

Calling a triathlon a competition is a bit of a misnomer. Sure, they are races that are timed and list winners, even lists of finishers organized by place and age group. For triathletes, the events are times to foster friendships, return to favorite locales and enjoy new experiences. The finishing order makes little difference.

Consider David Daggett. An attorney from Winston-Salem and avid triathlete, Daggett has competed in 199 triathlons in the past 41 years, taking to the courses in 28 states as well as Germany (nine times), Canada and New Zealand. But Daggett is making a point of scheduling number 200 at one of his favorite events, the Smith Mountain Lake Triathlon.

"I've only missed it twice since 1984, when my daughter had dance recitals," Daggett says. He was given an award by Virginia Amateur Sports three years ago when he raced for the 20th time in the 22 races put on by VAS.

"I actually started coming up to the race when it was the old one, run by the Jaycees. Back then you had to find races.

"In the early '80s you have to look far and wide for triathlons and there was one at Smith Mountain Lake. There were no series or anything. You had to search them out and registering was a big deal, sending away for registration forms then sending them in," Daggett said.

When the Jaycees gave up the race and VAS took over, he said it was natural to keep coming to the race, just a couple of hours from his home – practically his backyard in a sport where travelling to events hundreds or thousands of miles away is common.

"Smith Mountain Lake is a spectacular area and my interaction with VAS has always been very positive," Daggett says. "Every year SML is on my things to do."

Part of that is because he also has people to see. For years, Daggett loved seeing the late Owen Grogan, a VAS coordinator who knew how to make a good impression. "I would only see him once a year but he was always so positive, so enjoyable," he says.

These days Daggett loves visiting with Mike Morris, the Roanoke resident who is racing in his 300th triathlon at the SML event.

"I backed off my schedule a little so I could do my 200th the same time Mike does his 300th," Daggett said. "It's my tribute to him. We met during this event and he's the sweetest, nicest guy ever."

Turns out, Morris is a decent cook, at least when it comes to granola bars.

Says Daggett: "About 15 years or so ago, after a race, they had homemade granola bars and I had to find who made them. Mike's the one who made them and they're great. Now he gives me some every year. I produce a race down here (in North Carolina) and Mike has come down and done my race.

"We keep up through email and through Facebook. It's a special bond and the entire bond is around the Smith Mountain Lake tri and my race," he says.

Daggett also enjoys competing with a regular group of Roanokers who are slightly younger, and stalwart triathlete Mark Long, who's slightly older.

"If you count the ones run by the Jaycees, I've won or placed in my division in every division from 20-24 years old all the way up to 60-64, where I am now," he says. "There's the group of guys a little younger that, when I get to the top of the age bracket they come in and beat me, then I age up and I do the same to Mark Long," Daggett says with a laugh, knowing that bragging rights are the least of motivations.

This will be the 41st consecutive year that Daggett has competed in triathlons. That's an unofficial record. USA Triathlon, the sport's sanctioning body, does not keep records of how many consecutive years a competitor has participated in at least one event, but Daggett has asked many people who know the smallest details of the sport and no one knows of anyone with longer streaks.

"There are people who've been doing it longer, but they had to take some time off here and there, missed a year or sat out for an injury, so it's not continuous," Daggett said.

As testament to how long Daggett has been competing, his USA Triathlon registration number is 1853. Newbies to the sport would now be given numbers six digits long.

And in all those years and the countless of miles swam, biked and ran, there is still something special about Smith Mountain Lake and the event held there. The setting, of course, but it's the people most of all.

On April 30, David Daggett will be back, reconnecting with those old friends and making new ones. And it won't really matter who places higher in the race.