Noting the same trend and asking: “How come nearly all the women finish [notorious US 100-miler] Leadville and fewer than half the men do?”

Due to age-old biological disparities between the sexes – men tend to have higher VO$_2$ max for example – women are less likely to win. But they’re also far less likely to give up and drop out (DNF). Following that logic, the female of the species is more successful at running ultramarathons. It could even be the closest thing there is to a gender neutral sport.

**LET’S GET PHYSICAL**

When it comes to endurance, women have several inherent advantages over men. “Women generally have a larger surface area to mass ratio, which enables heat to dissipate more easily,” says running coach and movement specialist Shane Benzie from Running Reborn.

“This means women are generally better at coping with heat,” explains ultrarunner, registered dietician and sports nutritionist, and Training Food author Renee McGregor. “A smaller athlete tends to have lower fluid losses due to smaller surface area.” So they’re less likely to become dehydrated.

A lighter runner is carrying less weight and therefore stressing the body less. A shorter runner also benefits. “Shorter legs are often seen as an advantage,” says Benzie, “as they are more suited to a quicker turnover, and a faster cadence will ensure efficient use of the elastic energy created during our running stride.” Some also believe that in long races with more descent, a smaller physique incurs less muscle damage on downhills – quads are the place most ultrarunners feel soreness first. That means (in theory) a shorter runner will move more comfortably later in a race.

Diminutive Lizzy Hawker, five-time women’s winner of UTMB, a 104-mile race in the Alps with 10,000m ascent, is a prime example of this.

Fat metabolism is another key factor that favours females. In *The Complete Book of Running for Women*, Claire Kowalchik writes that women use about 75% more fat than men while running. “Women generally burn a higher percentage of fat compared with men,” agrees Renee McGregor. This means consistent and almost limitless energy release, while ‘bonking’ or hitting “The Wall” comes more naturally to more carb-dependent men – especially as they’re likely to run faster (more anaerobic). “It’s also been shown that women are better at using exogenous sources of carbohydrate compared to men,” says McGregor. “So even if glycogen stores are full, they tend to use available carbohydrate from exogenous sources more efficiently.”

**THAT’S PLAIN MENTAL**

Another key aspect – perhaps the key aspect – is pacing. A RunRepeat study of more than 1.8 million marathon results from all over the world spanning five

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**WHY WOMEN ARE BETTER THAN MEN AT RUNNING ULTRAMARATHONS**

**WORDS: DAMIAN HALL**

Going the distance

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**WOMEN GENERALLY HAVE A LARGER SURFACE AREA TO MASS RATIO, WHICH ENABLES HEAT TO DISSIPATE MORE EASILY**
any woman stood on the start line of a daunting event whereas men are more likely to sign up with bravado than up for an ultra unless they feel they are fully qualified. they met 60% of the requirements. Apply that hypothesis a promotion only when they believed they met 100% of and made an interesting discovery. Women applied for in top management positions they commissioned research Hewlett-Packard wanted to see why more women weren't fresh as a daisy. “The longer the race, the greater the chance for women to shine,” says Ian Corless, publisher of the Talk Ultra podcast and a photographer often found clicking away at ultramarathons. “Watch any ultra and men charge off the front and the ladies play it cooler. When the men drop out through exhaustion, the ladies come running by looking fresh as a daisy.” In ultra, confidence is a complex thing though. When Hewlett-Packard wanted to see why more women weren’t in top management positions they commissioned research and made an interesting discovery. Women applied for a promotion only when they believed they met 100% of the qualifications listed. Men were happy to apply when they met 60% of the requirements. Apply that hypothesis to ultramarathons and female runners won’t have signed up for an ultra unless they feel they are fully qualified. Whereas men are more likely to sign up with bravado than a relevant running background. Helene Whitaker thinks women’s comparative lack of confidence benefits them. “Most women don’t have a huge amount of self belief and esteem,” she says. “So any woman stood on the start line of a daunting event will have done her homework, prepared hard and will therefore have a greater chance than most men of completing it.” Whitaker also thinks women tend to be more detail orientated. “They spend time and effort getting the small things right. Navigation, food, heart rates, foot care, the nitty gritty that make or break over large distances. Call us control freaks, but ultrarunning is all about being in control. The gender differences were evident on the 2015 Dragon’s Back race again. None of the female runners were in distress. Some were perhaps slow, but all competing within their own, known, tried and tested abilities.”

LEADING LADIES
Levels of confidence in female runners may be a double-edged sword however, as participation in ultramarathons is still comparatively low for women. The same thing that makes them so successful means many may be too daunted to try them in the first place (if this is you, please see our tips overleaf). This could also be social and cultural. “Many of the stronger women in today’s running are groundbreakers,” says ultrarunner Carol Morgan, who’s completed the Dragon’s Back Race and won both the Lake21 100 and the Fellsmans ultramarathons. “I suspect for many female ultrarunners, behind the soft facade, the smiles and the enjoyment lies a determination to succeed – the historical knowledge that we’ve been overlooked, both individually and as a sex, driving us on to succeed where we were told we wouldn’t and couldn’t.”

