

Donald Ardell

puts wellness in perspective



A wellness pioneer, this activist and author shares bracing views on wellness past, present and future

by Colin Milner

The modern wellness movement owes its start to a small group of key individuals. Donald Ardell, PhD, is one of these select few.

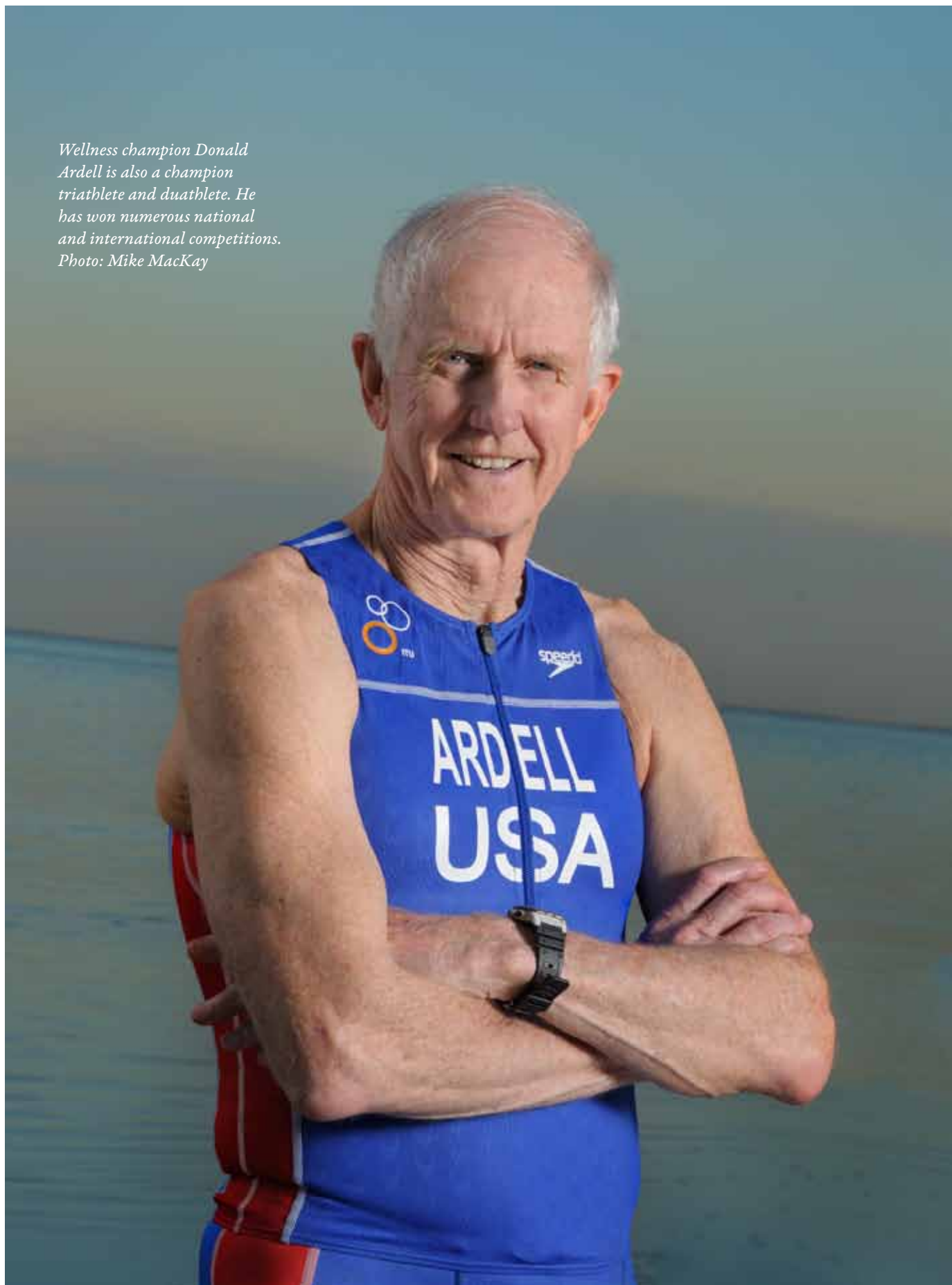
In 1977, when I was in high school, Ardell was already a wellness pioneer. That was the year Rodale Press published his landmark book, *High Level Wellness: An Alternative to Doctors, Drugs, and Disease*,¹ which helped to activate the wellness movement that exists today. In the nearly 40 years since, the wellness leader, author and activist has extensively promoted “the wellness perspective”² in his lectures and his works, which number 15 books and 2,000-plus essays and articles. From 1984 to 1996, Ardell served as associate professor and directed the campus wellness center at the University of Central Florida, Orlando. He also

helped shape the wellness profession through his decade-long service as a board trustee of the National Wellness Institute in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. The Institute presented Ardell with its Halbert L. Dunn Wellness Award in 2011 to recognize his lifetime dedication to wellness, leadership and contributions to the wellness movement.

