



ATHLETIC EMERALD. SEEN
BRIEFLY ON CATWALK
RUNWAYS IN PARIS, NEW
YORK AND LONDON

Cast your mind back to last summer. You might have hopped on a plane somewhere, visited some sights or simply unwound on the beach. Rachel Eyre, 26, filled her Smythson diary with a rather more strenuous schedule. "I took part in two triathlons, a half marathon and two 10km runs. I trained six days a week, drank no alcohol, went to bed early and avoided nights out." Her two sprint triathlons alone involved a 750m swim in open water, a 20km cycle, followed by a 5km run. She calls the entire period her "summer of madness".

Rachel isn't a full-time athlete. She's a marketing manager, a woman who uses her spare time to push her body to its limits. "It was a huge commitment but I loved it," she says. "I'm the kind of person who can let work take over my life but this wouldn't let me. I had to focus 100% on the goal ahead."

for tough treks rocket, with 60% of its database now comprising of professional women aged between 25 and 50; women heading off to Everest or Machu Picchu. These numbers have doubled in the past two years alone, with 1,318 jetting off in pursuit of a challenge in 2010.

One competitive convert is sales adviser Stephanie Machnik, 28, who decided to do a 450km cycling trip across Tanzania for the charity Transaid. The training had a huge effect on her life and work. "Instead of coming home after a stressful day and slumping in front of the TV with a glass of wine, I'd get on the bike and cycle 20 miles," she says. "I'd walk into work the next day feeling bright and alert rather than groggy. I also felt more motivated and able to concentrate better."

Sue Tibballs, chief executive of the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation, says this isn't unusual. She has witnessed the trend in

sprint, studies show women have a better endurance capacity. This may be due to their smaller size and lighter body mass, their muscles having a superior fatigue resistance, or certain psychological factors. It has, for example, been suggested that women may be more resistant to pain than men."

Women are also fast discovering the psychological and neurological benefits to entering that triathlon. There's a serious endorphin rush, says clinical sports psychologist Dr Victor Thompson. "Running a triathlon or climbing a mountain works on the neurotransmitters in the brain very much as recreational drugs do, making you feel euphoric and stimulated." David Wasley, exercise psychologist at the University of Wales Institute in Cardiff, agrees, "This rush or 'high' stems from endorphins in the blood stream becoming larger and crossing the blood/brain barrier. As the nature

the sofa this Sunday, remember there is a scientific reason why expending energy actually makes you feel more energetic. "When you exercise you pump oxygen into your system and upset the natural resting state of your body's blood sugars," explains Wasley. "Your body responds by over-compensating, boosting energy levels to prevent you feeling fatigued."

There's also a proven brain boost to breaking out the trainers. William Greenough, neuroscientist at the University of Illinois, found that monkeys who ran on treadmills for an hour a day, five days a week, for 20 weeks, ended up with a greater volume of blood vessels in their motor cortex, a key region of the brain. The monkeys that exercised were also able to learn cognitive tasks more quickly than their lazier monkey companions. These findings are reflected in a study by University of Pittsburgh psychologist Kirk Erickson. He found that exercise not only improved spatial

RISE OF THE COMPETITIVE WOMAN

More women are taking up extreme physical pursuits than ever before. *Stylist* explores the trend for pushing yourself to the max

WORDS: LAUREN LIBBERT

She is far from alone. The trend for women chasing the adrenaline rush of setting a goal and achieving it, with the desire to push physical boundaries and see what their bodies can achieve, is growing. Across all areas of extreme physical activity, professional females are joining up in droves. Women aged 25 to 45 make up the largest group of runners in England, and one in 12 UK females now take part in some sort of sporting competition. Perhaps inspired by the 2,500th anniversary of the original marathon this year and with the 2012 Olympics looming, on 17 April, 3,000 more women will gather to pound through the capital in the London Marathon than ran it in 2007.

