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THE SUNDAY TIMES

See how she runs

For most women, a quick jog is enough. Yet the iron ladies cover hundreds of miles in gruelling endurance events – leaving the men trailing behind

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At her peak: Dr Lizzy Hawker in the mountains around Klosters (Andrew Testa)

High in the mountains at Klosters, the chocolate-box ski resort in the Swiss Alps, the British athlete Dr Lizzy Hawker is running in a particular square-shouldered way she has developed, sure-footed and sinewy as a mountain goat. It's two days before the start of the

ski season and the snow has yet to fall. The slopes are empty, the restaurants and bars closed, and the cable cars dormant. Lizzy, who grew up in Upminster, east London, but lives here now, is taking advantage of the peace; it's just four days until her next big race, in San Francisco.

At 35, Lizzy has one of the most impressive CVs in British sport and is a better endurance athlete than most of her male counterparts. She set a world record when she ran the 198 miles (320 kilometres) from Everest base camp to Kathmandu in Nepal in under three days, despite being forced to shelter

from torrential rain for eight hours and suffering from a chest infection. In September she ran 153 miles around a mountain near Llandudno, North Wales, in 24 hours, finishing two miles ahead of the man who came second. In fact, she's so fit, and runs so far, that she's priced herself out of the 2012 Olympics, where the furthest distance is a mere marathon. "I wouldn't be fast enough over that short a distance," she says, with no hint of irony.

"She's amazing, just incredible," says her friend and fellow world record-holder, the four-time world champion Iron Man triathlete Chrissie Wellington, 34. "Lizzy beating everyone in that race, including all the men, was a phenomenal achievement and sends a message to other women about just what's possible when you push yourself."

Hawker and Wellington are blazing the trail for a growing number of women who are dedicating their lives to endurance training, spending thousands on kit, giving up their social lives, honing their diets, even forgoing their chance to have children in the process.

Amanda Owens, a leading sports psychologist, says: "I've noticed more women taking part in sports that require extreme fitness. We're lucky to have amazing role models like Chrissie Wellington who has done so much to prove that women can be super-fit, even fitter than men. But I also think there's been a social change, a general shift in attitudes to what women are good at, and it's brilliant that they can beat men at their own game." Women make particularly good endurance athletes, says Owens.

Some studies show that oestrogen, the female hormone, may protect muscles from exercise-induced damage. "There's a lot of research to suggest that women have a higher pain tolerance, and that toughness, that ability to endure, helps them achieve great things. So much of being a great athlete is about mental strength, pushing yourself to the limit."

In the flesh, Hawker doesn't look so tough; she is tiny, birdlike and softly spoken. We meet at the virtually deserted Sport-Lodge hotel in Klosters. She wears a purple cotton T-shirt, jeans and trainers. There's not a scrap of fat on her wiry, 5ft 3in frame, which makes her sunburnt hands look almost too large for her body. Her pretty, youthful features are completely free of make-up, but the elements have weathered her a bit. "Spending time on taking care of myself is not something I do," she says. "Sunblock, when I remember."

She is astonishingly self-deprecating, insisting that she doesn't do anything that amazing, she's just "a bit crazy, a bit obsessive!"

I try and challenge myself to be the best I can be, and that's been the case with everything in my life; I've worked hard at everything".

Being the best you can be is a phrase that comes up time and time again with Iron Women. Melissa Brand is a 32-year-old surveyor from north London who trains four hours a day, two hours before and after work, and cycles to and from the office.



Roz McGinty has a life-threatening condition but is in training for her fifth Iron Man (Andrew Testa)

Brand only rests one day a week, “and even then I sit and think, I really want to be training”. She has done three Iron Man triathlons (swim 2.4 miles, cycle 112 miles, then run a full marathon, 26.2 miles) in the past two years and five half-Iron Mans, and

says she’s lost count of how many smaller triathlons. “I don’t do things half-heartedly. That’s not me.”

She watches her diet, of course, cutting out cakes and fatty “rubbish like that”, and doesn’t drink. She admits that she doesn’t have the wildest social life. “All I’m good for when I get home is packing my bag for the gym next day and getting some sleep.”

Brand is single; it’s difficult, she concedes, to make time for boyfriends when you’re training so hard. “My last boyfriend did triathlon as well. We started training for the same race. He told me, ‘I’ll dump you if you beat me,’ and I did, so we had to change it to, ‘if you beat me by more than a minute.’” The relationship ended two years ago — not just, she insists, because Brand was a better triathlete.

For Wellington, the discipline that goes with triathlon helped her overcome her battle with eating disorders. “Like so many women I’ve struggled with my body image,” she says. “My sport is as much about strength of mind as body. I’ve always been quite obsessive and compulsive and controlling, and I’ve channelled that into various things: university, my career, and now triathlon. Endurance sports are incredibly empowering in that way.”

Iris Groenewald is a trainer with the UK gym franchise Fitness First. “Most of the time, if people are sensible and committed, only positives can come from intensive training.

It can spill into every aspect of your life: you’re more focused at work, less stressed at home,” she says. But it can go too far. “Not eating enough when you’re doing endurance training can lead to too little body fat, which for men is not so problematic, but in women it can cause them to stop menstruating.”

Amenorrhoea, the technical term for when periods stop, can happen when fat levels dip below 16% and the body stops producing oestrogen.

