

Ultrarunning is not just running; it's walking, scrambling, climbing and enjoying the view too

# TAKING THE

The last year has been rather mono-paced for many of us, with lockdowns and cancelled races, and we've all missed the highs and the newness of normal daily life. Maybe it's time to shake things up and take your sense of adventure on a journey it won't forget

Words: Keri Wallace

# LEAP

I've never run a marathon. I've never even run a trail marathon. But I do run ultramarathons – over mountains. Hold on: did I miss a step there? Maybe, maybe not.

Thankfully, there is no right answer and no one path into ultramarathon running. Some women progress gradually from marathon distance to beyond, and others jump straight in – but most of us sit on the fence, wondering how to take the leap or questioning why anyone would even want to.

I'm starting out on a journey to the historic Dragon's Back Race, billed as one of the toughest ultras in the world. I'm only just beginning my training for the 2021 event and I'm on a mission to encourage more women to give ultrarunning a try.

### Breaking barriers to entry

If you want to run your first ultra, then the first step is surely to enter an event. But for many, the idea of entering a race that is further than 26 miles seems daunting. Fortunately, there

are lots of positives which are easily overlooked. The pace in ultramarathon is much slower than a marathon, walking is acceptable (yes walking!), the scenery is better and you have to eat lots of food along the way – what's not to love, right?

Sadly, however, race data reveals that few women feel comfortable clicking the 'Enter now' button. Last year, a survey of global running showed that more female than male runners were competing in UK road races for the first time in history. But in »

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# Races for beginners

We reached out to the *Women's Running* community for tips on which ultrarunning events are suitable starting points

- **White Star Running** Inclusive and friendly events in spectacular scenery. "Stunning scenery, great for beginners, fantastic aid stations, atmosphere and bling!" **Nicky Chrascina**
- **XNRG** The team organises multi-day races over achievable distances (you can enter individual days). "XNRG The Humanity Direct Amersham Ultra is only 29 miles and a great starting point for going beyond marathon distance. It's for charity and there's no cut-off time." **Natalie Crawford**
- **Glen Ogle 33** "Great team, always friendly, awesome marshals and aid stations, superb scenery and you can't get lost – a whole load of fun!" **Katie Robertson**
- **Centurion 50s** Centurion South Downs Way 50 and North Downs Way 50 are good first ultras to consider; "Waymarked, fully-stocked aid stations with great community support." **Debbie Martin-Consani**

The great outdoors. Without a focus on splits and times, you can enjoy the company and the scenery

trail races (and in particular ultra-distance trail events), female participation is still as low as 9-23%.

"There are a lot of different reasons why we don't see as many women on the start lines of ultras," says ultrarunner and GB international Sophie Grant, "Training takes a lot of time each week and with household tasks like cooking, cleaning and raising children still falling predominantly to women, time is not something many of us have to spare. Those of us who are mothers often feel guilty taking that time for ourselves to train. No one thinks twice about men going out for long hours training, but somehow it is less acceptable for women.

"On top of this, women often suffer from 'imposter syndrome' (a psychological pattern in which an individual doubts their skills, talents or accomplishments, and has a persistent

internalised fear of being exposed as a fraud). For this reason, most women don't line up for an ultra until they are sure they can do it, whereas more men are more likely to have the inner belief that they will be fine, sometimes entering without the necessary training to back it up (to their detriment). Unfortunately, female ultrarunners are also sponsored less and covered less; if you can't see it how can you be it!" she adds.

Happily, there are many good reasons why women should strive to overcome these barriers and enter ultramarathons (see page 47).

## What's the appeal?

Event names and slogans that are used to promote ultramarathons tend to revolve around the pain and suffering participants are likely to endure, and marketing campaigns are rife with macho imagery about runners' abilities to conquer, survive or become a champion. Having spoken to

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The terrain is varied and sometimes technical so training and practice essential

Channel your inner mountain goat on the descents

training peak is not solely about speed and distance, but is focused more around what I call 'time on your feet'. This means progressively longer days (often back-to-back), culminating in a final effort about three weeks before the race. Tapering for an ultra will also take longer than for a marathon."

