



# QUEENS

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A marathon used to be the toughest challenge the average person attempted, so why are more and more women pushing their limits further and further? Abigail Butcher investigates  
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**I DID IT!**

Ingrid Kvale, 45, set a world record as part of the first team of four women to row across the Pacific Ocean from California to Honolulu in the inaugural Great Pacific Race. 'My dad was an adventurer. He cycled around Europe and Africa aged 14, so it runs in the family. I do a lot of competitive rowing with the City of Bristol Rowing Club and have always done crazy challenges - I've cycled on a 21-seater from London to Brussels and had previously attempted to row around Britain in a mixed four, but we had electrical problems so had to retire. I'm a divemaster, day skipper and wildlife filmmaker, so I work on dangerous projects, love the ocean and do risk assessments for a living.'

Now nearing 40, I love standing on the edge of a cliff with a pair of skis on more than I ever did, and I'm physically training harder than ever before in my life. My first charity horse race 10 years ago was the start of a dangerous snowballing effect that has led me to seek out bigger and better highs.

Both men and women are becoming sportier to the extreme. The number of events taking place around the country, from ironman competitions to sportives and Tough Mudders has mushroomed, and although female participation remains steady at between seven and 17 per cent for the past 10 years, there are far more events now. In 2009, there was only one ironman event in the UK, but now there are four major televised events of this distance - so 75 per cent more women are taking part than five years ago.

 **ROLE MODELS**

'Women have been taking on big challenges for centuries, but the advertising of events is now so much bigger via national media and social networking,' says consultant clinical psychologist Sally Austen.

Celebrities are also pushing themselves to the limit. In 2009, Cheryl Cole and Fearne Cotton started the craze by climbing up Mount Kilimanjaro, and in February this year, Davina McCall - who has previously bungee jumped out of a helicopter over the Grand Canyon - ran, swam and cycled 500 miles from Edinburgh to London in her 'beyond breaking point' sport relief challenge. Meanwhile Radio 2 presenter Jo Whiley ran a 26-hour marathon in a glass box outside the BBC's Broadcasting House in London, starting and ending with two live radio shows.

Seeing Davina in tears of exhaustion after being pulled from Lake Windermere and 40-year-old mother of two Jo Pavey win a 10,000m gold medal at this summer's

Commonwealth Games are encouraging 'normal' women to have a go, says Andrew Lane, sports psychologist at the Centre for Health and Human Performance (CHHP) in London.

'We're getting accustomed to these challenges,' he explains. 'It's becoming really accessible to do something like the London 100 bike ride - we see normal people being interviewed at the end saying what a fabulous experience it is. And all you have to do is click a link on a website to enter.'

 **ENDORPHIN RUSH**

So why do we do it? I know from personal experience that the reasons are complex. I have a need to achieve, but I also enjoy proving to myself just how far I can push mind and body and am hooked on the endorphins post-event. This year, during my ironman training, I cycled 111km at high altitude in Colorado, climbing from 2,425m to 3,687m in the Rockies, two

days out of three. I never believed I was strong enough for that - nor, while we're at it, that I could survive 15 days in storm conditions, in the open ocean, on

less than two hours' sleep in every 24.

'A challenge is a way of getting to know an aspect of yourself that you suspected was there but you didn't have proof of,' says Austen. 'You suspected that you could conquer that fear, or push your body that hard, or fend for yourself, and to succeed in the challenge is to prove it to yourself and to others that you can. The target of the task (the ocean, mountain or long-distance road) is not really the challenge, but the exploration of the aspects of your own mind and body.'

Austen says that while pushing yourself towards this life-defining knowledge, you're also released, in a surprisingly relaxing way, from the less vital concerns of life.

'If you're struggling to find a foot hold or praying for a storm to pass, then the

**You explore the aspects of your mind and body**

**N**ext year, I'm planning to learn to kite surf to competition level, row around the Isle of Wight and am toying with a grand plan of skiing across the Alps. This year I trained for an ironman, last year I raced in a yacht across the Atlantic and I've also competed in three horse races, including one at Goodwood. Why? Because I'm hooked on pushing myself to the limit, physically and mentally. I have, what psychologists call a 'need to achieve', and I'm not alone...



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## ESCAPE YOUR COMFORT ZONE

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◆ **Start small.** Breaking down a challenge makes it more attainable. If you want to run a marathon, begin with a 5k. Be prepared to learn slowly.

◆ **Increase your fitness,** flexibility, strength and stamina first - it will give you more body awareness and an idea of what you can do and what you'll be best at.

◆ **Join a group** doing the activity you're interested in - try Facebook. That way you can speak to people who've done the challenge you're interested in and learn from their experiences.

◆ **Book an activity holiday** - there are myriad options, whether you're learning a new sport, or already accomplished. These give a non-pressured way to learn or improve your skill.



### I DID IT!

Lucy Rivers Bulkeley, 35, became the first European woman to complete the 4 Deserts Grand Slam (Atacama, Gobi, Sahara and Antarctica) in 2010.

