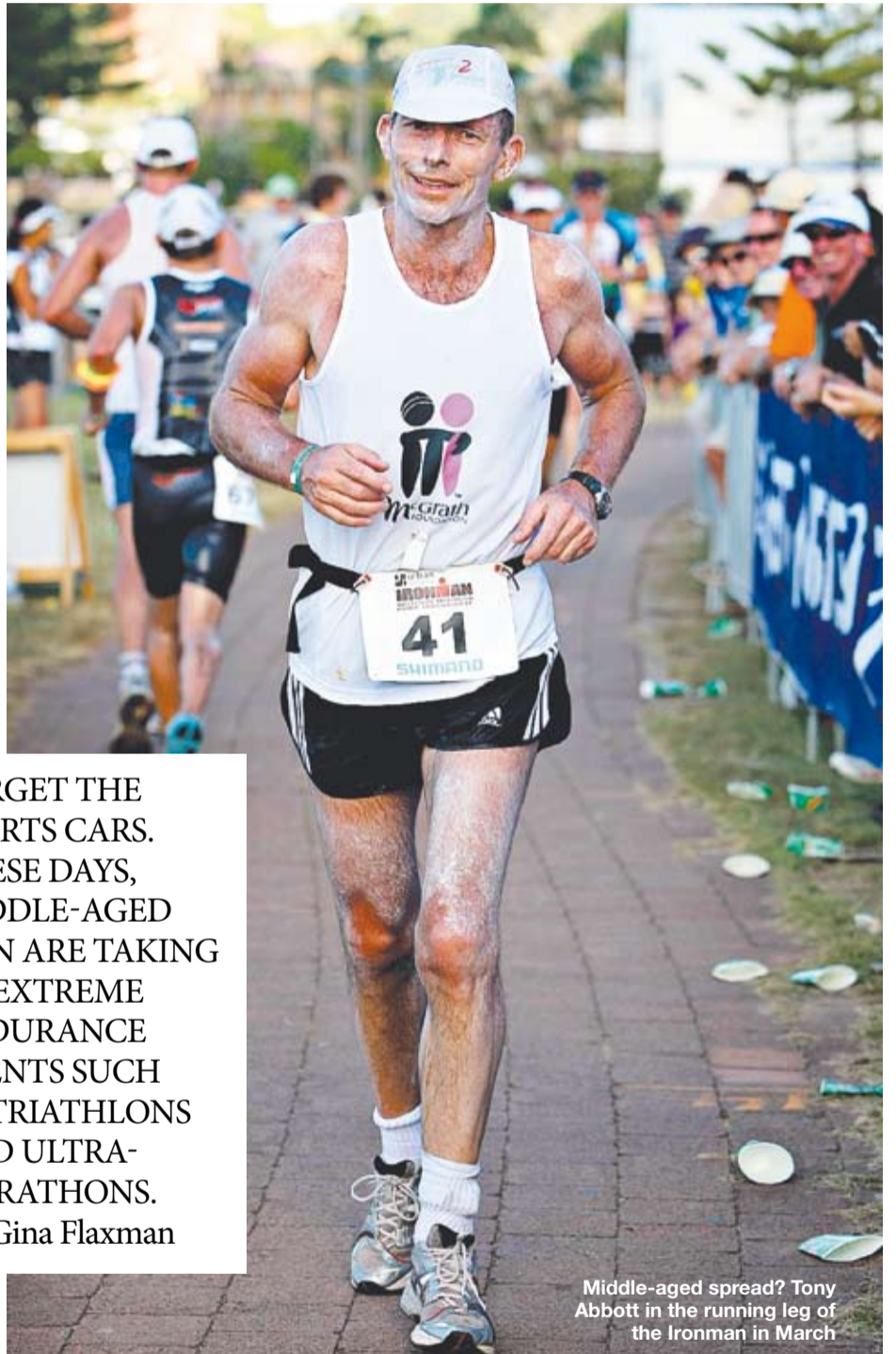


Why men are running for their lives



FORGET THE SPORTS CARS. THESE DAYS, MIDDLE-AGED MEN ARE TAKING UP EXTREME ENDURANCE EVENTS SUCH AS TRIATHLONS AND ULTRA-MARATHONS. BY Gina Flaxman

Middle-aged spread? Tony Abbott in the running leg of the Ironman in March

When Tony Abbott completed the Ironman and the Pollie Pedal, a nine-day cycle from Melbourne to Sydney, in March, the 52-year-old Opposition leader was part of a growing trend.

Across the country, middle-aged men are lacing up their trainers or donning Lycra and competing in triathlons and ultra-marathons.

Of the 1376 to complete Ironman Australia 2010, 959 were men aged between 30 and 54. Trent Taylor, Ironman marketing and communications manager, says men over 30 make up 75 per cent of the event's participants and are its "biggest growth market".

Ian Cornelius, president of the Australian Ultra Runners Association, says that of the association's 360 members, 234 are over 40.