Thousands of women are also taking on physical challenges abroad, using their holidays to carry a 7kg daypack up a Nepalese mountain or trek across the Masai Mara. Charity Challenge, the world's leading fundraising challenge operator, has seen the number of female bookings

professional women seeking competitive, goal-orientated experiences outside the workplace over the past two years. "I come across many successful women who are venture capitalists or work in the City and are also very sporty. They discover a passion to push themselves and see what they're capable of, both at work and in play," she says. "In the past, women weren't encouraged to be competitive as it was seen as a male trait - but now, given the same opportunities, we can be and are just as competitive both in the office and on the running track."

While there are obviously physical differences between the sexes, says exercise physiologist Karianne Back, there are clear sporting advantages to the female form. "Women carry more fat as they need it to bear children, while men have more muscle mass and a greater oxygen-carrying capacity than women, which gives them an aerobic advantage. So while men might win at the 100m

of this tissue changes, you feel the resultant lift in your brain."

THE WORK ADVANTAGE

It wasn't just a mental boost that Rachel got last year. "I thought doing something as arduous as five events in one summer would give me an edge over my colleagues and earn their respect - a bit like adding something special to your CV - and it did."

It seems natural for Rachel, and thousands of women like her, to add physical challenges to their already hectic lives. "I enjoyed the competitive environment of school and university and when I started working, I wanted something ambitious and challenging to work towards and test myself against," she says. "At first, it seemed insurmountable but as time went on I realised I could do anything I set my mind to. At work, too, I felt a stronger sense of focus and it made me braver when making decisions."

Just like Stephanie, competing gave Rachel energy. So as you unwind on

memory, which means a better ability to remember patterns, but boosted the size of the hippocampus, the area of the brain that deals with memory. So, in effect, regular running could banish the need for endless to-do lists.

Extreme exercise also aids concentration and the speed with which you learn. A 2008 study co-authored by neurologist Scott Small from the Columbia University Medical Center and Fred Gage of the Salk Institute, claimed that the impact of exercise was far more complex and powerful than just oxygenating brain cells. As you exercise, your muscles contract. This releases chemicals, including a protein called IGF-1, which travels to the brain and stimulates another chemical called brain derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which in turn stimulates your neurons to branch and connect in new ways, increasing your ability to learn.

If you still doubt the ability of marathons to make Monday mornings a little brighter,



➤ a recent report by the Social Issues Research Centre might change your mind. It found that 52% of women said sporting success has an impact on their approach to work, with 47% saying it lifts their mood and makes them more productive in their jobs, and 12% of women saying it increases their motivation at work. For Saira Khan, MD of baby skincare brand miamoo.co.uk, former *Apprentice* runner-up and all-round competitive person, training for the London Marathon in 2004 had another, very beneficial effect.

"If I ever felt stressed out at work - which was quite often - I'd just get on the treadmill and run it out," she says. "It works for me today, too."

Wasley explains why this happens, "If you're running 10km or cycling uphill, mood-enhancing endorphins pump round your body and levels of the stress hormone cortisol increase. Afterwards, the body returns to a state of physiological relaxation, with the stress having all been released."

Khan believes in the link between competitive sport and excellence in

"Sport and work are totally connected. You set goals in the workplace just as you do in sport"

the office. "In all the big corporations I've worked for, the top people were all sporty." Lord Sugar cycles 60 miles a day, David Cameron never misses his daily bodyguard-escorted run, Oprah Winfrey and Sarah Palin run marathons. Vera Wang is a former figure-skating champion and Condoleezza Rice famously rose at 4.30am to exercise before starting work as US Secretary of State. Work success and endurance activity seem to go hand-in-hand.

It's adrenaline, says Dr Victor Thompson, that helps explain why. "One of the key transferable skills from sport, apart from goal-setting, focus and the pure challenge, is learning to ride the wave of adrenaline. When you're preparing for a big work event or deadline, your body produces enormous waves of adrenaline, which creates nerves and anxiety. But athletes learn to work through that feeling, to reach the sense of achievement at the end. So when preparing for a work pitch or giving a key presentation, they have learned how to manage the physical changes that might put off non-sportspeople."