'The first run I did was the RacingThePlanet's Sahara marathon, 250km in six days, with my sister, the year after my father died, as a fund-raiser for charity. It was supposed to be a one-off, and when I crossed the finish line I vowed I'd never do it again, but I'd always wanted to go to the Atacama. As I did more research, I discovered no woman had ever run all four deserts in one year, so I set out to achieve it. I'm now attempting the seven summits. I'm not very good at being told I can't do something.'

worries of the "normal" world are put in their rightful place – way down the priority list,' she explains. 'Often we need to be faced with a rock fall before the politics of the playground, workplace or Christmas gathering can be seen in proportion.'

While nurture has a strong part to play, the behaviour of extreme queens is governed by nature, too. Personality types that are drawn to the glamour and the 'high' in achieving a physical challenge are equally as likely to apply themselves in the same way to their career.

### IN THE GENES

Last year, PhD student Cynthia Thomson and kinesiology professor Jim Rupert at the University of British Columbia found that risk-taking behaviour in skiers and snowboarders is linked to the presence of a particular gene variant that helps determine the density of dopamine receptors in the brain. Dopamine is responsible for making us feel satisfied – whether that's after a nice meal or jumping out of an aeroplane. Scientists already know that people who have fewer dopamine receptors are more prone to risk-taking behaviour, but Thomson and Rupert proved it's in people's genes.

The researchers studied men and women who practise paragliding, mountaineering, skydiving, parkour and BASE jumping, and compared them to those athletes who do low-risk sports such

running, swimming or yoga. The research concluded that about 15-25 per cent of people have the gene variant associated with high risk-taking behaviour, 50 per cent with medium risk-taking behaviour, and 25-35 per cent with low risk-taking behaviour.

'I think genetic factors play small a role in influencing people to take risks in sport,' says Thomson. 'But psychology and environmental factors are also important.' Gamblers and drug addicts have the same gene variant, but Thomson and Rupert found that extreme athletes are not as impulsive – in other words they might take risks, but those risks are calculated.

Our modern ability to calculate and break down the risks is key in this, according to Lane. Years ago, preparing an athlete for the Marathon des Sables would have been very different he says. Now, it's easy to find people on social media who have completed the event, from whom new competitors can learn and discuss every aspect of their training.

### CALCULATED RISKS

'In many cases, what looks risky becomes less so the more confident you are as the risks are broken down. As people learn the demands of the task, the risks lessen,' explains Lane. 'People progress in terms of confidence to take things on, such as learning to live off a certain food, being on their own or coping without sleep.'

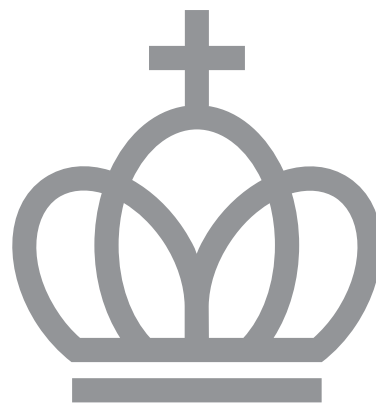
If I look back to my own pathway, I didn't just decide to sail across the Atlantic, I'd been yacht racing for several years and endured an English Channel crossing in storm-force conditions before signing up for the big one. My achievement seems huge to the uninitiated, but small fry to me, when I compare with those who do such crossings alone, or race boats professionally.



### I DID IT!

Lizzy Foreman, 24, completed the seven-day Haute Route Alps cycling race in 2013.

'I'm preparing for a solo transatlantic sailing race, so wanted to do an extreme challenge as part of my build-up. It was a 900km ride, climbing more than 20,000m over seven days. I turned up on my own to do it, with no plan of where I was going to stay, and made friends and met people along the way. I learnt a lot about myself, nutrition, endurance, stamina – I knew these were skills I had to learn for solo sailing. I've wanted to do extreme challenges since seeing [solo sailor] Pete Goss's boat in Cornwall as a child.'



Risk taking is without doubt addictive

### BEING HEROIC

Ingrid Kvale, 45, who just set a world record for being part of the first women's four to row across the Pacific, has been rowing competitively for years in her hometown of Bristol. She also undertakes risk assessments on a daily basis as part of her job as a wildlife film-maker, working with great white sharks and man-eating tigers.

'I work on some quite dangerous projects, and am used to evaluating the risks,' says Kvale. 'I didn't think at any point we were going to die, but it was never certain we were going to make the crossing – and rescue was days away from us at any one time.'

Risk taking is without doubt addictive but, at the end of the day, it's nothing new, points out Lane. 'Women have been suffering physical pain and showing extreme performance and mental toughness since the beginning of time, giving birth to children. It's utter misery, but there's social support for it, and the end point, the baby, is perceived to be worth it – getting the baby justifies the pain,' he says. 'The kind of mental toughness that requires "putting on your man suit", such as rowing across the Atlantic, creates huge doubt and worry over danger within some social circles and is, unlike childbirth, regarded as ultimately heroic.' ■