An ultra-marathon is any distance over 42 kilometres. It encompasses events such as 24-hour

trials, where participants try to run as many laps of a course as possible in 24 hours, and adventure races such as the North Face 100 in the Blue Mountains, where participants run 100 kilometres through the day and night, in mountainous terrain. Only in its third year, this year's race, on May 15, is sold out.

"The popularity of these events has been growing for the last three or four years," Cornelius says. He says that while marathons are a young man's game, ultra-marathons are more popular with older men.

So what makes a middle-aged man want to compete in an ultra-marathon or the Ironman, a 3.8-kilometre swim, 180-kilometre cycle and 42.2-kilometre run?

"The average Aussie bloke harbours a dream to excel on the sports field," says Taylor, 33, who has completed five Ironman races. "But as you get older, work and family get in the way. They are looking for a challenge. Some see [triathlon] as a midlife-crisis sport."



Finishing the Ironman was a life-changing experience. After putting yourself through that, everything else is achievable

Mark Roberts, 42, agrees. About four years ago his friend committed suicide and he had a “life change”. After leading an “unhealthy builder’s life” of takeaways and little exercise, he now does two mountain bike races, the Half Ironman and two Olympic-distance triathlons a year and is studying exercise science.

Jeremy Wilshire, Triathlon Australia marketing and communications manager, adds: “Triathlons are often a release for those who juggle a family and a stressful job.”

Roberts agrees: “You think, ‘How the hell can I do this?’ But then you find yourself flowing through it.”

Jonathan Blake, currently Australia’s top male 24-hour athlete, says ultra running is a stress release from his job as a chartered accountant. “But really, it’s the sense of satisfaction of completing something that would be out of the question for most people,” says the 44-year-old winner of 2009’s 242-kilometre Coast to Kosciuszko.

He says ultra-marathons are more about pacing yourself than marathons, which is why they may appeal to older men. “The younger generation want instant gratification,” he says. “In ultras, nothing is instant.”

Wilshire adds that older men tend to have more disposable income. When you add up equipment and entrance fees, Taylor says you can spend \$10,000 on your first Ironman. And with equipment, fuel and

accommodation for you and your support crew, ultra running can be expensive too.

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

The sports can also be hard on the body. Blake had to take three months off due to a fractured pelvis. “It takes days to recover from a race, but it doesn’t matter,” he says.

When he’s training for a race, Blake will run more than 200 kilometres a week. Trent says that for the Ironman, most people dedicate 25 to 30 hours a week to training. “It consumes your life,” he says.

Dr Peter Nathan, Sports Medicine Australia spokesperson, says: “There is some concern that these extreme endurance events may push the body too hard, but further research is needed.”

He says because older men are less prone to risk taking, they are actually not at greater risk of injury or cycling accidents than younger men.

All the men say the rewards of their sports outweigh the risks. “The camaraderie is extraordinary,” says Blake. Ultra-marathons are usually smaller, less commercial events, which adds to their appeal.

Taylor says: “Finishing the Ironman for the first time was a life-changing experience. After putting yourself through that, everything else is achievable.”

■ THE ULTRA RUNNER

“EVERY TIME I CROSS THE FINISH LINE I’M IN TEARS”

In 2000, Stuart Cole, a financial advisor from Bathurst, NSW, was “in a bit of a rut” and a friend suggested running a marathon. He had played a bit of golf and baseball, but he says: “Once I’d done one marathon, I became addicted.”

Now 43, Cole says he had already had a midlife crisis at the age of 36. “I bought the fast car and it didn’t make me happy,” he says. “It was very materialistic.”

Cole did his first ultra-marathon in 2006 and has since completed the North Face 100 twice and plans to run it again this year, as well as the Coast to Kosciuszko.

“We’re so regulated in everything, [ultra running] is a bit out of the norm. It’s extreme and it’s all about you, so it’s a bit of a release. Everything else just falls away,” he says.

Cole, who describes himself as a “back-of-the-pack runner”, runs three times a week, does two weights sessions and one spin class. “The boys call me a bit lazy. But I’ve found my body works better with three runs a week – any more and I get injuries.”

He acknowledges injury is a risk, but believes he is training sensibly.

“My father-in-law keeps telling me I’m going to need knee surgery one day, but I say, ‘So be it, at least I’m out there doing it.’ Injury is a factor, but [in races such as the North Face 100] it adds to the excitement. Running at night, in the bush, on your own – it’s a buzz.”

Cole says the “internal meltdown” after a 24-hour race is extreme. He says his muscles recover quickly but it takes about a month for the fatigue to vanish completely.



Stuart Cole completing the Six Foot Track Marathon

Cole says his wife is supportive of his interest, though managing his running around his work and four kids can be “a bit awkward at times. You can work around it; it’s just a matter of what you’re willing to do.”

This year, for the first time, his wife will be bringing his children to watch him compete in the North Face 100. “I want to show them they can do anything,” he says.

“In ultra running, your mind is the biggest part of it. That’s the exciting thing about it. Every time I cross the finish line I’m in tears. It’s such an emotional high.”