

LAST MEN STANDING

There are 12 runners left in the Ever Presents club, the men who have run every London Marathon since the first race in 1981. RW met them as they prepared for their 36th outing

We've come a long way since more than 7,000 runners took to the streets of the capital for the first London Marathon on March 29, 1981. Back then there were no spectator barriers and supporters enthusiastically banged saucepans. Now, it's one of the biggest marathons in the world, an annual citywide carnival with, this year, over 247,000 applications for its 38,000 coveted places. This year will also see the millionth runner crossing the finish line, but as this finishers' club swells, membership of another – the Ever Presents – dwindles. Of the original 42 who formed the Ever Presents in 1996 to celebrate 15 London Marathon finishes in a row, just 12 are left. No-one new can ever join. Members can only leave.

'Over the years some have run through hell and high water – through all sorts of complaints and injuries – just to be on the start line,' says

Ever Present Dale Lyons, 79, author of *The Real Marathon Men – London Marathon Everpresents* [sic] (£9.99, New Generation Publishing). 'For a lot of them it's the most important thing they have ever done.' And he should know: he completed the race on crutches two years ago following knee and ankle replacements, then did the race in a wheelchair last year.

This time last year, club membership stood at 14. But Dave Fereday, then 77, withdrew from the 2015 race with health issues. Pat Dobbs, then 76, who had completed the 2010 marathon four months after suffering two strokes, was injured after stepping on a water bottle at six miles and didn't make The Mall.

And then there were 12. Bonded together by their immense common achievement, but each with his own unique stories and loaded with inspiration and insights into what we like to think is the greatest race on earth.



Chris Finill

57, school bursar, Surrey

Started running 'Aged eight. My mum was a heavy smoker and I used to run to the shop to buy her cigarettes. I ran at school, then joined Harrow Athletics Club, where I'm still a member.'

Highlights 'Setting a world record for the most consecutive editions of a World Marathon Major marathon completed in less than three hours [30, from 1981 to 2010]. My favourite bit is always the 22-23-mile mark, when I know that I just need to have a pulse to finish and can afford to take it easier!'

Toughest race 'In 2014 I had a high hamstring-tendon tendinopathy injury so couldn't run properly. I was still trying to go under three hours and was on course until 23 miles, but fell apart in the last 20 minutes. I just didn't have it in me because of the lost training.'

What it means to be an EP 'We all want to get round on the day and hope the others do, too. We are very much a close band. The next milestone will be 40 years. The others say that I've got the strongest chance of being the last EP, as I'm younger, but who's to say what's around the corner for any of us? Some of the EPs are 76 and 77 and it's a greater achievement to be in the club at that age. There is no other race that I regularly complete like this one; I absolutely love it. In 1987/88, my wife and I planned our round-the-world trip so I could be back by February to train and be ready for April. My wife is also an EP; she has been a spectator at every single marathon apart from the one year when she ran it herself. This year, hopefully, she'll present me with my medal. I often wonder what it would be like if you didn't get to the race on time or didn't finish and it doesn't bear thinking about.'

Interviews Fiona Duffy Photography Ben Knight

Dale Lyons



79, retired chef, Birmingham

Started running 'Aged 42. I wanted to get fit to play squash so I joined a running club.'
Highlights 'There have been so many. I set records for the fastest three-legged marathon and became known as the Galloping Gourmet for my fastest marathon while tossing a pancake. But I'm really proud of my run in 1983, completed with a broken leg. I had a crutch under one arm and tossed a pancake with the other. I've also run a few 'doubles' [running the course twice] and one triple, when I was 61. I started the night before and ran to the finish, then back to Blackheath - arriving just in time to join the

back of the race. I have so many favourite parts of the course. I love the start - you're on such a high and the crowds are magnificent. At Tower Bridge they're phenomenal and you're still fresh. Then coming up Birdcage Walk you know you've made it. However tired you are you've still got a little bit in the tank to put a bit of a spurt on.'
Toughest race 'My triple marathon was done while nursing a broken wrist in a sling. But the toughest was running with a walking frame for Age Concern. I'd practised running with a wheeled version, but found out the night before you couldn't run with any form of wheels. I had to take the wheels

