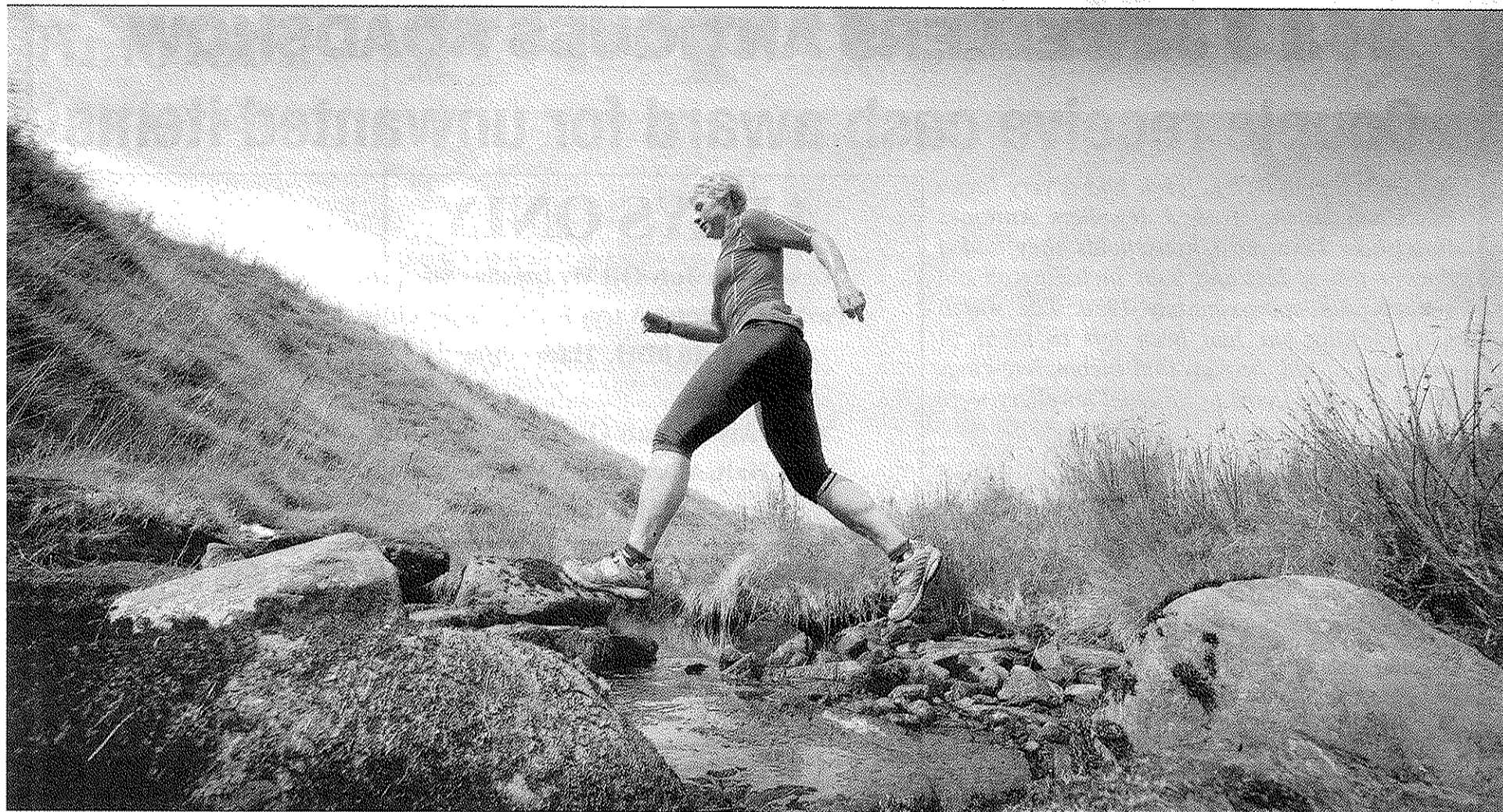


The Mondaypage

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Think a marathon's a long way? Think again, says **Jenny Laue**, after meeting two of the region's fell runners



Over hill and dale...and hill and dale... and

WHY anyone would want to put themselves through a gruelling 95-mile run – nearly four times the distance of a normal marathon – up and down a mountain, over rugged terrain and more often than not in inclement weather is anyone's guess.

The men and women who line up at the start of ultra-marathons must be incredibly hardy and super fit. Fell running is obviously a step too far for anyone remotely normal, even those who work out in the gym three times a week.

Not so, says Helen Witham, from Cotherstone, near Barnard Castle, who's been a passionate fell runner for more than ten years and who ran the 95-mile West Highland Way Race not long ago.

"I started running after I had my daughter, who's 27 now," says Helen, who belongs to the Durham Fell Runners, based at Hamsterley Forest. "It was a way to get the baby weight off and get active. It was probably ten years ago that I really got into fell running. I just found myself turning off the road more and more."