Among Ardell’s books, *Aging Beyond Belief: 69 Tips for REAL Wellness*³ recommends a wide range of things people can do to age well. His recommendations cover such topics as exercise, nutrition, personal responsibility, resilience, humor, meaning and purpose, sexuality, and effective relationships. Ardell wrote the book at age 69, conjuring up one wellness tip for every year of his life. In his latest offering, *Wellness Orgasms: The Fun Way to Live Well and Die Healthy*, he and coauthor Grant Donovan focus on the little pleasures that make life worth living.⁴

Continued on page 54

*Wellness champion Donald
Ardell is also a champion
triathlete and duathlete. He
has won numerous national
and international competitions.
Photo: Mike MacKay*





(L to r), Jack Travis, MD, and Donald Ardell, PhD, recently addressed the Global Spa & Wellness Summit, where these ‘founding fathers’ of wellness were presented with the Wellness Innovator award. Image courtesy of Global Spa & Wellness Summit, Morocco 2014

Now in his mid-70s, Ardell continues to demonstrate the value of wellness in his own life—as a champion of national and international triathlons and duathlons (running and cycling), an international speaker and consultant, and a prolific writer and blogger. (For more, see “In his own words: Who is Donald Ardell?” on page 57.)

Every week Ardell informs, stimulates and challenges readers of the *Ardell Wellness Report* with thought-provoking essays. The activist/author believes wellness is influenced by issues of the day. So he tackles these issues directly in his long-running newsletter (now delivered electronically), including those belonging to that “taboo” trio of politics, sex and religion—which he admits to being his favorites.⁵

So what *does* Ardell think about wellness today? In his view, the term *wellness* is used too broadly and too often to describe things that barely reflect or relate to the original concept,⁵ as happens sometimes when philosophies or approaches are widely adopted. In fact, he

fails to see “real” wellness in the mainstream at all (more below).

Ardell explains shifts in how he defines wellness and gives wellness advocates plenty to consider in our interview for the *Journal on Active Aging*[®]. It’s as bracing and fascinating as the man himself. Let’s dive in.

CM: *As someone who has been involved in the field of wellness for many years, can you give us an overview of how wellness came to light in the 1970s and ’80s?*

DA: The word *wellness* and the varied models describing what the term represented started with Halbert L. Dunn, a physician who gave lectures and wrote articles beginning in the 1950s and ’60s using the phrase “high level wellness.” The word and the ideas Dunn expressed called for attention to nonmedical approaches to health, showing that doctors, medications and testing protocols could, at best, help somewhat in overcoming or avoiding illness. The medical system could never deliver positive, vibrant good health. That, Dr. Dunn in-

sisted, was up to the individual, though he knew that cultures, organizations and even “health care” systems could support and encourage it.

Dunn’s ideas did not gain much traction with the public. However, more than a few medical students, teachers and public health officials were intrigued by what he was saying. By the early 1970s, some started acting upon Dr. Dunn’s ideas, introducing the phrase “high level wellness” in graduate school public-health classes, in their own professional journal articles, at conferences and in books. A local publishing company (Betty Press) distributed a booklet in 1961 that became an underground classic for a new generation of well-being enthusiasts. The title of that little opus was *High Level Wellness*.⁶ The chapters consisted of the 29 lectures that Dunn delivered at a Unitarian Church in Arlington, Virginia.

CM: *Why do you think it took until recently for wellness to go mainstream?*

DA: Wellness has yet to go mainstream. Dr. Dunn’s original vision—expressed in ideas about personal responsibility, supportive cultures, environmental awareness and love of life—is not yet represented in worksite wellness, or otherwise in popular usage of the term. To Dunn, wellness was “an integrated method of functioning, oriented toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable.”

To recapture this meaning of wellness, I promote the phrase “REAL wellness.” The modifier REAL stands for reason, exuberance, athleticism and liberty. Like Dunn’s usage, this definition addresses the scope and consequence that incorporates much more than avoidance of illness. This is wellness worthy of the mainstream. It rarely appears in programs billed as wellness at worksites, in hospital classes, in ads for medical services or in fitness center promotions.

Only when REAL wellness ideas reach public awareness will the concept as envisioned by Dunn be worthy of going mainstream.