off and carry it. A lot of people remember me from that race.'
What it means to be an EP 'When people introduce me, they say, "He's done every single London Marathon, you know." You are part of a really elusive club. It's up to my body to say enough's enough; mentally, I'll always want to carry on.'
 As the years have gone by I enjoy it more than ever. You listen to your body more, you know when you're in trouble and back off and enjoy it. In the early days, when you're going for a PB, you're running on empty for the last few miles, pulling out all the stops to the detriment of the body.'

Boys' Club

Why no female EPs? Just five per cent of runners were women in the 1981 race, with none continuing the streak. How times change: last year 37 per cent of starters were female.



Mike Peace

66, retired head teacher, Hampshire

Started running 'At junior school aged eight; at secondary school I fell in love with cross-country racing and I won district championships in the early 60s.'
Highlights 'The first was the best; it was a very special occasion, with a magical crowd and a truly exhilarating finish - even though it was another 10 years before I ran my fastest time of 2:37.'
 In 1988 my mum was arrested for running onto the course to hug me at 25 miles. She was escorted away by a policeman and given a talking to while my embarrassed Dad hid behind a tree!
Toughest race 'I had to take 10 months off running before the 2003 race owing to a pubic bone inflammation; I only jogged 35 miles in training. I doubted I'd finish, but I actually ran it steadily.'
What it means to be an EP 'The marathon is a great street party and it's grown so much over the years. It's a privilege to be part of an exclusive club, one that no-one else can join.'

Bill O'Connor

70, teacher, London

Started running 'My first love was rugby, then football, until a parent at a school I worked at talked me into joining their running club. I became best friends with two international runners and we ran together. I could hoof it a bit in those days. I avoided marathons like the plague but, after moving to England [from his native New Zealand] in 1971, I drifted into doing London in 1981. I'd planned to return to New Zealand the following year and never dreamed I'd still be doing them today.'
Highlight 'My fifth London, in 1985. Over the years we've had torrential rain, snow and heat waves, but the weather was perfect, everything just went perfectly and, at 39, I was thrilled to run 2:34:29.'
Toughest race 'Two months before London 2001 I slipped in a half marathon, tearing the cruciate ligament in my knee. I wasn't able to train but was determined to stay in the group. I ended up shuffling round in five hours. I had surgery later that year.'
What it means to be an EP 'It would just be nice to keep going for as long as we can. They're a great group. We meet for lunch occasionally - most recently at the Cutty Sark, on the marathon route.'



Charles Cowens



73, gentlemen's hairdresser, Suffolk

Started running 'When my wife asked what I wanted for Christmas one year in the 1970s, I decided I'd look smart in one of those tracksuits that were all the rage. She said, "If I buy you one, you need to at least run around the block in it."'

Highlight 'Meeting Sir Steve Redgrave. On hearing I was an EP he said, "You must be mad." One sight that has stayed with me was a group of runners stopping to help Paralympian Peter Hull when one of his prosthetic legs came loose.'

Toughest race 'There hasn't been one. You always know there is going to be a point when it's going to be agony, but I've always finished. The marathon has never really been fun, but more of a challenge to myself. Last year was the same...hard!'

What it means to be an EP 'It's nice for an average guy like me to be part of an elite group. I hope to carry on until my body gives up. Apart from one year, 2014, the marathon has always fallen on my wife's birthday weekend; she's only ever had one birthday holiday.'



Steve Wehrle

68, paper manager, Kent

Started running 'At 30 I was a little overweight from beer and not enough exercise, so I started jogging and built up to five miles a couple of times a week with a friend. When I suggested the first London Marathon, he said, "You must be mad."'