“Weight loss is a huge issue for me,” says Wellington. “I have a tendency, not deliberately any more, to

lose weight. It's important to be disciplined with nutrition and hydration, to do what you can to ensure the body can withstand the stress, otherwise, yeah, you do stop menstruating."

Brand has thought about the possibility of slowing down training to have a family in future. "I spoke to my coach about it and he said, 'Look, you're a woman in your thirties. It's only wise to look ahead and know you'll have to ease off at some point if you want to have children. It doesn't bother me, no. I suppose I'll cross that bridge when it comes.'"

The British Triathlon Federation has more than doubled its membership in the past five years, from 6,748 to 14,896. The number of female members has grown steadily, rising to 41% by 2010.



Roz McGinty, 40, is a nurse from

Melissa Brand has done three Iron Mans and trains all but one day a week (Andrew Testa)

Hertfordshire, who works in Harley Street, London. She's training for her fourth Iron Man, next July. Her husband of 10 years, Martin, is a radiographer. What does he think of her training, running or cycling round Regents Park for 2½ hours every day? "I'd love to do even more," she sighs, grinning. "I'd go twice a day if I could but he's my husband and he takes priority. I want to make sure I spend enough time with him. Luckily, he's mad on golf."

The couple do not have children, "which leaves plenty of time for training and enjoying each other's company". McGinty is so dedicated she continues to compete despite a potentially life-threatening condition called EIA, or exercise-induced anaphylaxis.

She is literally allergic to exercise. EIA causes extreme hives, swelling of the mouth and lips and shortness of breath. She was diagnosed last year. "It's not every time. It happens rarely and I carry an EpiPen [adrenaline injection to counter severe allergic reaction] with me in case it comes on. It can be terrifying, but it's not enough to put me off."

What drives her to continue? "I'm sensible and always train with people. And I've promised my husband that if it happens again, I'll stop immediately. I just get a lot of satisfaction out of testing myself."

Having a family and being an Iron Woman don't have to be mutually exclusive, says Lizzie Hutson, 31, from Dorset, who is a physical training instructor for the army.

She completed Iron Man Hawaii this year — known as the most important Iron Man, with the best athletes from around the world — in 10 hours 34 minutes, which placed her 21st in her age group.

She has a son and a daughter, aged eight and six, and the whole family is sporty.

“The children go to trampolining, gym club. We're always ferrying them somewhere. By the end of the week we're all shattered.”

But she won't give up. “I'd have to have therapy if I stopped now. I'm hooked. I'd be lost just mooching around.”

She doesn't drink. “When you're doing Iron Man, you can't afford to miss a day's training because you want to get pissed. I'll have a blow-out once a year, and people know about it then because I'll be wild, dancing on tables. But in general I prefer a cup of tea and a biscuit.”

Her husband, who is also in the army, is in training too, “but he's not hooked like I am”, and they split time with the kids between them while the other is out training. “We've just got a dalmatian puppy, to add to the chaos. When he's older I'll take him out with me running or on the bike, turn him into an Iron Dog.”

Back up the mountain at Klosters, Lizzy Hawker is shyly, patiently, having her picture taken, restless to set off on her solitary run. I'm reminded of something she said earlier. “Yes, I'd love to settle down and have a family one day. It's not that I don't meet people, I meet lots of people doing what I do. It's just none of them have been the right one.” She doesn't blame the time she spends alone, running in the hills. “I could work in an office for as many hours a week and not meet someone.”

Then it's over and she gives a lovely warm smile and she's off, in her stout, square gait that saves her energy and keeps her steady on steep, rocky ground, running off into the hills.



Does Amy Turner have what it takes to become an Iron Woman?

Week 1 I meet Iris from Fitness First at the gym. I tell her I hate gyms. She doesn't laugh. Instead, she

On your marks: Amy Turner followed a fitness regime for a month (Andrew Testa)

says I must
cut out all

fatty foods, booze, and train every day. If I really want to build up to a triathlon — she raises a dubious eyebrow — I should train for three hours a day and get 10 hours' sleep a night. "But let's raise your basic fitness level first." For an entire week I'm an angel: no fatty food, no alcohol, early nights, and swim or gym every morning. I have two hour-long sessions with Iris, during which

I learn the value of personal trainers. She may cost £50 an hour, but she is brilliant — not too preachy or cheerleader-ish. She forces me to push myself, without judging when I turn the colour of beetroot.

Week 2 I'm feeling fitter, and I've lost fat and gained muscle. But, oh dear, on Friday a friend comes to town for a gig. We get drunk, then go dancing, crawling home the next morning. Training is off, my hangover lasts days and scuppers my diet.

Week 3 I go abroad for an interview. I'm away for three days, including travelling. I manage one gym session and a training session with Iris. Work's busy and there's less time to work out.

Week 4 At 6.30 Monday morning I wake up feeling guilty that I haven't trained all weekend. Iris texts: See you tomorrow at 8.00? We do two sessions, I feel good, but there's not much improvement in my fitness, because I've not been sticking to the regime and, I confess to Iris, I've been having a drink. No good if I really want to be a triathlete, she says; "Alcohol takes away nutrients. Your body can't perform to that level if you don't give it the right fuel."

I want to be fitter, really I do, and I'm getting there. But for me, life would get in the way of being a real Iron Woman.