CM: *Why do you think so many people find the concept of wellness a challenge to grasp?*

DA: One reason is because wellness has been explained, promoted and otherwise advanced in so many different ways. Many people are confused as to exactly what it entails. Another is that “grasping the concept” is not the same as making everyday choices of a wellness nature. When it is used to represent a healthy lifestyle, it becomes a big challenge for most Americans who do not make good choices about their health. That’s one of the main reasons we have such a huge and expensive medical system.

Wellness means, at the very least, a pattern of vigorous daily endurance exercise; a respect for and practice of reason or critical thinking; the consumption of a sound, evidence-based diet; and other practices that are difficult for most people to manage. If wellness were easy, everyone would follow such a lifestyle. It is not. Doctors, coaches and counselors must do more than offer sound wellness education; they have to prepare people to create the conditions enabling them to sustain good intentions to live wisely.

CM: *Have we changed the way we define wellness, and if so how and why?*

DA: As you can tell from my answers to the last few questions, many of us in the wellness movement are doing just that, trying to make wellness mean what Dr. Dunn and early promoters meant in the 1970s—a mindset and lifestyle for experiencing advanced levels of physical and psychological well-being far beyond the mediocrity of “non-sickness.” When we talk of REAL wellness, we mean high energy levels, joy in living and satisfying relationships. We think of having and

utilizing effective decision-making skills and healthy passions that add meaning and purpose, resilience and coping capacities. And we add to that enjoying a well-developed sense of humor and other like qualities that together render existence quite delightful on a day-to-day basis.

This is not, unfortunately, how wellness is promoted in worksite and other venues and not what it means when used to sell products and services. Ways must be found to promote the wellness concept more in line with these positive, celebratory qualities.

CM: *Where are we today with wellness? And, why is this important to health and well-being in the United States?*

DA: Many of us have heard about the one percent that controls an outsize proportion of the nation’s wealth. There is another one percent: the “wellest” of the well. ... [This] latter group is struggling mightily to share its good fortune.

The small number of folks who have somehow managed to create and sustain healthy lifestyles, who enjoy the positive qualities identified with REAL wellness, want others to have the information, tools, resources and support systems that would enable better choices. This will foster improved health and life-quality outcomes. That’s where we are today in a wellness sense. It’s a hopeful outlook, but probably not realistic. What is realistic? The situation is dire. We must do better. Somehow a way must be found to make REAL wellness a priority.

The Federal administration, the Congress and policymakers at all levels must support a healthier, improved typical American. Spending on chronic and other illness conditions, due largely (70–90%) to unhealthy lifestyles, has given us a health—that is, medical—system that

Continued on page 56

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now costs US\$3.8 trillion annually.⁷ This is unsustainable. Our bloated sickness system also does not make Americans healthier in a positive sense.

CM: *What are the greatest advancements in wellness you have seen over the years?*

DA: It is true that the term *wellness* has gained a lot of attention since the 1970s. Despite familiarity with the word, Americans are not yet engaged in anything approximating healthy lifestyles. So far, we don't have much to show for wellness in terms that would impress Halbert L. Dunn or others who see wellness as a pathway philosophy and lifestyle for high-quality life.

Resources

Internet

SeekWellness: Ardell Wellness Report

www.seekwellness.com/wellness/ardell_wellness_report.htm

SeekWellness: Wellness Center

www.seekwellness.com/wellness-topics.htm

Print

Ardell, D. B. (2007). *Aging Beyond Belief: 69 Tips for REAL Wellness*. Duluth, MN: Whole Person Associates Inc.

Ardell, D. B. (2010). *REAL Wellness: It's What's New in Wellness Today*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform

Ardell, D. B., & Donovan, G. (2014). *Wellness Orgasms: The Fun Way to Live Well and Die Healthy*. See www.seekwellness.com/wellness/reports/2014-09-17.htm for information.

The challenge we face is to properly educate those hundreds of millions of citizens who rely on outside forces for quality of life. All the doctors, medications and ministrations for dealing with disease and illness cannot deliver health, fitness, happiness or skills that connect with exuberance in all its forms. That is up to each person, available only via education in the art and science of advanced well-being.

The Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid said, "There is no greater impediment to the advancement of knowledge than the ambiguity of words." Just so. And the word with fatal ambiguity for lifestyle advances at present is *wellness*. It is trapped in a miasma of misuse; it too often represents less than exultant living.

