



# For mid-lifers, endurance sports are the new sports car

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Andy van Bergen, founder of Everesting, a challenge in which participants choose a hill anywhere in the world and repeatedly walk or cycle up that hill until climbing a total of 8,848 metres.

TAMARA VAN BERGEN/SUPPLIED

It's early morning on an overcast day in June and I'm about to jump off a steamship into Lake Muskoka in Gravenhurst, Ont. The plan is to swim 1,500 metres to shore before cycling 40 kilometres along Highway 169, followed by a 10-km run along hilly country roads. I'm feeling hot and constricted in my purple swim cap and neoprene wetsuit, yet my teeth are chattering, my body shivering with fear and excitement. 'What have I gotten myself into,' I wonder as I plug my nose and take the plunge.

The 16-degree water spikes my heart rate, but I'm distracted by the fog on my goggles. I can't see even a foot in front of me and am frantically trying to wipe them clean while treading choppy water and remembering to breathe. Finally, I hear the blasts of the steamship whistle – my cue to set off to shore – and so begins my first-ever Olympic triathlon.

Friends are shocked that I've embarked on this challenge just days before my

50th birthday. Co-ordination has never been my strength (I once went cycling on a girls' trip in Arizona and fell sideways into cacti). Despite my klutziness, I wanted to mark my 50th with something more meaningful than a vacation or party. I wasn't sure what that was until friends from the gym began talking about triathlons.

“Do it because you can,” said my brother-in-law Daniel, a triathlete who recently completed his first half-Ironman. The sentiment stuck with me. Last fall, I felt hopeless watching the news each night, including the start of a devastating war in the Middle East. I figured training for a triathlon would provide some semblance of control when everything around me seemed to be spiralling. For me, the idea of doing something difficult “because you can” also meant celebrating good health and freedom – two things I'm especially grateful for as I enter a new decade.

Once upon a time, a midlife crisis meant having an affair or splurging on a convertible; these days, endurance sports are the new sports cars. Many people between the ages of 45 and 64 view this stage as an opportunity rather than a crisis. They're signing up for intense races such as triathlons and Ironman, undergoing gruelling workouts and running marathons as a way not only to cope with getting older but also to celebrate the transition. In some instances, they finally have time to devote to training now that their kids have grown (a triathlon requires at least eight hours a week of training and up to 16 hours for Ironman). Or they've reached the stage in their career where they have the financial means to purchase high-end gear or to pay for coaching or nutrition support.

“The demographic that seems to be the strongest for us, in terms of participation numbers, is 45-plus,” says Jason Vurma, president of MultiSport Canada, which plays host to more than 9,000 competitors each year in triathlons, duathlons and other races. “To even get to the start line of a sprint-distance triathlon [750-m swim, 20-km bike, five-km run], you have to swim once or twice a week, cycle up to three times a week, and so on. ...

That’s a tall order if you’re just getting established in your career or starting a family.”

Amy De Domenico, 55, knows all about putting family first. As a mom and stepmom to seven children, she worked as a law clerk but eventually quit her job to manage the house and kids while her husband was on tour as a musician. At the time, she kept active with group fitness classes, such as strength training, at a GoodLife Fitness near her home in Etobicoke, Ont. In 2017, with her youngest approaching double digits, De Domenico signed up for her first sprint triathlon, at the age of 48. “I saw that age as freedom,” she recalls. “The kids were old enough where if I wanted to go on a bike ride, I didn’t need a babysitter. I thought, ‘What am I going to do now?’ ”

Pretty soon, De Domenico was hooked on racing. She competed in four sprint triathlons throughout Ontario that season, landing fourth place in her age group in Wasaga Beach. “I was so excited at that point. It’s very satisfying when you find something you’re good at. ... It makes you want to do whatever you can to improve.” The following year, she hired a coach and trained for her first Olympic-distance triathlon, in which she qualified for the 2019 World Triathlon Championship Series in Lausanne, Switzerland.