Highlight 'My dream was to break three hours and I finally did it in 1991 - by a single second. Back then the race finished on Westminster Bridge and I can remember hearing over the loudspeaker, "You have 45 seconds to break three hours." There was a mad sprint for the

line. I discovered afterwards that Seb Coe came in a minute ahead of me. If I'd known how close I was to him I'd have gone even faster. It was my easiest and fastest marathon.

I've seen some bizarre outfits over the years - a mankini, a Teletubby. It hasn't stopped being fun, but it's changed from a mass-participation run or race into more of a parade. The winners and fancy dress runners are acknowledged, but the decent club runners don't get much notice any more. And there are so many people now that, at various points, it becomes virtually a walk.'

Toughest race 'In 2010 I had a severe bout of sciatica, which triggered a shooting pain up my right leg whenever I ran. I jogged the first couple of miles, then slowed to a walk. You see a different race from the back. There were barbecues on boats all along the Embankment and I ended up ambling along while eating a chicken leg!'

What it means to be an EP 'I never planned to run all 35, it's just happened that way. Some people don't quite believe it. Some don't even know it's been going that long. This will be my 50th Marathon - and my last London. I was hoping to make it to the last 10 EPs, but 12 will do. It's always a shame to lose EPs each year, but not surprising when you look at our ages. Chris Finill will still be running when the rest of us are pushing up the daisies.'



Roger Low

72, part-time senior consultant, London

Started running 'Growing up in New York I was always the slowest runner in my class. It wasn't until I joined the US Marine Corps that I realised I had a lot of stamina. I started running and, after moving to London in 1972, joined Highgate Harriers. I ran a marathon in 1980, which hit me for six. I swore I'd never do one again but must have forgotten that by the time the

entries opened for London. I've done approximately 100 now.'

Highlights 'I've loved seeing the atmosphere change over the years. In the early days the New York Marathon was much more exciting. Americans are very exuberant, whereas the British just didn't know what to make of it and stood there quietly on the sidelines. Over the years Londoners have got with the programme and they are now just as enthusiastic as New Yorkers.'

Toughest race 'My first London hit me hard. I arrived home to find my 10-year-old son had broken his arm and I told my wife "Deal with it - I'm going to bed!" In 1996 I was ill, felt incredibly exhausted as the race progressed and ended up walking.'

What it means to be an EP 'It means a lot of pressure to keep going. With some of us it's what we are known as. One year, a running friend was getting married in Edinburgh on marathon afternoon. A taxi rushed me to Heathrow; I showered in the waiting lounge, changed into black tie in the aeroplane loo, jumped into a waiting taxi and arrived just as the bride did. I've never let the groom forget that he could still be an EP if he'd done the same.'

My Ever Present top alerts other runners to the person they're passing and some are kind enough to say a few pleasant words to the old man before speeding off. I'd like to carry on until my legs fall off, but 60 London marathons would be a good round number!'

