FITTER & FASTER AFTER 40!

We're besieged with images of youth; everything, it seems, is better when we're younger. But despite the odds, a growing band of runners seems to be defying this universal truth, which has lead us to pose the question: could we actually be better at running in our 40s?

Words: **Katy Dartford**

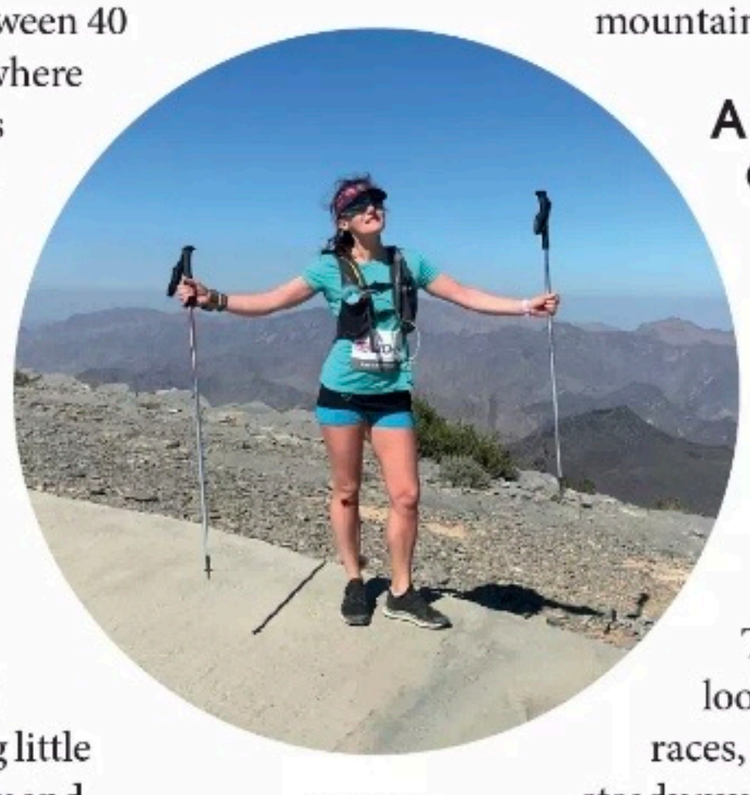
There comes a point in a race when my body finally gives in and accepts what I'm doing to it. It's usually about 24K in.

When I talk about racing, I'm talking about ultramarathon distances – or, to be more specific, what counts as middle-distance ultras these days: somewhere between 40 and 60K. Later in the race, somewhere around the 42K mark, after hours of grinding it out, something else start to happen. The wind comes back into my sails, and I start flying past people who'd been snapping at my heels earlier on. With the right tune playing, my legs just seem to keep turning.

It wasn't always like this. Back in 2005, I ran the London Marathon; it was the first time I'd ever done anything like it. Having little money, not taking it that seriously and perhaps also in denial, I trained, on occasion, in my squash court shoes for that race. At the start line, my knee was already hurting. At 18K, I was walking, and I ended up limping down The Mall to finish in five-and-a-half hours. I was 26, wrecked, and swore I'd never put myself through anything like that again.

Fast-forward to my 40s. My race times aren't necessarily faster, but they look better on paper.

After witnessing an ultra run for the first time in 2012 – the Tor des Géants, during a visit to Courmayeur in Italy – I felt it was something I wanted to do someday. Not long afterwards, I made the big move from South London to Chamonix and entered the 2013 Mont Blanc Marathon, my first mountain race.



Katy is an accomplished long-distance runner

A decade of trail running

Running in the Alps hasn't been easy. Short legs and big climbs, and, since the start, I've been plagued with Achilles problems, tight calves and a lack of dorsiflexion, possibly due to years of wearing high heels.

That said, on the other hand, looking back over a decade of trail races, what stands out most is how steady my results have been, and I can now clearly see that they haven't fallen off a cliff with age.

Since my first appearance at the Marathon du Mont-Blanc and the Trail du Tour des Fiz in the same year, I've taken part in more than a dozen ITRA-rated events, from the limestone ridges of Oman to the technical trails of Courmayeur. The distances have mostly hovered between 40 and 60K, with 2,000-4,000m of climb, with the longest

distance being the Nice UTMB (62K/3,300m+ elevation gain) in 2023. The toughest climb (and my longest day on the trails ever) has been the Trail des Aiguilles Rouges 2016 (50.9K/4,032m+).