That same year, De Domenico completed her first half-Ironman (1900-m swim, 90-km bike, 21-km run) and partnered with a friend, Trish Omeri, to compete in *The Amazing Race Canada* (Season 7). One challenge in the series



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involved diving under three feet of ice in Great Slave Lake, in the Northwest Territories; she credits her triathlons for giving her an edge, as she knows what it's like to put on a wetsuit and plunge into frigid water. De Domenico has since completed a series of gruelling races, including a full Ironman just weeks before turning 54 and Escape from Alcatraz Triathlon, which includes a 2.4-km swim in shark-infested waters from Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay. This fall, she'll compete in the World Triathlon Championship Finals in Torremolinos-Andalucia, Spain.

“I wasn't always adventurous. I spent so much time in a van, driving the kids to hockey, soccer, gymnastics. One child is deaf, another has autism, and so we'd take them to therapy and doctors' appointments. Everything surrounded the kids,” De Domenico says. “Now I have time to try things for myself. I've discovered this side of myself that I didn't realize was there. ... I don't feel my age at all.”

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To mark his 50th birthday, Toronto-based entrepreneur Michael Back registered for Everestesting – a challenge in which participants choose a hill anywhere in the world and repeatedly walk or cycle up that hill until climbing a total of 8,848 metres (the equivalent height of Mount Everest). He completed that feat on Sept. 22, 2023 (the day he turned 50), by ascending B.C.'s Mount Whistler eight times by foot, with his wife and three teenage sons there to cheer him on. It took him 31 hours to finish the challenging endeavour.

“I experienced an incredible, unforgettable high that lasted for days. You are giving every ounce of energy you have – I’d never had that feeling before,” recalls Back. As for why he took on the challenge, Back says he began noticing people his age having setbacks with a sore back or bad knees. “I wanted to prove to myself that I still had it ... the fitness, the strength, the endurance. I took it to the next level in time for my 50th and I’m not slowing down.”

This year’s challenge came in the form of an Olympic triathlon, for which Back had to learn two new sports (swimming and cycling). He’s still deciding what’s next – a half-Ironman is top of mind – but Back is confident that whatever he chooses will continue make him stronger in more ways than one: “As a business owner and parent, these types of challenges make you better at both.”

Back represents the growing trend of middle-aged endurance-sport athletes. “Our age group has shifted to an older demographic since we started [in 2014],” says Andy van Bergen, Everestesting’s founder. “The feedback we’re receiving is that everything up until this point has been about getting their career or family up and running. This is the first time in a long time – maybe since their 20s – where they can say, ‘Now I’m able to do something that’s really for me.’ ”

Van Bergen, 45, adds that tenacity and determination are key in getting him

through his own athletic endeavours – traits that are stronger in the midlife set: “They have more life experience, more things to pull them through. The amount of photos I see of people completing Everesting with their kids at the base, holding up signs, is just amazing.”

As for my own triathlon experience, I was surprised by how moved I was having my two boys and husband cheering me on. Seeing them clapping and shouting my name fuelled me more than the energy chews tucked away in my pocket. I could never have attempted this challenge in my 20s, while working long hours in magazines, or even in my 30s or 40s, when I spent the bulk of my time shuttling the kids around and caring for them.

After years of putting myself last, I finally felt the joy and satisfaction that comes with setting out a goal and accomplishing it through hard work and perseverance. It had been a long time since I felt that way. I’m now counting down the months until next June, when I can once again test my limits with another triathlon – this time with slightly less fear (I hope) and the wisdom that comes with age.

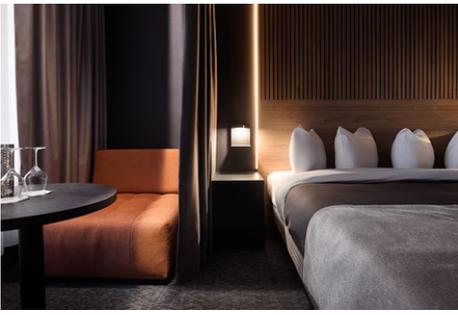
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