"But I don't think I'm ultra-fit. I have a lot of endurance. On some of

the ultras I have to work hard to keep going," she says. "But I absolutely love it. Because I love the countryside and I can't think of anywhere nicer to train than in and around Cotherstone or Hamsterley. Sometimes we train at How Gill, in the Dales or on the North York Moors. What's best is that because I'm stuck in an office all day, I get to enjoy nature."

Helen reckons that and the increasing popularity of running as a beneficial weight-bearing exercise is the reason why more women are taking up the once-male dominated sport. Where once she was one of only a few, women now make up nearly a third of the Durham Fell Runners' membership.

That's a view Andrew Minister, a fell runner from Hartlepool and fellow club member, shares. Although his main club is the Hartlepool Burn Road Harriers, he tries to get out to places like the Lake District, the North York Moors or Roseberry Topping to train as much as he can. The 33-year-old social worker started running as a youngster and for him, taking his training from the road into the hills was a natural progression.

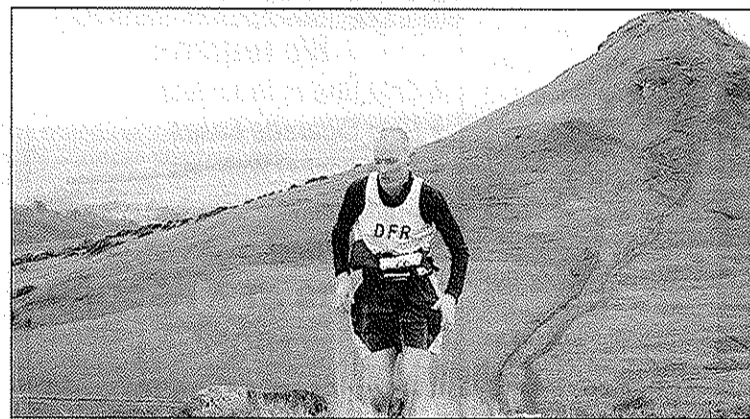
Andrew thinks that for the same reason as people clamour to take part

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in events like the London Marathon or the Great North Run, fell running presents a real challenge to them, not so much against other runners but against themselves. It's a test of their willpower.

"It's about pushing yourself. It's very rewarding when you've kept going although halfway through a race you think, what am I doing here? When it's a really hard race but you manage to finish it, you're totally buzzing," he says.

But isn't running for hours over fell and dale, sometimes in the dark, sometimes in atrocious weather, rather dangerous? Races have had to be abandoned due to treacherous



MILE AFTER MILE: Andrew Minister racing near Guisborough
Picture: KEN MAYNARD

conditions in the past – most recently the Welsh 1000m Peaks Race in Snowdonia in North Wales in June, when participants had to be airlifted off the mountain.

"I don't think fell running is a particularly dangerous sport," says Helen. "Yes, there is always the possibility that you can turn over on your ankle and a risk of the odd blister, but otherwise it's pretty safe. And I also don't run by myself, in case

something should happen. I have a training partner, a girl I train with. We run races together because you're not allowed to run them alone anyway as sometimes you have to navigate from point to point in uncharted terrain," she says.

Andrew believes the media is partly to blame for blowing the dangers of fell races out of proportion. He says the Fell Running Association has years of experience organising

Features



TAKING A BREATH: Fell runner Helen Witham in Teesdale

Picture: MIKE GIBB

...races and all runners are well aware of the risks involved. No one who cannot prove their experience and capability in navigating or who shows up to a race without the correct survival gear is allowed to take part. Both Helen and Andrew always carry a backpack with provisions on every race, even if it is over a short distance.

Fell races are highly organised events: with the unpredictability of the British weather, they have to be. Not only do runners set off in pairs, but they are also equipped with navigating instruments such as maps and a compass, as well as first aid kits, torches, whistles, extra warm clothing and emergency food, in case weather conditions dramatically.

OTHER safety guards include manned checkpoints which have to be passed by the runners within a certain time, otherwise they are not allowed to carry on. Most runners also have back-up, in Helen's case her daughter, who provides food and encouragement.

"I'm really lucky I have such a supportive daughter," she says. "She thinks I'm totally mad, but she drives and makes sure I get food, change of clothes and shoes."

Last, but not least, both Helen and Andrew say the comradeship that exists among the members of a club as well as the wider community of runners is something that keeps them in their running shoes too.

"We're a tight-knit little community, which is wonderful," says Helen. "There is a bit of competitiveness, but it's as much against myself as others. The sense of achievement that comes with it is a great high."

Fell running: how to get started

Durham Fell Runners was founded in 2004 and now has 62 members, the oldest 75, the youngest 17. The club trains every Thursday evening at 7pm at the visitor centre at Hamsterley Forest. Find out more about fell running and the club on durhamfellrunners.org.uk.

Races being run in our area in July are: Beacon Hill, Rothbury, Northumberland, July 9; Pinchinthorpe Plot, Guisborough, July 21; Summer Handicap Series 4, Hamsterley Forest, July 23 and James Herriott Run, Bolton Castle, North Yorkshire, July 26.