"On race day, starting the race slower than you are capable of allows you to conserve energy and protect the muscles, with the aim of finishing the second half of the race strongly. Careful pacing and 'looking after yourself' over long periods of time takes discipline; I recommend practising this in a competitive situation, so that you can cultivate that discipline. Be mentally prepared for things to go wrong – expect it and be ready to deal with problems quickly and efficiently," advises Spinks.

"With experience, you'll learn to vary your race pace strategically over the course, according to event distance, ascent, terrain, distance/ascent between checkpoints, hours of darkness and the time of day the race starts."

The longer the race, the more factors come into play. For a multi-day race, fuelling and recovery time at the overnight checkpoints is also important. Spinks explains, "Fuelling and hydrating on the move is critical for all ultras. It's rare that you feel hungry or overly thirsty while racing, so it's important to have a reminder, either by time or by distance, for when you should eat and drink. What you can stomach while running is very individual however, and you need to practise this element on training runs."

The other important consideration is kit. This is also highly personal and will of course depend on the climate,

distance and terrain of your event. But whatever you decide to use, ensure that you're old friends with anything you plan to deploy on race day. If labels or stitching chafe over marathon distance, then you'll be in bits after multiple days of shuffling!

"As a coach, I have found that women sometimes don't realise their own abilities and can really surprise themselves," says Spinks. //

accomplished female ultrarunners, it's clear that the advertising for such events is missing its mark in the women's running community.

"Perhaps some women are put off by the way these races are advertised as 'brutal', 'extreme' or 'toughest' challenges," agrees record-breaking Spine Race winner, Jasmin Paris. "The irony of this is that the women who do take part are usually more likely to finish (statistics of several such long races support this)."

"I think the appeal of the longer races is the fun of exploring new places and the adventure of a journey from start to finish. For me, it's always the longer the

confidence it builds is huge."

## First timer 101

Inov-8 athlete and record-breaking ultrarunner Nicky Spinks has coached many runners through their first ultramarathon. "Unless your chosen ultra is on road (and most aren't), you'll need to tailor your training plan to include a lot more off-road running. I would suggest that this include some walking, as it's common for beginners to walk much of their first race," says Spinks. "The

## KITTED OUT

Prep is not just about training miles; make sure you have the right kit

DRAGON'S BACK



# Race finishers' top tips

Let's hear it from those who know. How to beat the peaks, be positive and stay the distance

- **Head for the hills.** "Long days out in the hills are perfect prep. It's not all about running!" **Kirsty Reade**
- **Big climbs.** "You'll need to build a lot of ascent and descent into your training programme. This is just as important as the mileage you'll be covering." **Nicky Spinks**
- **Get kit fit.** "Train with the kit you'll use during the race; work out how to avoid blisters and look after your feet." **Sabrina Verjee**
- **Minimise faff.** "Every minute spent faffing is a minute you're not running, eating or resting, which is essentially all you need to do! Be organised with your kit on the move, and for the start and finish transitions of each day to save time." **Kirsty Reade**
- **Don't moan!** "It's fair to say that by day 3 or 4 everybody will be suffering. The miles can fly by if you get chatting to positive people along the way. Be upbeat company because other people's support will make a massive difference to your race." **Kirsty Reade**

## Going To extremes

In the last 20 years, the popularity of ultra-distance events has increased by over 1,500%. This rise has brought with it an increase in the number of elite women competing and winning races. In 2019, there were wins by several big names, including Jasmin Paris (268-mile Montane Spine Race); Katie Wright (Riverhead Backyard ultramarathon, New Zealand) and Courtney Dauwalter (238-mile MOAB race), to name a few.

Interestingly, most of these achievements have been in so-called 'extreme' events, leading to the suggestion that women have an advantage over men in races requiring the highest levels of endurance. In RunRepeat's State of Ultra Running in 2020 report, data from over 85% of ultrarunning events worldwide showed that women were faster than men at distances over 195 miles.