I've recently noticed that, since turning 40, I've regularly finished in the top quarter of the women's field, often placing in around the top 15-20 in my category, and sometimes higher.

At the Oman by UTMB 50K in 2019 – a brutal course of heat, dust and jagged rock – I was shocked to discover I'd finished first in my age group, despite it being so technical it took me 10 hours to complete.

And, while it wasn't a huge field – the race was new, remote and far from the Alpine scene – the achievement still felt like a small victory. It felt like proof that the last few years in the mountains had paid off.

Incidentally, that race produced more than one impressive result: the 137K event was won outright by a 51-year-old Irishman called Eoin Keith; evidence, if ever we needed it, that endurance can age well.

Back to this summer in London, and I finally had an injury-free window after months of Achilles pain and sharp stabbing pains in my calf that had stopped me running. I was looking for a marathon-distance trail race, something close enough to home to test where I was at. I spotted the East Sussex Maverick, grabbed a last-minute entry, and headed to the start line with zero expectations.

As usual, the first 20K felt like resistance training; my body complained, my legs dragged. However, somewhere in the final third, the switch flicked, and I finished with a feeling of strength rather than survival.

When I checked the women's results later, I found out I'd placed third in my age group and finished solidly in the upper third overall. And in fact, when I reflected on that very first 2005 London Marathon after a further two decades of running – and ageing! – I found that in my East Sussex Maverick, I'd covered a harder, hillier trail race with 1,000m of ascent and finished in around the same time. Only this time, I wasn't broken. I was buzzing. I think the differences were fitness and experience. I knew how to fuel and pace, and how to talk myself through the rough patches. And, despite not having as much training as I would have liked, I'd always felt I could pull it off.

"I knew how to fuel and pace, and how to talk myself through the rough patches. Despite training less than I would have liked, I always felt I could pull it off"

Shift your mindset

At the start line, I'd noticed one particular woman who was warming up and raring to go. Later, when I checked the results, I wasn't surprised to see she was the overall winner of my race. She was called Iciar Loza; she'd won by a huge margin and, to my delight, she was in her 50s.

When I spoke to Iciar later, she told me she hadn't grown up running; she started after having four children in four years. "It was something easy to do," she says. "My husband could stay with the kids for half an hour while I went out. Then it just progressed; I'm quite a competitive person, and I realised I was getting better."

A former basketball player, Iciar turned her attention to marathons, soon clocking three-hour times. "I twice qualified for the London Championships, but both times I got injured six weeks before," she says. "I didn't have a coach back then; I was just reading, doing the miles, probably pushing too much." After repeated injuries, Iciar decided to stop, but eventually Covid brought her back. "I ran 50 miles on the coast path with a friend," she explains. "That was my first real trail

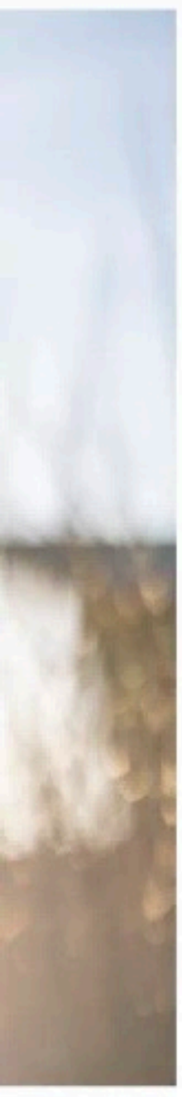


Running after 40 isn't about grinding out the miles



Menopause can cause a crimp in training but it doesn't last forever







If you came to running late, it may serve you well in midlife

experience. I've always loved hiking and the mountains, so trail running felt natural."

"I think I just fell in love with the feeling," she reflects. "There's something about the rhythm of running that I don't get from anything else. It's freedom."

It *is* freedom, but it's also structure. After qualifying as an endurance coach, Iciar built in strength work and cross-training. Now, with her children grown, she runs around 130K a week, often fitting it in before or after her full-time job. "It's not glamorous," she says. "I don't have mountains near me, so I use the treadmill and the step machine. Sometimes it's boring, but it builds strength. When I get to the races, I know I can cope with the climbs."