Other athletic and fell running clubs in our area: Northumberland Fell Runners, northumberlandfellrunners.co.uk; Crook Athletic Club, crookathletic-club.org.uk; North York Moors Athletic Club, nym.ac; Cumberland Fell Runners, c-f-r.org.uk; Quakers Running Club, quakersrunningclub.org.uk; Hartlepool Burn Road Harriers, hartlepoolburnroad.co.uk and Teesdale Athletic Club, eastbriscoe.co.uk/tac. For more information, log on to fellrunner.org.uk

Janis Green calls herself 'a Geordie from Africa' because of her globe-trotting life, she tells **Steve Pratt**. Now she has plans to expand her computer software business, which helps schools make the most of their money

FIVE minutes into the interview and we're on the move from a corner of the busy Newcastle office of software company Pebbles to a quieter meeting room on the floor below. This is, perhaps, only to be expected from a woman who's moved 27 times in 30 years across four continents.

Along the way Janis Green has married, had a family and been one of the few women working in computers in the early days of new technology.

Now she's changing her name, or rather the name of her company SF Software to the snappier Pebbles. "We've been known by our product more than anything else and the name SF Software is as tedious and boring as you can get," she says.

The SF stands for School Fund in a business that blends her experience of teaching, finance and computers. The company designs software to help schools manage the school fund, voluntary fund or private fund, as it's known in different parts of the country. It's the money schools receive from the parents via students to pay for all the extras.

Back in this country after years of living abroad, the former Blyden Grammar School girl was working for a group in Bedfordshire when she decided to apply her computer experience to school funds.

"That was the eureka moment when I thought 'I can do this better'," she says. "I know accounts and have knowledge of IT which at the time was a fairly unusual position to be in. I could put together all my skills," she says.

Pebbles now supplies the software to 3,000 schools, helping to manage huge amounts of cash in schools from Cornwall to Scotland. Successful enough, you might think, but she points out there are another 22,000 schools to go.

"I've taken a fairly small, but viable company run with just two or three people into a fully grown-up company with ten staff and plans to go much further," says Green.

"As a market, we have a long way to go. We went international when we sold to Dubai. The ethos of our company is that we're there to assist. You can apply that to any market. I just happen to believe in schools, having been a teacher in my first life."

With a name change comes expansion with a new service designed to help schools make the most of the difficult-to-locate European funding on offer. "We sift through all that information and pass to schools the ones for which they're eligible," she says. "Having found the money, there's the whole thing about gift aid. We've developed a module to show them how to claim back so much."

"It's the whole life cycle as to how schools can get money for themselves, which is increasingly a requirement. No one else is doing the whole package."

Green has been back in the North-East since 2005, having spent much



JANIS GREEN: Has supplied software to 3,000 schools

'My eureka moment'

of her adult life abroad, from the hot desert of Zambia to frozen snow-covered Canada.

Her globe-trotting resulted from her father's job. He was an engineer, who first went abroad when the government in Ghana requested assistance on a major irrigation project.

"Because it's your parents, you don't think about it. It's only when you think about it afterwards you realise your mother must have been one of the bravest people on the planet," says Green.

Her mother left the family home in Peterlee with her daughters, five-year-old Janis and her younger sister, to join her husband in Africa.

HEATHROW could still probably have been classified as a Nissen hut. I remember the flight because she bought us special outfits that matched. You went from London to Frankfurt to Rome to Tunis or Algiers. It used to take a day and a bit to get there.

She didn't return home for some time. "I say that I'm a Geordie from Africa," she jokes.

"My mother started a school so she could educate us. She was a very resourceful lady. With the help of the army, she built a wooden structure for the school."

On average, Green moved every two years. When she married at 25, the travelling didn't stop. "I just happened to meet somebody who'd been brought up in the same way, hauled across to the Middle East at an early age. That's what we did, we upped sticks and moved at the drop of a hat."

"The family home was wherever my father was, it was the way my mother preferred it."

Green was partly educated in England, where her grandmother still lived in the North-East. She recalls the "lollipop flights", packed with schoolchildren going back to England

for the holidays. They had to travel in school uniform.

By the time she married engineer Michael in Zambia, she was teaching. Eventually she returned to the North-East with the intention of settling there. She didn't last a year before getting itchy feet again.

Knowing they wanted to start a family and Africa wasn't perhaps the best place to do it, they moved to Canada and the cold of Northern Alberta. Their three sons were born there.

From one extreme to another, they next settled in Qatar in the Middle East where Michael worked for a national oil corporation. IT was being introduced into his working environment, so she found out about it first hand. "He took to it like the proverbial duck to water, bought a kit, built a computer and we learnt together. I found it quite fascinating."

"In between having children, I worked with a friend to do tax returns systems. When we got back in the late Eighties, the government had just announced the local management of schools initiative and were throwing money at schools to buy computers to do accounts."

A few months after her return, she was working for a county council "because I was a teacher who knew about computers."

She feels that Pebbles still has a lot to offer in the future. "I said two years ago I would like to double in size. I thought that would be huge. We're there now and it's nowhere near huge. It's limitless really and I've set myself no ceiling."

"If we can roll this out into other markets because there are things like churches, charities and other associations that could use the system."

And she adds: "Then there's the whole of the English-speaking world." It sounds like she might be on the move again.

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