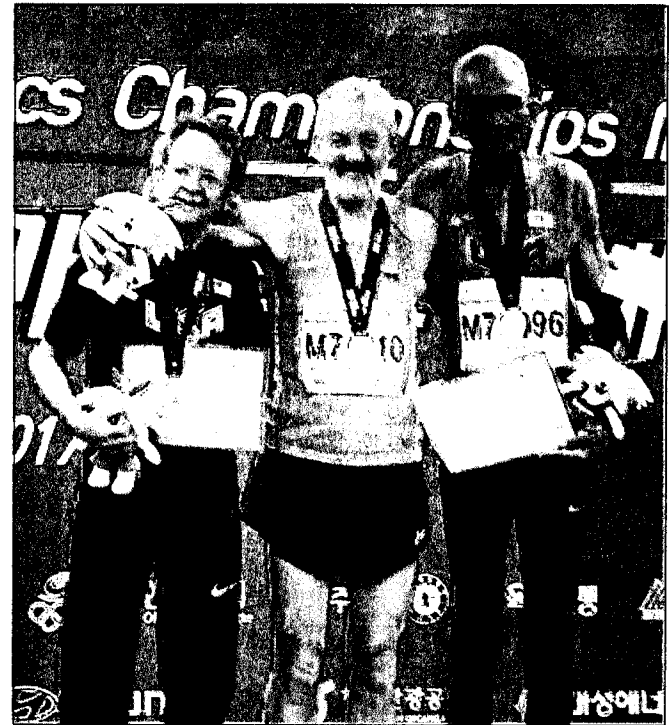
why on March 24. Smeets smashed the world record for his age group, becoming the first 70-year old to break the five-minute mark. He broke the tape in 4:59.62. Patton was second in 5:10.46, which was not far off the American record he set last year at 5:07.11. Pate was third in 5:35.97.

Patton was willing to lace up the spikes one more time last Saturday on the final day of the event. He joined Robert Cozens, Pate and Robert Lida on a 800-meter relay that placed second. Finland won the race in 2:06.08. The U.S. team finished in 2:07.12.

### No regrets

Patton was glad he got a chance to represent his country again.

"I was glad I decided to go to Daegu to again meet other masters athletes from around the world, to see that little corner of Asia and to experience another culture," he said. "And, of course, to make the medal stand four times against very



Gary Patton of the United States, Hans Smeets of the Netherlands and Ronald Pate of the United States were the medalists in the M70 800-meter run and 1,500-meter run at the WMA World Indoor Championships. Photo submitted

good competition."

The next WMA championship event is not until 2018. It will be in Malaga, Spain.

"We'll see if ambition, health and finances come together to make that trip a possibility," Patton said.

Teams appreciated competing in good weather