MEN VS WOMEN: AND THE BIGGEST WIMPS ARE...
Ultradonations don’t necessarily need to be painful, but they can be, and a popular urban myth has it was left to men to give birth there wouldn’t be any children in the world. However, there’s no evidence that women have a higher pain threshold. “Population-based research shows that more women than men report having long-term pain,” says Dr. Riah Kadim, head of research at St Georges University of London. “Laboratory research doesn’t give us a clear message about whether men or women are more ‘sensitive’ to pain. It’s really hard to unpick research into gender and pain because pain is an subjective experience. Also, pain is not the same as suffering. So a person can feel pain without finding the pain is making them suffer.” However, renowned fell runner and two-time Dragon’s Back Race finisher Wyke Daddo Binks otherwise. “At a non elite level, I have observed in a different endurance sports, that men are less aware of the ongoing pain they have.”

TAKING FAT FOR A CYCLE
Ultra-race fuelling is not always straightforward. “Fat metabolism is hugely dependent on menstrual cycles,” warns McGregor. “In the follicular phase, while oestrogen is dominant, the body requires a higher amount of sugar as fuel – this is also often why so many women crave sugar in the seven to 10 days prior to their period. There is a physiological need.”

What do you get from running ultras?
Nobody speaks during road races, do they? Mainly because it involves running eyeballs out around an industrial estate, but the camaraderie and race spirit at ultras is amazing and addictive. At the risk of sounding New Age, you can unearth layers of yourself you didn’t know existed. Most people are tougher than they think.

What advantages do you think women have over men?
We’re just a bit tougher and race a lot smarter. That’s a sweeping statement, but women are just better at pacing - which is vital in ultras. Plus, I don’t think women have the same ego issues and aren’t afraid to use plan B and C, or just go for the finish, if things aren’t going their way.

Any ultra tips?
You can’t control what’s going on around you, but you can control what you do. Don’t chase someone early on or fret about the weather. Above all, enjoy it because there’s a high probability you’ll catch the ultra bug.
Going the distance

What do you get from running ultras?
If I don't run I get grumpy and depressed. It's a magical shortcut to salvation. It's meditative too; time to think. But if you are running 10K, there's no time for this. If you are out for 10 or 20 hours, you come back a different person.

What advantages do you think women have over men?
Women are smaller, so there's less toll on the body, we're better in the heat, and have superior fat metabolism. Women also tend to be more patient and persistent while with men it's all harder, faster, stronger. Also, men tend to be more egocentric and may be more likely to enter tough ultramarathons they're not physically competent of. I'm just speculating!

Any ultra tips?
Test all your kit, especially shoes. Just think of it as a day out, like a family walk, and enjoy it. Accept you are going to suffer. Then you won't be surprised when things get tough.

What do you get from ultrarunning?
As well as a reduction in foot modelling requests, a massive feeling of accomplishment. Nothing beats the feeling after running a hilly 10K. It's a mix of complete exhaustion and-smugness. The problem is that once you have completed that first ultra, you realise the body is an amazing thing and you want to test it further.

Do women have any advantages compared to men?
I wonder whether women are better at pacing themselves. I like to think we are just the superior gender (*walks away with nose in air!*)

Any ultra tips?
Practise nutrition. Don't just follow what other people do, find a food you enjoy. And visualise. There will definitely be low moments, that's why we need to do to get to finish, and need to do to get to finish, and need to do to get to finish, and need to do to get to finish, and need to do to get to finish.

What do you get from ultrarunning?
I really like the challenge of not knowing whether I can finish something. Running long distances is also a great way to get out and explore beautiful places. And I find the ultrarunning community to be full of the most incredible people - I've made a lot of good friends through the sport.

Do you think women have any advantages over men?
I think women are better able to focus on themselves and what they need to do to get to finish, rather than getting caught up in racing.

Do you have any ultra tips?
Nutrition is key! Make sure you have a good eating and drinking strategy that will fuel you to the finish.

WHEN WILL WOMEN WIN?

When it comes to almost every sport, with the exception of swimming longer than 20K (where women's superior buoyancy comes to the fore), elite men will almost always beat elite women. Biology is just unfairly imbalanced that way. But in ultramarathon running, women have distinct advantages over men that go some way to counterbalancing men's strengths. You could say ultramarathons are as close as we'll get to a gender neutral sport.

Though outright female wins at the most competitive ultra races are rare, it's not uncommon to see women challenge the podium. Indeed the gruelling 2015 Dragon's Back Race saw three women place in the top six, including in second and fourth places overall. And in the 1990s, American Ann Trason twice placed second at Western States 100-miler and once at Leadville. Pam Reed won the notorious 135-mile Badwater Ultramarathon outright in 2002 and 2003. Britain's Lizzy Hawker placed third overall at 2012's 155-mile Spartathlon. "Look at any UK results and women regularly make the top 10 or even the top five," says Ian Corless.

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