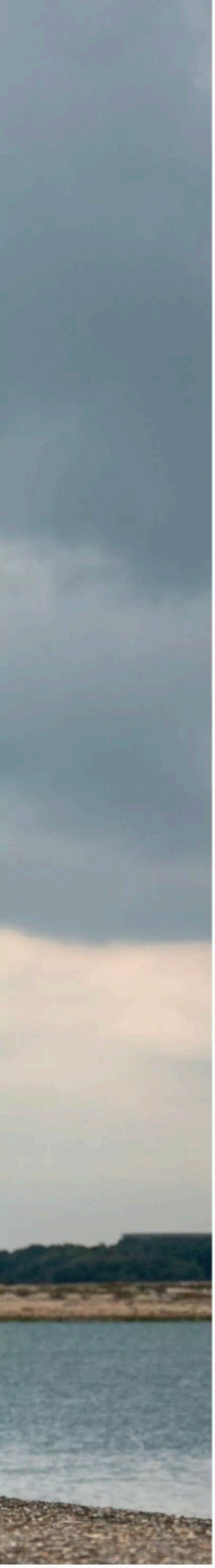
When I ask how running had changed for her in her 50s, she says, "You can still do great things, but you have to be more careful. Your body doesn't recover as fast, and you have to shift your mindset. Otherwise, you just dig yourself into a hole."

It's a simple point, but it has stuck with me. Iciar wasn't talking about slowing down; rather, getting smarter. At a certain stage, it's less about chasing personal bests and more about staying in the game: learning to balance fitness with recovery, ambition with patience, and pride with realism.

Iciar also points out that one of the hardest parts of midlife running is visibility. "Women in their 50s just get on with it," she says. "They race, they win, but you rarely see them." She's right. When I ran the Oman by UTMB, every category had a podium ceremony, except ours. Brands and media are slowly catching up, but for most women, the motivation isn't recognition. It's just showing up, again and again.

Training smarter

That idea that you don't stop pushing, you just do it differently



is something I have tried to put into practice in the last year. When I got a place to run the CCC in the French Alps, the 101K Courmayeur–Champex–Chamonix, I decided it was time to get serious. Normally, with the mix of running, skiing, climbing and the bit of biking I try to do, it's hard to train purely for running, but I usually seem to get away with it for 50K. For the CCC, though, I decided it was different. I needed a coach to plan my training properly (and crack the whip), to enter a few training races in the run-up to the big event, and to commit to those long, back-to-back mountain days that test your patience as much as your legs.

My coach – Chamonix-based Samantha Morton, an international mountain leader, UESCA ultrarunning coach and co-founder of The Adventure Running Company – helped me make sense of that shift. I asked her about the benefits of mixing things up in your 40s and apparently, my tendency to drift into other sports isn't necessarily a bad thing. "It's all movement," she says. "It builds endurance in different ways and protects you from the wear and tear that too much running alone can cause."

She believes cross-training is especially useful for older runners who already have an aerobic base. "You don't need to hammer big mileage to maintain fitness," she says. "What matters more is variety, strength and recovery. If you love being in the mountains, climbing or biking can feed into that, as long as you're still doing some running."

Samantha's advice on strength training is blunt but effective: "Once you're in your 40s, it's use it or lose it," she said. "I try to get to the gym three times a week. Lifting heavy is the best thing you can do because it keeps your muscles, bones and joints strong, and lets you keep doing what you love for longer."

> "Ultra performance comes from years of aerobic conditioning. Small, regular training loads with proper recovery yield better results"

Megan Smith, a physiologist at Loughborough University, agrees that the key isn't resisting change but training with it. "Many women in their 40s and 50s perform well because they've learned to work with their physiology, not against it," she asserts. While perimenopause may briefly disrupt recovery, Megan believes that once hormone levels stabilise, training will be predictable again. "Ultra performance comes from years of aerobic conditioning. Small, regular training loads with proper recovery yield better results than chasing spikes of volume or intensity."

Not fine wine

That balance between strength and longevity is something Chloë Lanthier, sports scientist and founder of the Chamonix Mountain Endurance Academy, knows well. When I lived in Chamonix, I occasionally joined her running workshops where she helped me flatten out my tip-toe running style in a bid to ease my Achilles problems.

