

* A practical guide to making the most of your sporting life

play

THE CHALLENGE

Queen of the mountains

She may look frail, but Lizzy Hawker is Britain's greatest endurance athlete, running ultramarathons while climbing the height of Everest. **Ed Douglas** tries to keep up in the Alps

PHOTOGRAPH **JUDITH SPANCKEN**

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When Lizzy Hawker starts running, I see at once why she is one of the best ultra-athletes in the world. She holds her elbows out and quite still, while her feet are planted widely on the rocky trail we're following above the Col des Montets in the French Alps. She just eats up the ground.

Ahead of us, the smooth white bump of Mont Blanc glares in the sunshine, but there's little time to contemplate the view. On rocky sections, Lizzy's feet skip precisely from foothold to foothold. Trail running isn't like road or track running. There are obstacles and dangers to avoid. Above our heads are steep granite cliffs. Below us the ground drops sharply away into deep pine forest.

She makes it look so effortless I assume I can just follow her lead, but find my feet aren't quite so well connected to my brain. She's a natural. I have done this before, but can't come close to matching her precision. "When I'm moving," she tells me, "whether it's running or being in the mountains, that's when I know myself more. Running is just part of me."

Four years ago, Hawker lined up in nearby Chamonix for the Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc, a race around the highest mountain in the Alps. The course then was 155km long with 8,500m of ascent and descent. That's four marathons back-to-back and almost the height of Everest to climb. The winner would cross the line in just over 21 hours. Then 28, Lizzy had little idea what would happen next. She had never run so far. She had no support team and no plan. Under current rules, she wouldn't even have been allowed to take part. In the world of ultra-running, Hawker was a complete unknown. "I mean," she says as we stop for a breather. "Even I hadn't heard of me."

That day, as usual in mass starts, Hawker had to wait to start running. But once she did she could not stop. Through the evening and into the night, she moved steadily through the field of 2,000. Running after her in bright sunshine, I try to imagine navigating this terrain at speed in the dark. Not easy. But halfway round, she caught the race favourite.

Hawker seems almost apologetic about her determination to win. But as she runs there is not a moment of hesitation, just pure focus. "I thought to myself, I'll see if I can be the first woman to cross the border into Switzerland. And after that, I just kept going." She was the first woman across the line, finishing in 26:53:51. Overnight, an ultra-running star was born. It was no fluke. She has won a string of races since, including the 100km world championships in 2006. After running seven and a half hours, the margin of victory was four seconds.

But it's in the mountains we are running through now that Hawker excels. Last year she regained her UTMB title, knocking an hour off her time on a course eight kilometres



Lizzy Hawker shows Ed Douglas some ultra-marathon terrain in her playground, the French Alps.

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longer and with more ascent. The next woman was more than two hours behind her.

Hawker is back in Chamonix to give a trail-running class and to defend her 2008 UTMB title in August. She agrees to take me along a section of the course to show what it takes to

win such a monstrous race. In photographs, she can look frail. In the flesh she appears more robust, though spare and compact, like most ultra-runners. Her head is perfectly still as she reads the trail ahead of her.

Then she watches me. "You cross your arms too much," she offers. "That can restrict your breathing." Which, I'm guessing, can't be good at altitude. She also shows me a stride pattern for climbing steep sections. Rather than shorten my running stride, she shows me how to lengthen my walking stride, which is just as quick but uses less energy. Walking fast is a critical part of mountain ultra-marathons, where it is often too perilous to run.

For most of us, running a marathon on the flat is imposing enough. But we have got used to the idea that for some athletes, a marathon seems comparatively short. Most of us are also aware of the fell-running tradition in the north of England, where whippet-thin athletes power up steep grass slopes and hurtle back down again. Then there are long-standing challenges such as the Bob Graham Round in the Lake District.

Mountain ultra-marathons are something else again. No two races are the same, which is part of their appeal. Last year, for example, Hawker won the Gondo Event in Switzerland, back-to-back marathons each with 2,000m of ascent on consecutive days across the Simplon Pass. But as she stresses, it's not winning that motivates her. She runs in mountains because she loves it.