"I like not knowing whether I can complete them," admits Paris, "but I also just enjoy running longer distances on technical terrain where there is an element of navigation. I prefer spending a day in the mountains instead of just an

hour, being able to breathe and look around, chat and make friends as I run, and really savour the experience and surroundings."

"In the Spine Race, although there isn't much sleeping involved, I really enjoyed that for those five days; all I had to do was focus on moving in the right direction, keeping myself warm and dry, plus eating and drinking enough. It was like going back to the very basics of life and forget about all the stresses of work and laptops and phones," says Verjee.

**DAYS & NIGHTS**  
Multi-day races are tough. Novices should start with an all-dayer

If you're trying to envisage what it might be like, Kirsty Reade suggests not comparing it to the pain of a marathon with added extras. The accomplished ultrarunner and Dragon's Back Race finisher is encouraging: "You'll be going at a much more comfortable pace and walking the hills; that, in itself, will let you keep going much further than you thought! I'd say it will probably be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life, you'll make new friends and see some incredible places."

## The dragon's roar beckons

The Dragon's Back Race (DBR) is an ultra-distance stage-race (six days in 2021), over which competitors have to run the 380K from Conwy Castle to Cardiff Castle all the way down the mountainous spine of Wales. Competitors are required to self-navigate their way along the route (which accrues a dizzying 17,000m of ascent), and camp along the way.

In general, the longer and more technical an ultramarathon, the lower the percentage of women you'll see competing in them. This has more to do with 'barriers to entry' than competence, as there is increasing evidence that women have a lower DNF rate in such events.

In 2019, only 17% of Dragon's Back Race entrants were women, so it's great to see positive steps being taken to encourage and support more female participation. "It's really important for us that our female participants receive the same recognition as our male participants in all of our events. We hope that by sharing their stories equally

in event coverage, race documentaries, participant blogs and social media, we are providing inspiration and role models to encourage more women to enter our events in the future" says

Janie Oates, Marketing & Events Coordinator, Ourea Events Ltd.



In 2021, for the first time, DBR delivery partners Raw Adventures will be offering a guided recce day for Female Dragons only – open to all interested runners, not just competitors. This

fantastic concept will give women a taster alongside like-minded individuals and give them a precious chance to chat with previous race finishers about their experiences.

"It was an unbelievable five days of running, which pushed me to my limits, showcased some amazing parts of Wales and introduced me to lots of new friends. I can't recommend it enough if you're looking for a challenge or a

once-in-a-lifetime adventure" says Kirsty Reade.

So what does this all mean for me you might ask! As a Dragon in Training, I can see that I need to up my mileage before September. My training weeks are variable at present, but should include one or two big hill days, some speed work and something a bit longer and flatter as training progresses.

Fortunately, my guiding work with Girls on Hills provides me with lots of good opportunities for back-to-back runs and for testing out my kit. I'm nervous about the event, but I always feel that way before embarking on a new adventure. For me, the appeal of these events is always the unknown quantity – if I knew I could do it, I probably wouldn't enter.

"My advice would be to sign up, and just start training," says Paris, as encouraging as ever. "Almost everyone will walk some of the course, and you will have the company of other people, as well as the chance to look at beautiful scenery, to take your mind off things when it starts to feel hard. My advice would definitely be to give it a go; it's great fun, and you'll be surprised at what you can achieve." 🐉

## 5 REASONS

# WHY WE SHOULD RUN ULTRAS

Ultrarunning is, in some cases, way more suited to women. We know how to stay and fight!

- 1 Training**  
Commitment to training and good preparation are better indicators of success than confidence or hardy-ness.
- 2 Pacing**  
Women are better than men at maintaining a consistent pace over longer distances.
- 3 Mental strength**  
Women are said to benefit from emotion-focused coping strategies, where men rely more on trying 'fight or flight' responses when things get tough.
- 4 Competitiveness**  
Ultramarathon events are often personal challenges in which competitors seek completion rather than a particular time or placing.
- 5 Endurance**  
Endurance is more important than speed or power; RunRepeat's *State of Ultra Running in 2020* report showed a gender gap in performance that decreased progressively between 5K and 100 miles (over distances of 100 miles, women were only a quarter of a percent slower than men).



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