She puts it simply: "We're not like fine wine. We don't get better with age, but we can stay strong if we keep doing the right things. Once you hit peri-menopause or menopause, the goal is to protect longevity. That's consistency, strength and good habits, like eating well, resting, recovery and going to bed early. It's the small details that add up."

Her approach focuses on prevention, not performance. "It's not about hitting 50 and suddenly lifting heavy weights because someone online said so," she said. "It's about mechanics, balance and progressive training. Divide your workouts through the week, keep them varied and stay consistent."

She also stresses that sport-specific work still matters. "To be a good runner, you have to run," she said. "Cross-training is great for variety – because it keeps you fresh and builds general strength – but it doesn't replace running".

For both Chloë and Samantha, you don't necessarily get better with volume, but you should swap junk miles for intention. "You don't need big mileage days," Lanthier said. "Shorter, more focused sessions using different speeds are far better. I call it sub-maximal training; you work at low-moderate, moderate and moderate-high intensity. Those pace changes lift your heart rate, build strength without red-lining, and let you recover for the next day."

Going long

Chloë and Samantha's approaches both focus on training smarter, not harder, concentrating on shorter, more purposeful runs that keep you fit without overloading the system. But that doesn't mean shying away from distance altogether. The fitness you build in those controlled sessions can translate into stronger endurance when it matters most: on race day.

Dr Daniel Longman, another lecturer in physiology at Loughborough University who studies human evolution through endurance sports, agrees that midlife performance isn't about "defying age". Instead, it's about how endurance itself changes with it.


Strength training is essential to keep injuries low and performance high

"There's a debate about whether men or women are better at ultra-endurance events," he told me. "Men tend to have higher maximal oxygen uptake and larger muscles that can generate more power, which gives them a clear advantage over short distances. But as races get longer, those differences matter less. In a 250K desert race, for example, nobody is working at their maximum capacity, so factors like psychological resilience and running economy start to dominate instead."

And that shift, he added, also helps older athletes. "As we age, muscle power declines, but that's less of a disadvantage in longer races where power isn't the limiting factor. Older athletes are usually more experienced, understand their bodies better, and manage injury risk more intelligently. If you look after yourself and keep good biomechanics, increasing distance can be a great way to stay in the game as you get older."

Daniel's point reminded me of what professional Adidas Terrex mountain athlete Holly Page told me after the Oman by UTMB. Then still in her 20s, she had finished second in the 50K race in just 6 hours 34 minutes and was clear about her priorities.

"People always think the next challenge has to be further," she said. "But you just get really slow! I think I'd be good at the long stuff – my mind's stronger than my body – but if I start doing that now, I'd lose my speed. The long races are basically long hikes; you don't breathe heavily, so it doesn't hurt as much."

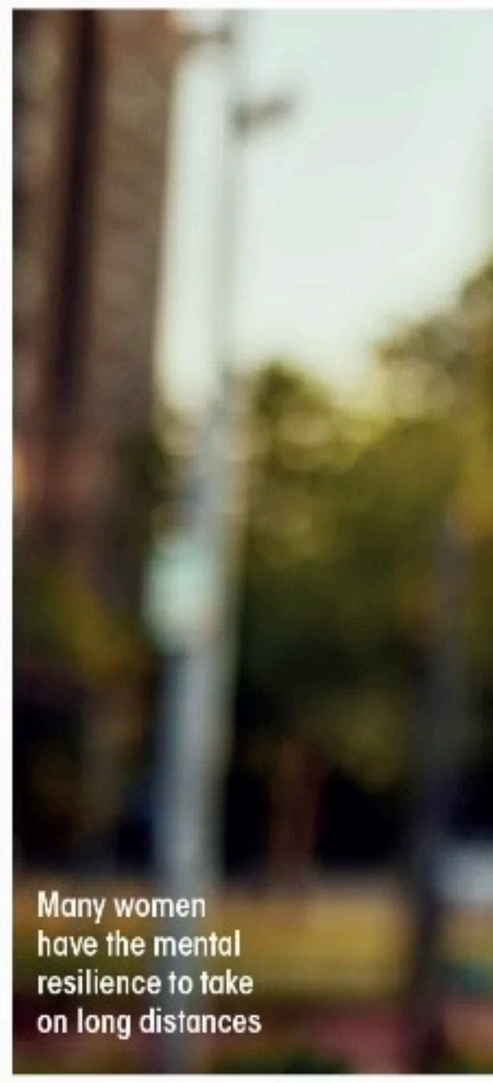
For younger athletes like Page, that slower pace represents a trade-off; less intensity, less edge. But it's also what makes those races sustainable later in life. Longer events reward pacing, patience and resilience; exactly the qualities that tend to strengthen with age. It's the same picture that Dr Daniel Longman describes: when power matters less than efficiency, experience becomes the advantage.