It's little wonder then that Palin and Cameron are - to an extent - following the athletes' lead. Remember Paula

FANCY A CHALLENGE IN 2011? SIGN UP FOR ONE OF THESE

Thailand Jungle Expedition
10-20 March

Spend six days trekking, kayaking, rafting and riding elephants in the Kanchanaburi province. Minimum sponsorship £2,950. (breastcancer.campaign.org)

Swimathon, UK
8-10 April

A fundraising event held at 575 public swimming pools around the UK, you can enter the individual 1.5k, 2.5k or 5k challenges, or the team 5k. Registration from £10. (swimathon.org)

Shock Absorber Women Only Triathlon, Eton
2 July

Races for all levels, with a flat tarmac run and bike track and a clean, calm lake. Entry from £60. Proceeds to Breast Cancer Care. (humanrace.co.uk)

L'Etape du Tour, France
9-12 July

Keen cyclist? Head to the French Alps for this stunning 109km ride between Modane and Alpe d'Huez. (For more info and prices, sportstours.international.co.uk)

Atlantic Coast Challenge, Cornwall
30 September-2 October

Run, walk or crawl three marathons (78.6 miles) over three days along one of Britain's wildest coastlines, from Padstow to Land's End. Entry £155. (votwo.co.uk)

Simien Mountain Trek, Ethiopia
26 October-6 November

Climb one of the highest peaks in Africa on this 12-day super trek. From £2,100, including a £100 donation to your charity. (charity.challenge.com)

ING New York City Marathon
6 November

One of the world's greatest road races, now attracting more than 100,000 applicants each year. Entry around £175 for non-US residents. (ingnyc.marathon.org)



found that the brains of top athletes are quicker to act, calmer in a crisis and better at finding solutions to problems and these traits are not present at birth. "Good genes may account for some of the [findings] but even the most genetically well-endowed prodigy clearly needs practice - and lots of it - to develop the brain of an athlete."

GET IN THE ZONE

So, how can those not currently training for that triathlon learn from the sports mindset? Mental performance consultant Andy Barton of The Sporting Mind (thesportingmind.co.uk) has worked with sportspeople as well as corporate executives and has seen how we can all harness the power of an athlete's mind. "First get into the zone state or flow state, which means existing in the present. When a runner prepares for a marathon she doesn't let herself think of the full 26 miles, she thinks of putting one foot in front of the other. At work people make endless lists worrying about the end of the day, or thinking about yesterday. Focus purely on the task at hand, give it your full attention and your efficiency will increase."

Second, remember the importance of the internal language you use. "Our nervous system can't recognise a negative, but our minds can," explains Andy. "So if you say to yourself, 'Don't let my hands shake during that presentation,' your brain will mentally rehearse it, making it more likely to happen. Instead, focus on what you do want to happen, and your mind and body will follow."

Finally, says Barton, get moving. "Every molecule in our body contains a neurotransmitter, our whole body thinks. So when we stay hunched at our desks all day, we are not working our minds to their full potential. Make sure you take that lunchtime walk. Your performance will definitely improve."

Small steps can improve work performance exponentially. "I've seen the results, city workers earning hundreds of thousands of pounds more by following these tips," says Barton. And if this is just the result of following these few pointers, imagine the results of completing that marathon. See you at the finish line.

Radcliffe's expression when she won the London Marathon in 2002 in the world's best time for a women-only race? "It was tunnel vision," says Louise Ellis, sports psychologist and performance consultant. "It's this ability to switch off and focus that can turn athletes into winners, both on and off the field."

DRIVEN TO SUCCESS

Dame Kelly Holmes (ambassador, businesswoman and sports mentor) agrees, "Sport and work are totally connected. You set goals in the workplace just as you do in sport and if you're driven in one area, you're bound to be driven in the other."

Many companies are now tapping into this sports mindset, bringing in

former athletes to teach their mental toughness, leadership qualities and drive. Inverness-based company Global Energy Group brought in former Olympic biathlete Ian Woods to help drive the skills of its staff, while in Tokyo, Earth Dragon Resources has just appointed former freestyle wrestler and Olympic gold medalist Jiichiro Date to its board of directors. "We believe his accomplishments and motivational skills, along with his strategic approach to success will prove hugely beneficial to our efforts," says CEO Thomas Herdman.

Neuroscientist Reza Shadmehr of Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University