Terry Macey

67, solicitor, London

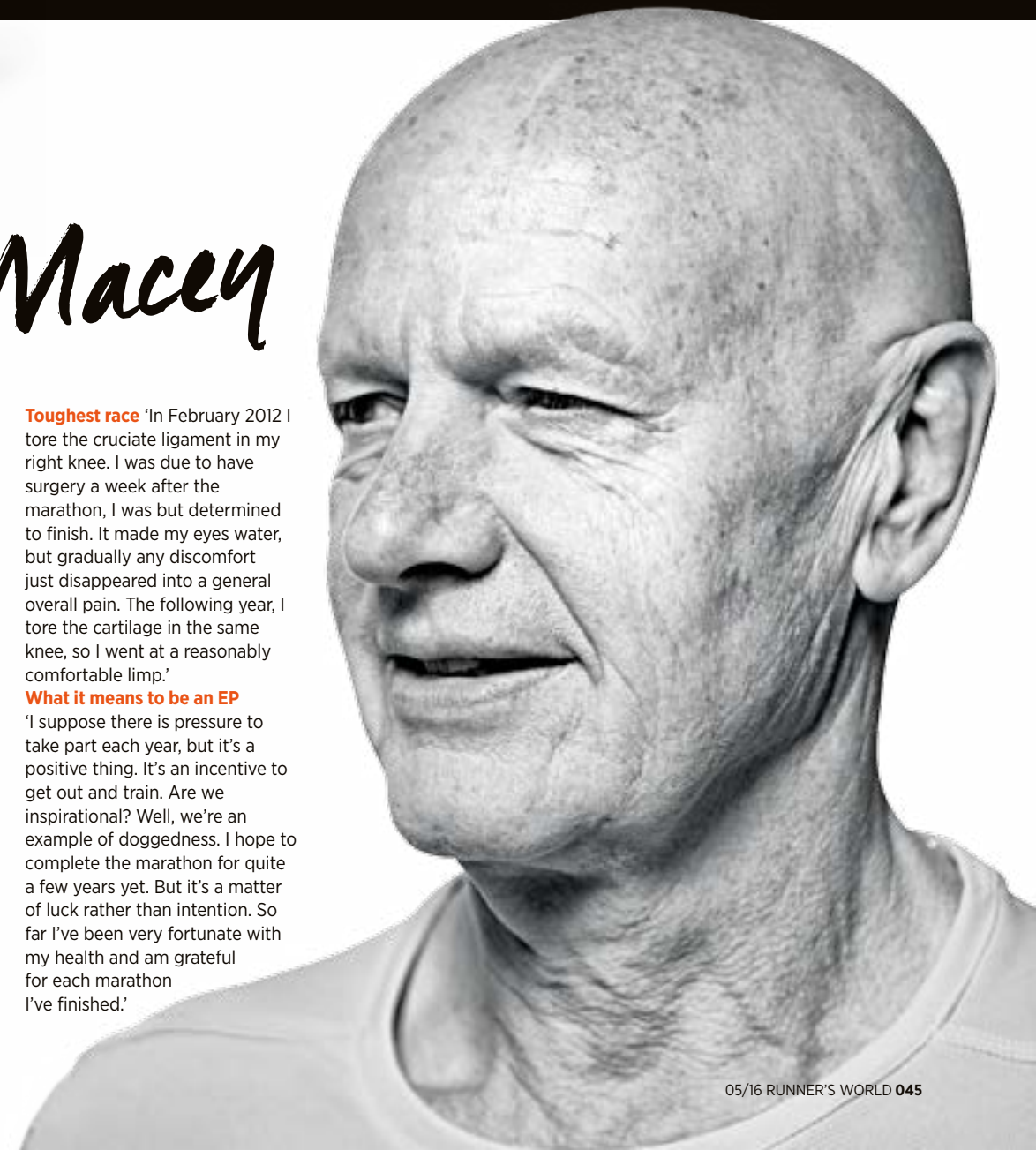
Started running 'I've run for as long as I can remember. At school, I wasn't particularly fast, but I was enthusiastic. It's much the same now. I entered the first London Marathon, aged 31, as the start line was 400 metres up the road.'

Highlights 'The 2009 race, when my daughter, Rebecca, ran alongside me. It was amazing to think she wasn't even born when I started taking part. She's 34 now and she, her boyfriend, James, and my son, Rick, all run with me now.'

One moment remains with me. We had reached a water station packed with supporters and I was surrounded by runners all racing for charity or in memory of a loved one. It struck me that everyone was thinking of others. The crowd was supporting the runners, while the runners were raising funds for others. Not one person was thinking of themselves.'

Toughest race 'In February 2012 I tore the cruciate ligament in my right knee. I was due to have surgery a week after the marathon, I was but determined to finish. It made my eyes water, but gradually any discomfort just disappeared into a general overall pain. The following year, I tore the cartilage in the same knee, so I went at a reasonably comfortable limp.'

What it means to be an EP 'I suppose there is pressure to take part each year, but it's a positive thing. It's an incentive to get out and train. Are we inspirational? Well, we're an example of doggedness. I hope to complete the marathon for quite a few years yet. But it's a matter of luck rather than intention. So far I've been very fortunate with my health and am grateful for each marathon I've finished.'