Reaching your peak

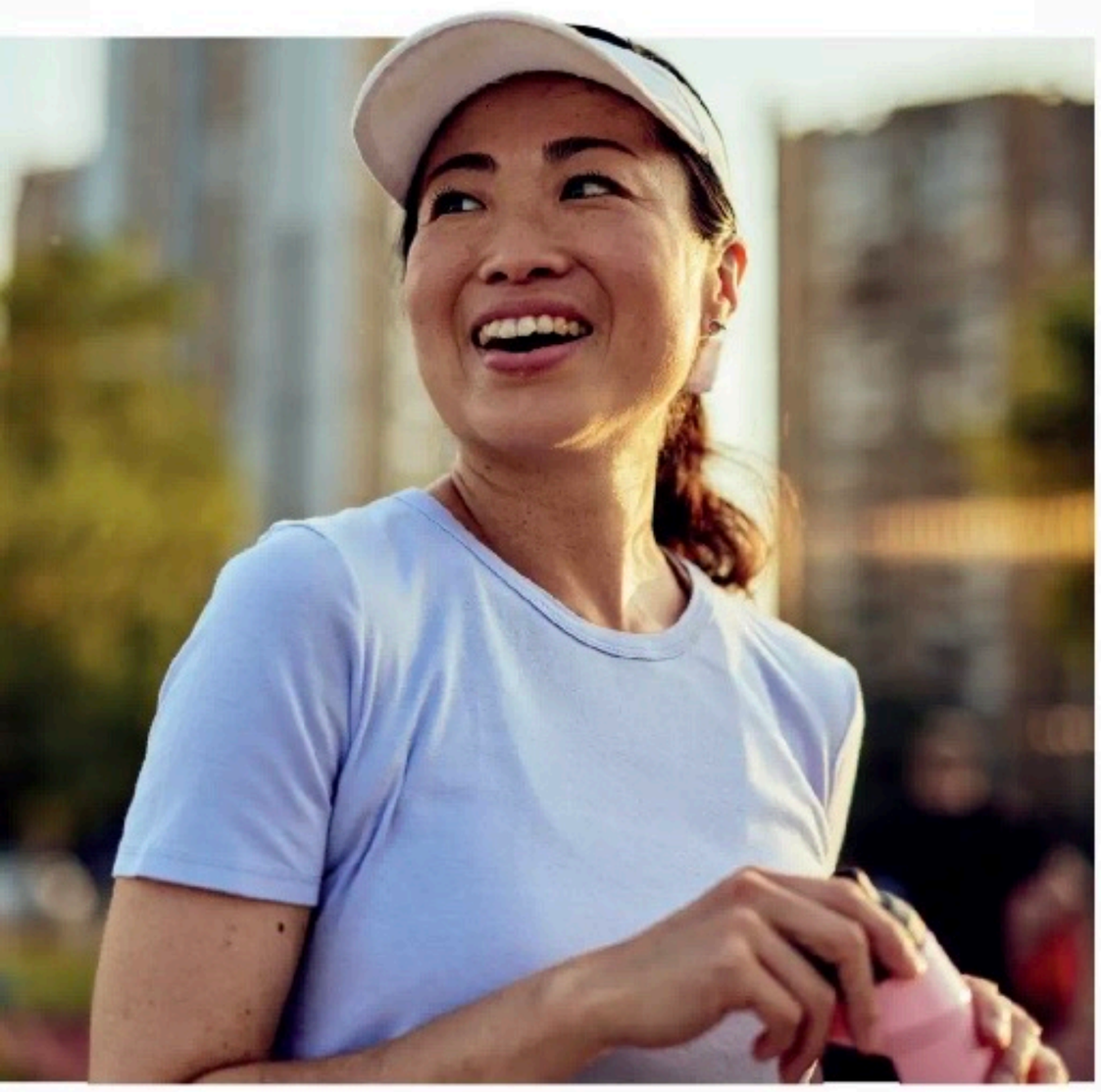
Dr Chris Gaffney, lecturer in sports and exercise science at Lancaster University, suggests there's a simple explanation for why some runners seem to improve later in life: many never reached their physiological peak in the first place. "If you didn't train seriously in your 20s or 30s but increased your training volume and intensity later on, you might actually be the fittest you've ever been," he said, simplifying the issue. "It's not about ageing, it's about training."

