

Kerry Sutton **WARRIOR**

"My running is about adventure!"

Kerry Sutton is a running evangelist. The combination of its physical demands, and the way it enables you to see inside yourself and grow emotionally have put it front and centre of her professional and personal life

Words Rachel Ifans

"Am I competitive? Well, I'm competitive about making sure I get to the end. If that means I get first place, so be it; if it's last place, so be it. But I've got to be tired and to have worked to my potential." Meet Kerry Sutton: runner, run coach, mentor, mother of four.

We met her just days after she'd not only taken part in – but smashed – one of the hardest, most mind-boggling races we've ever heard of. The Crawley AIM 24 Hour is – you've guessed it – a 24-hour ultramarathon. Around a 400m running track. Yes, you read that correctly.

"I did 469 laps," says Kerry.

"I managed 117 miles in the 24 hours. There were 40 people in the race and it was a very strong field. It's often used as a qualifier for European races," she adds, happily.

For her, it had been a challenge she didn't know she could overcome. Mostly

because she has always hated seeing the competition during races and this time she knew she'd be able to see them all the time through day and night. This kind of scenario has always messed with Kerry's mental strengths: "My demons start playing up: 'They're faster than you, you're not a good runner, you're too big.'"

And it's not just the mental rigours in a race like this. "People were more broken at the end than I've seen in any ultra," she continues. "Trail running allows your muscles, tendons and ligaments to move this way and that, but this was such a singular motion that my knees were really suffering."

"I know excellent athletes who crashed out of this one. I saw one man, around halfway through, hanging on to his wife. He sat down and I thought to myself, that's it – he's out. But then, during the last two hours, I saw him running again. He'd used the one-more-step philosophy

and suddenly from somewhere a second wind had come.

"As I say to the groups that I coach, try and not give up. There's almost always more in you. Just take one more step. Don't worry if you're not actually running – just get round. You can't anticipate how you're going to feel in a few steps."

A slow burn

So, Kerry is an accomplished runner, who takes on punishing challenges and succeeds. But there's something else about our warrior that is even more impressive than her running creds, and must be why she's such a natural coach to other female runners (more anon).

"I hated running when I was young and it took me a very long time to grow to love it." Kerry was a sporty kid – a 'try-hard', she says, self-deprecatingly – but never ran. Being tall and strong, she was a natural pick for the rowing >>





team at uni. “They needed someone in the first eight crew so I signed up.” Glamorous it was not, she says. “It was Liverpool University, so we were rowing in yellow, stinky, frothy water watching sofas and the odd shopping trolley pass us by most of the time,” she laughs.

Despite success with the crew, rowing never became a passion. She went on to work in the City and then as a teacher and it wasn't until she'd had her first child and moved to Australia that Kerry attempted her first tri.

“The running was the challenge. It was 5k and I remember stopping twice because it was an inordinate distance to me then. I was slow and it was painful. Running was a real fight for me.” Even a few years later when she did a 10k she still hadn't found the sweet spot, or how to get in to the elusive ‘zone’. She admits: “It was a very slow burn.”

As we talk about her running background, it becomes clear there were big hurdles to overcome. Ones she has had to get over – and still is, to a certain extent. “I grew up in a male-dominated family with two very sporty brothers, so the focus was never on my sporting efforts. I mean, obviously it was all done in a very loving way, but I

became trapped inside my family's set of expectations for us children. I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s in a fixed mindset. You either were or you weren't. I've had to develop my own growth mindset as an adult and accept that maybe I'll never be a runner in some people's eyes, because they have a fixed mindset and they can't get past things like, I'm not the right build, or not fast enough, to be a runner.”

Breaking barriers

So how did running finally break through Kerry's mental barriers? “Well”, she says, “I just thought, why do so many people love this? What am I missing? I realised I'd probably been approaching it incorrectly from the start. What I had been doing – which is what a lot of people do – was haring off at a pace that wasn't sustainable and very quickly getting into a lactate buildup, out of

// You need to have got to that point in life where things have got a bit gnarly, to really feel the curative power of running //

breath and dying to stop. It's a rookie error! It always felt terrible, and it wasn't the headspace, listening-to-the-birds-tweet experience I'd been lead to believe it should be. It was something I dreaded.”

So she trained herself, using the old two-minutes-running/two-minutes-walking programme and building up to a sustainable running distance and speed. She moved back to the UK and randomly started training for the Marathon des Sables, dropping her kids off at nursery and running until she picked them up.

“The training for MdS was very raw; I was building a base so I didn't need to make things complicated. It wasn't about the details – pacing, heart rate, etc – it was about the Rate of Perceived Exertion and developing a sense of feel: What's hard? What feels easy? Am I hungry? Am I thirsty? It was very organic.”

She entered the Marathon des Sables with no expectation – and loved it. “Having done a couple of 50-mile walks in Scotland, I knew I could walk the distance so I took the pressure off myself by thinking that, at the end of the day, I could definitely get round by walking. It worked and it's something I tell my ladies time and again!”

It was an interesting journey for

Kerry to build her mental strength and to watch her mind during training for her early endurance runs. She says now: “It's especially the case for ultras, but on long races you tend to pass through all life stages in a day. I start off full of hope, with all my expectations in front of me, then around 30 or 40km I hit my demons – the same old doubts seep in about whether I can actually claim to be a runner, and the fears that everyone else is better than me try to gain mental ground. That's always pretty grim but then something turns and I start getting better and better through the rest of the race.”

A few years ago, Kerry went through a transformational period of life when she got divorced. It was a time when she really needed the running as an emotional crutch, but found the long-distance running was really hard. “When I was mentally drained, I wasn't sleeping properly. I felt lost and horrendous, and I felt that life was coming at me from every side. It was a struggle to manage my business, four kids and the money, and I found I didn't have the well of strength and the drive to do long distance and do well. Alongside that exhaustion though, I really needed to do well. I wanted to place, I wanted to be in the top three women, or the top 10 in the field and doing so helped me find who I was.