Hawker has had little coaching of her own in her unusual sporting career – “It never crossed my mind to join a club; I’ve always run on my own a lot” – but her advice seems pragmatic. Her route into athletics came from her passion for the Alps. Sitting in a café after our run, she talks excitedly about her first visit, aged six. Going home on the train, she cried as the Matterhorn disappeared from view. Coming back to live in the mountains has been her goal since. “I grew up in Upminster [east London],” she says. “Maybe mountains are a reaction to suburbia.”

It's her mountaineering background, she says, that taught her how to keep going all day and all night if necessary, whatever the discomfort or pain. In a 50-mile event in San Francisco, she tripped and fell, her weight driving her knee onto metal tubing that essentially split the flesh. At the end of the race, which she won, paramedics could see tendons flexing through the wound.

Despite the risks, I find I am much happier running in the mountains than on the road. Being surrounded by nature rather than traffic fumes is exhilarating. For Hawker, the decision isn't so easy. Since winning the 100km in 2006, she has flirted with a mainstream athletics career. In 2007, she found herself riding the bus to the elite start of the London Marathon with stars including Mara Yamauchi and Liz Yelling.

Marathons are the cut-off point for serious investment in athletics. There's not much loot in ultra-running. Hawker doesn't have a coach or access to the kind of training facilities athletes of her ability take for granted. She doesn't have a house or a car or many possessions beyond her laptop and her rather ordinary running shoes. She ekes a living from writing, coaching, and a sponsor, North Face.

But I suspect Hawker prefers being a

nomad. It suits her philosophy. She lives like she runs – lightly and on her own path. After Cambridge she did her post-grad in oceanography, undertaking research in the Antarctic on climate change. To say the environment preoccupies her is only half of it. It is hard to imagine Paula Radcliffe quoting Thoreau on her blog, as Hawker does. While most runners focus on the next race, Hawker spends a lot of time reflecting on how and where to live in an ecologically mindful way.

I ask how she keeps herself going on such long runs. “I won't drink much up to marathon distance,” she says. “I don't sweat much so I don't need to drink as much as others, and I find it hard drinking when I'm running fast. I don't like gels or bars. I prefer real food. During the world championships I had chocolate and honey sandwiches, just stuff I'd taken from breakfast at the hotel.”

She has been a vegetarian most of her life, and when I note her enthusiasm for cheese, she laughs. When you're running all day, she says, you can eat pretty much what you like. Until last year she had been largely injury-free, but in trying to work up some speed for the marathon and 100km, she developed a stress fracture in her pelvis. Pounding asphalt does not suit her well. “My heart's always going to be in the mountains,” she says.

Two years ago, along with Stephen Pyke, she set a new record for running from Everest Base Camp to the Nepalese capital, Kathmandu – a distance of 302km with 10,000m of ascent and 14,000m of descent – in three days, two hours, seven minutes. It's astounding to recall that women were first allowed to run an Olympic marathon only in 1984. Hawker managed on just four hours' sleep and came close to abandoning the run after her team lost the trail in the dark. And she did all this soon after reaching the summit of Ama Dablam, a difficult peak of 6,812m.

After this year's UTMB she's heading to Tibet to climb an 8,000m peak called Cho Oyu – and then run back to Kathmandu. She frets about the jet fuel she'll burn and the dangers of frostbite. Supreme fitness, Hawker knows, is no protection against altitude sickness. And then there's the temptation to give up the high road in favour of a conventional career. Still, as she says herself, “Just maybe, Thoreau is right. Whatever we are doing must be only for the love of it. The true love of it.” Then she heads out to run some more. **OSM**

Lizzy Hawker (lizzyhawker.com) holds trail-running courses at Laufschule Scuol in the Swiss Alps (laufschule-scuol.ch) and for Tracks and Trails (tracks-and-trails.com/index.php/eng/Health-Fitness). The Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc (ultra-trailmb.com) starts on 28 August



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