Ken Jones



82, former civil servant, Northern Ireland

Started running 'After leaving the army in 1954, a group of guys started running and asked me to join them. I enjoyed it and never stopped.'

Highlights 'The first. I'd only ever

run small marathons, some with just 60 runners. This was the first big one, but it's grown so much since then. It was also an honour to carry the Olympic torch because of my athletics work while living in London. My daughter, Heather, said it was the best day of her life.'

Toughest race 'The 2014 race was very tough. My chest just wasn't letting me run. Three years ago, at mile 24, I fell and landed heavily on my face. They put me in an ambulance, but I got out and kept running. Other runners helped me to the finish. I ended

up with a black eye and bruises all over my face.'

What it means to be an EP 'It's been an honour, a privilege and more. Last year I was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation – an irregular beating of the heart. My consultant ruled out the marathon, saying it would seriously damage my health, and I was heartbroken. But two weeks before the race they discovered it had been a mistake. I rebooked my flight and ran-walked the marathon. It was my worst time ever, but I got my medal and I am going to get this year's, too.'



Dr Malcolm Speake

74, retired GP, Suffolk

Started running 'I was a podgy boy who was no good at ball games but I could run cross-country reasonably well. I got better and represented the county, but I gave up at university. I started running again in 1978.'

Highlight 'London Marathon, 1991. Everything went well on the day. It was three minutes off my best time, but I loved that race.'

Toughest race 'Too many to choose from. I have had no end of struggles. I've run with cracked bones in my foot, terrible

toothache – the antibiotics caused diarrhoea – and norovirus [which causes vomiting – and diarrhoea]. I could go on forever.'

What it means to be an EP 'It's difficult to express and a very mixed feeling. You feel you'd like to be released from the pressure and not feel you have got to do it. But if you don't do it, you'll be watching, wishing you were. In the last 12 or 13 years I've run five times when I really shouldn't have. But the year I can't run will be devastating.'

Jeff Aston



68, retired IT consultant, Cardiff

Started running 'I'd dreamed of doing a marathon since watching the 1960 Olympics, but only played soccer and squash until 1980, when the local squash courts were flooded by the River Taff. So I started running.'

Highlight 'The 1983 race was one of those days when everything went right. The weather was perfect and, for a while, I ran with the elite women, before they slipped away. I got a PB: 2:29:34.'

Toughest race 'Before the 2000 race I did two 20-mile races within a week. From then on I started getting back spasms whenever I ran more than a couple of miles. But I could walk without pain. I finished in 5:38; it was a long day.'

What it means to be an EP 'It's important for me to do as well as I can – not just for myself, but for the rest of them. You feel a funny sort of responsibility for the rest of the group.'

David Walker

70, part-time training adviser, Buckinghamshire

Started running 'I'd always been a frustrated sportsman – I didn't make the school football or cricket teams. In my late 20s I was overweight and unfit, so I started running. I realised I'd found something I enjoyed and could do. I've done more than 40 marathons, and an 80-mile ultra.'

Highlight 'Running the marathon with my three children – Hannah, 34, John, 38, and Jamie, 40. It was brilliant. There can't be many dads who can say they've run a marathon with all of their children.'

Toughest race 'I strained my back just before the 2012 marathon. I had intensive physiotherapy and felt great for the first half mile, then it went. I knew I wasn't going to do any real damage, so I walked the rest of the way, but it was very painful. Last year was also very tough – I dropped off the pace at six miles and still don't know why. I've been diagnosed with anaemia, but I'm still planning to run.'

What it means to be an EP 'It's part of what I do. We all have our aches and pains, but some EPs have been heroic in just getting to the start line. We don't have to prove anything any more. It's sad when someone drops out – there have been lots of emotional moments over the years. We're all within clutching distance of 40 [London] marathons now, which is my goal. But I'd like to reach 50...' RW

Follow the EPs

To find out more about the EPs, including a full history of the group, check out their website, everepresent.org.uk