"What might exultant living be," you ask? Let me call upon the oratorical power of Robert Green Ingersoll to provide a sense of the difference between the absence of disease/non-illness framework that wellness currently offers with that of exultant living. The latter, Ingersoll might say, is found when "we can fill our lives with generous deeds, with loving words, with art and song and all the ecstasies of love that flood our years with sunshine—with the divine climate of kindness, when we can drain to the last drop the golden cup of joy." [Ed. Robert Green Ingersoll, (1833–1899), was an American political campaigner, lawyer, speechmaker and agnostic known for his freethinking and gifted oratory.⁸]

This is clearly not the kind of state than can be measured, like body composition, cholesterol ratios and other such medical measures, but one that can be felt and enjoyed now and then, as often as possible for those who value such fortunate states of being.

That's why there is a need for a modifier. Wellness must again, as in the 1970s, be reintroduced as REAL wellness—more

than and different from a treatment, service or program. REAL wellness is a personal commitment to physical and psychological excellence for the pleasurable benefits that ensue from such a posture. It is not a strategy for overcoming problems, but one that improves the chances of avoiding problems in the first place while enabling positive, life-enriching benefits.

What I'd most like to see follow from advances of a wellness movement is improved human functioning in the broadest sense, with such sweeping reforms as reason over dogmas, new truths over old superstitions, and less dependence on experts and more on ourselves.

CM: *What have been the greatest challenges for wellness over the years? Why?*

DA: One challenge has been finding ways to convince those who use the term to keep the issues positive and focused on life quality, not illness avoidance, alternative healing approaches or other such distractions. It's a life-enhancing philosophy and lifestyle approaches for enjoying dramatic advances in well-being beyond today's norms (being overweight, underfit, poorly nourished, overstressed and unhappy, for starters).

Another challenge is the incorporation in "wellness" programs of varied medical testing protocols, administered by healthcare professionals. This is fine within the medical system dealing with prevention, but risk reduction, medical management and other activities focused on containing corporate insurance costs crowd out time and resources that should go to wellness education. The challenge is to disassociate wellness from all the ills, dysfunctions and discontents to which the flesh, particularly the brain, are heir.

REAL wellness invites continuous learning about and advances toward life-affirming matters, including but not

limited to happiness, positive passions, meaning and purpose, joy and affection, effective decision-making and expansions of personal freedoms. It's all about people living the kind of life they want to enjoy while being in top form and sound mind.

CM: *Where do you see the future for wellness, and why?*

DA: It depends. It depends on how wellness is defined, understood and offered to the public, how well things go with our economy and, on a global scale, whether a way is found to engender a little more harmony and peace on earth.

It also depends on which sectors take the lead in promoting REAL wellness. I believe three industries have the best structures and business models for advancing their interests by assuming a leadership role in offering REAL wellness to the public. They are:


- destination spa resorts and other parts of that industry
- the fitness industry
- educational institutions at all levels

Frankly, I don't think most people can learn about REAL wellness values and principles, much less sustain whatever intentions they develop to live in ways consistent with them. It's too difficult to overcome cultures that do not support good choices. Few are prepared for the challenges and obstacles they will have to overcome.

But, some folks are doing it anyway, and people who are sufficiently informed, motivated, supported and capable can make a good run at it. I wish them well.

Essence of wellness

As someone who has devoted more than 40 years of his life to promoting wellness, Donald Ardell possesses a rare perspective of the modern wellness movement. Ardell's comments in this article

may challenge some readers' views and affirm others. Whether people agree or disagree with his statements, this wellness pioneer clearly emphasizes the importance of a supportive culture to wellness and the philosophy's life-enhancing essence. Both resonate in an active-aging industry that increasingly embraces wellness as a way of life. 

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In his own words: Who is Donald Ardell?

I'm a 76-year-old guy who has had a fortunate life. From the accidents of my "choice" of parents and time and place of arrival, to the choices, values, circumstances and events over decades, chance has played an outsized role. A rather healthy lifestyle and a good attitude about most things have helped, too.

I enjoy my life every day. Typical highlights include:

- an hour or two of training—running, swimming, biking and/or strength training
- reading and writing, much of it to post essays at several blogs (Seek-Wellness, The Political Junkie, Trusted MD and Perry Street Palace) and to produce the weekly *Ardell Wellness Report* (694 so far)
- reading the lectures of Robert Green Ingersoll, 19th-century American orator and freethought champion
- reading books, enjoying music by Mozart and Bach, and scanning newspapers and websites
- doing what needs to be done to safeguard the unending delights derived from the company of my darling wife, Carol

I'm most proud of my two children and three grandchildren, my wife, the schools I attended (especially George Washington University), a pretty good season of competition in 2014 (I won all 17 races entered, including three national and two world championships), and my 15 books, the newest being *Wellness Orgasms: The Fun Way to Live Well and Die Healthy*.