He also notes that some people genuinely age more slowly than others. "If your results are holding steady or even improving while others decline, it suggests your biological age is younger than your chronological age," he explains. "That slower decline reflects a mix of good genetics, consistent movement and sound nutrition."

While world-record performances usually peak before 40, Dr Gaffney says there's enormous variation in how quickly individuals lose speed. "In shorter distances, runners lose roughly 0.5-1% per year. Some decline faster, others slower. If you're doing better


Many women have the mental resilience to take on long distances





"Long-term aerobic exercise even leaves behind what's known as epigenetic memory; the body 'remembers' fitness and adapts faster each time you return to training"

than average, you're ageing more slowly than the pack."

For Dr Gaffney, the lesson is pragmatic rather than genetic. "You can't change the DNA you were born with," he said, "but you can influence how your body responds to it. Good diet, regular training and steady recovery all help slow the cellular wear and tear that comes with age."

Genes for fitness

That biological picture is one that the genetics company FitnessGenes has examined in detail. Their scientists say that around 30 to 50 per cent of endurance capacity is genetic – and the rest comes down to training, nutrition and environment. "You can't out-gene a bad routine," says Dr Geraldine Campbell, "but you can change how your genes behave. Regular endurance training activates pathways that protect mitochondria, reduce oxidative stress and help your body repair itself."

Long-term aerobic exercise, she explains, even leaves behind what's known as epigenetic memory; the body 'remembers' fitness and adapts faster each time you return to training. "It's the clearest example of use it or lose it," she adds.

My own FitnessGenes results don't reveal the profile of a natural endurance athlete; far from it. They show traits linked to good lactate-threshold tolerance – the ability to sustain effort longer before fatigue – and efficient mitochondrial function, both common among seasoned endurance athletes. The catch is a variant associated with soft-tissue injury, a likely culprit behind the Achilles issues that has followed me since my move to the Alps. The results also flag a relatively low VO_2 max profile, the measure of how efficiently the body uses oxygen, so I'm never going to be one of those effortless mountain gazelles.

While my genes may not be built for brilliance, lifestyle seems to have done the heavy lifting; the cumulative effect of training and (mostly) decent habits. I'm no saint – I still drink wine, stay up too late and sometimes eat whatever's handy – but I've done the right things often enough for them to add up. "Your genes tell part of the story," Campbell says, "but your habits write the ending."

The long game

If my DNA suggests persistence will take me a long way, the CCC showed where it runs out. Despite my efforts to do things right, the race still unravelled on the day. By 70K, I'd had enough. My legs felt fine, but I couldn't eat or drink. Normally, I'm relaxed about fuelling; a bit of salty food and bouillon at aid stations, maybe a sandwich if I'm on my own. But not that day. Whether it was heat or fuelling mistakes, I just felt nauseous. I decided to DNF rather than struggle through the night on empty.

It was a reminder that running at any age isn't a straight line upwards. The body changes, and the tricks that once worked don't always keep up.

Samantha Morton points to the pull between ambition and realism. "There comes a point where you realise you don't have to prove anything," she says. "You can still push hard, but you choose your battles; races you actually want to do, not ones that will wreck you. It's about longevity now, not punishment."

That mindset, she says, defines midlife athletes. "You get better at recognising what your body's telling you. You start listening rather than overriding. That's when you stop proving and start protecting." Chloë Lanthier agrees: "You stop racing to prove something and start training to protect something. It's not about being better than you were 10 years ago; it's about keeping your body strong so you can keep doing what you love."

And the benefit of midlife running is not that you get faster, but that you get steadier. The highs aren't manic but and the lows don't scare you. You know what's coming, and you know how to handle it.

So somewhere between the DNFs, the gym sessions and the long mountain days, I've realised that progress in your 40s might not be a new PB. It's about balance, recovery and still wanting to get out the door.