“It was a very complex time back then,” she says. “Now my running is about adventure. I choose races – things I'd never have dreamed of, like AIM Crawley 24 Hour – using a different criteria. It's about the journey and the exploration of me rather than basics like the speed, the distance, the location.

Getting through

Kerry says that during her darkest times, when her divorce made her not want to face the day, the thing that has helped her get up in the morning has been coaching other runners rather than running herself. Maybe the responsibility of the role, the date in the diary, the commitment to the clients forced her into her trainers on those grim days. But it was mostly the coaching itself that provided the oomph.

“Being a run coach wasn't an intention. It just grew. But now

My running game changers

Kerry talks us through the essential accessories and the motivations that power her through each and every run



#1 Sun visor

It keeps the sun, rain and snow out of my eyes and keeps my long hair under control, stopping stray hairs from irritating me! I'm rarely seen running without one. I get mine from Headsweats.



#2 Running skort

I love running in a skort and I get mine from a very clever maker of sports clothes in my home town. She's called Lisa Thrower. I like the look of skorts, they feel super comfy and come in some cracking colours and designs.



#3 Salomon pack

It fits so well I rarely notice I am wearing it. When I pack it with my essentials, chuck it on and hit the trail, I feel completely liberated. I am self contained: just me and the outdoors!

#4 Podcasts

Interestingly the longer I run the less I like music or podcasts. It's on the shorter runs when I like some stimulation. Fast pieces are best done to some hardcore tunes and on mid-length runs I find I like chatter. I tend to go for podcasts where inspiring people look back over their lives and look at the influencers and points of change in their lives. Psychologist Michael Gervais and ultra athlete and wellness expert Rich Roll tend to be a couple of my go-tos!

#5 Thinking of others

For motivation I tend to draw on those who can't do what I am doing. This is particularly true when I race. I dedicate my race to someone I know who is ill and who given the chance would give anything to be in my shoes. They might not be a runner but I have the opportunity to embrace life something that is being taken away from them.

#6 33 Shakes

Are natural, tasty and easy to digest. A real find for me as I struggle to find things I like and that I can swallow – my mouth dries out when I run. Go to www.33shake.com and enter KERRYSUTTON33 at checkout for a 10% reduction.

#7 My sports physio

My sports physio in Bath, Claire Weller, who after years of running with pain has diagnosed and corrected my twisted hip. She's my fairy godmother!





// Being a run coach wasn't an intention. It just grew. But now it's definitely a passion: it has changed my life //

it's definitely a passion for me: it has changed my life, and given me so many hooks. It's strange to me that the physical act of running hasn't helped so much recently but that my run business has – turning up and helping others run is amazing. It is making people see there is so much more within them. It has got me up every day.”

Most of her groups are made up of women in their 40s or 50s but her 1-2-1 work covers men and women, and she also has a lot of online clients, for whom she writes training plans. She says: “I find there is a chemistry in groups that are all women. And as for the age thing, I just think that often the shit hasn't hit the fan by your mid 20s so you don't need running then. You need to have got to that point in life where things have got a bit gnarly, to really feel the curative power of running.”

Group dynamics

Her Tuesday group got very close knit: “We had two people going through divorces and another woman who had

fallen into the trap of feeling like a crap mother even though we could all see that she was measuring herself by all the wrong criteria. It's no wonder the group became a lifeline for the runners in it.”

Kerry has a catalogue of inspiring runners she works with on an individual basis – take these for starters.: a woman who survived a double mastectomy and contacted Kerry to train her to run the 56-mile Race to the King in Winchester. The physical exertion of running placed great strain on her stomach and bowels but she trained and achieved her goal.

She also talks about a client who was so ashamed of her body she wouldn't run outside, so Kerry took her on trails for months until she gained in confidence enough to emerge from the shade. “You know what?” says Kerry, eventually. “I've had five really miserable years but I've grown massively too, and I've found something I would never have found without the tough times. I'm still climbing a hill and I'm never going to be rich, but my soul is super satisfied! 🏃‍♀️”

Get in touch with Kerry for one-on-one, group or online run coaching: kerryamandasutton@gmail.com / <http://kerrysutton.co.uk>

Kerry's
tips for newbie runners

#1 Firstly, get to know yourself. Are you self-driven or do you work better with a group? Joining a group is always a leap, because, while being brave and putting yourself out there, you'll likely end up convincing yourself you're the rubbish one in the group. I try to meet everyone before their first session because I can humanise the whole thing and then they're more likely to give it a go.

#2 If you're self-motivated and have time constraints, and you know you stick to things, it's fine to go it alone – but don't try to be Mo Farah! Even Mo started slowly. Run slowly to start with – you don't want to be panting and sweating. Also, five minutes is a long time so break it down – run/walk to start with and in no time you'll be running 20 minutes. The first hurdle is a quick one but don't make it a hard one.

#3 Get yourself something nice-- maybe trainers or a jacket. It doesn't have to cost a fortune but when you put your clothes on, you want to feel nice. Oh, and while we're on running clothes – put them on first thing in the morning. You're more likely to go out if so, as it feels horrible to take them off again unused.

#4 Use hats and gloves to regulate temperature. I always do this because it's an effective way of cooling down or warming up and they're easy to carry too.

#5 Track what you do. Write down in a notebook what you've done and when and for how long. Believe me – you'll feel good about yourself when you look back at it and sometimes it's the only way you'll let yourself see your own progress.

#6 Set a target. Have a goal in mind that is achievable with a little effort and make sure it's something you'll enjoy.

