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# 'You're never too old to run an ultra': meet the 75-year-old running 155 miles across the world's harshest terrain



He ran his first marathon at 65 and now, 10 years later, Bill Mitchell is enjoying 155-mile desert races CREDIT: ANDREW FOX

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Over six gruelling days, the runners will traverse 155 miles across some of the harshest terrain on earth. Reaching almost 10,000ft above sea level, climbing peaks and descending into valleys, over salt lakes, volcanoes and sand dunes on an uneven, Mars-like landscape, the Atacama Crossing is not for the faint-hearted.

On Sept 29, Bill Mitchell will undertake the epic race, held in the driest spot on earth, the Atacama Desert in Chile. Over the past decade, he has completed 183 marathons or ultra-marathons (footraces that are longer than traditional marathon length) and counting. This year alone he's finished 23. Mitchell is 75 years old.

Just 10 years ago, the former naval officer, who had only recently become a regular runner, signed up for the London Marathon. “I was a bit nervous because there’s so much hype around doing a marathon. I quite enjoyed it, so I carried on,” he explains.

Why, as a sexagenarian, did Mitchell, from Derbyshire, take up long-distance running? Two years earlier, he was on holiday at a regular haunt when a man in the gym told him he’d lost fitness since a previous visit. “I started going for walks, doing three-mile loops, circular walks, up steep hills,” says Mitchell. “On one flat bit, I started jogging it. I got jogging more and more, and it escalated from there.”

Mitchell has broken several records along the way. In 2016, he won Best UK Male at the Marathon des Sables (MDS), a 156-mile ultra-marathon over the Sahara Desert in Morocco.

“It has a reputation for being the toughest race,” Mitchell explains, yet he still became the oldest British man to complete it (beating a certain Sir Ranulph Fiennes’s record set a year before). When he completes the Atacama Crossing in October, he’ll become the event’s oldest finisher.



Bill Mitchell running the Marathon des Sables in 2016

“I quite enjoy it,” says Mitchell, matter-of-factly, of desert running. “It’s a totally different terrain to what you have here. It’s a different challenge, and it can be quite stunning in places. It’s not just masses of sand dunes, you’ve got to go over mountain ridges, a lot of scrub, there’s even some oases.”

Though he’d never run a marathon before 65, Mitchell, who ran a marquee hire company until he retired last year, has long been fond of potholing and cycling. He is an exception to the norm. There’s evidence most of us, when we reach our 60s, are far less active than we should be. According to the British Heart Foundation, only 30 per cent of over-75s in England meet physical activity recommendations. But there is an indisputable link between physical activity and good health. “As people get older and their bodies decline in function, physical activity helps to slow that decline,” explains Dr Nick Cavill, a health promotion consultant.

The NHS recommends two types of physical activity per week, aerobic (150 minutes) and strength exercises on at least two days. Inactivity is linked to several health problems, such as obesity, heart disease, and an increased risk of falls.

Mitchell, a member of Shelton Striders running club, clearly isn't struggling to get his fix. His training for the Atacama Crossing, aside from regular marathons, includes running around 20 to 30 miles a week and up to five hours of gym work. But how does he prepare for the conditions – hot days, freezing nights, and high altitude? “The temperature doesn't really bother me,” he explains, in typical understated fashion. “I made a spare bedroom into a little gym and do heat training, with a fan set to 45 or 50C [122F].”

That should stand him in good stead, considering the average high in the Atacama Desert in September is in the low 20Cs. Altitude, however, is of greater concern. “That’s something I can’t really train for. I’m going out a couple of days before, hoping to acclimatise, but I can’t go out two weeks before. I’ll go at a speed that keeps me comfortable.”

Last year, Mitchell ran three MDS in a year (two in the Sahara and one in Peru). “I’m pretty sure I’ve got the record of the oldest to do three in 12 months,” he tells me. “The MDS has a reputation for being the toughest, but others say this one is actually tougher. I would take that with a pinch of salt. What one person might find tougher, you might not find tough at all. It comes down to how you cope with it.”

In fact, for Mitchell, a six-day jaunt can be less mentally taxing than a regular marathon, providing the surroundings are special. He describes marathons with several laps as “boring” and “monotonous”. City races “push you off into industrial estates with traffic trundling past you. At home, I wouldn’t dream of running in those places.”

Though slower, the variation offered by trail marathons, running up and down gullies and wading across rivers is more appealing.

The Atacama Crossing is not like most races. Part of the “4 Deserts” series, which includes races in Mongolia, Namibia and Antarctica, its competitors carry everything but water and tents. Dried food (“not the nicest of stuff”) fuels each stage, which averages just under a marathon a day – participants are given two days to complete a 47-and-a-half-mile stretch, often running through the first to rest on the second.

Mitchell’s mantra is that you’re never too old to get fit – though, of course, you don’t necessarily have to run ultra-marathons. Many years ago, he was at a sauna with friends when one asked another if he still played football. “I’m too old for that now,” replied the man, in his 30s.

“I was appalled. That’s the quickest way of putting yourself down. You’re never too old to have a go. If you don’t like running, have a go at something else. Saying you’re too old means you’ve lost the battle before you start. It’s an excuse not to do something.”

Unsurprisingly, Mitchell feels it has had a marked effect on his health. “I could safely say, without blowing my own trumpet, I’m a very fit person for my age.” Is he fitter than when he started? “As you develop your fitness you can’t remember what you felt like when you started, I feel normal to me. I always kept myself pretty fit but the more exercise you do, the fitter you’re going to become, it’s as simple as that.”

Ultra-marathons have had a dramatic rise in popularity of late with some sources reporting a 1,000 per cent increase in races over the previous 12 years. On all continents, men and women of all ages are testing themselves to the limit of human endurance. For Mitchell, the difficulty is a large part of the appeal.

And he's firmly fallen in love with running. “You'd be silly to go if you weren't enjoying it. I enjoy the challenge, being outside. Where I live, it's beautiful, hilly countryside. You can go out for a run on a lovely day but in winter, when it's cold and frosty, I still enjoy it. I like things to be a challenge, as opposed to pottering around doing nothing.”

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