

The women behind the records

Let's take the focus off the athletes for a while. When someone takes on an awe-inspiring challenge, there are countless people behind them, keeping it all ticking along. Whether it's physical or emotional support, the dedication of the support crew is fundamental and often goes unnoticed...

Words: Lydia Willgress

Log into Instagram and you will likely see someone breaking – or attempting to break – a running record. A whopping 51 world records were achieved at the London Marathon this year, and that's just the start. From running hundreds of kilometres on a treadmill to crossing entire continents on two feet, it's hard to ignore the people pushing themselves to new limits.

But while these records are certainly individual feats of endurance – a sign of extreme mental resilience and physical strength – they couldn't happen without a dedicated team. We're talking about the people who give up their familiar routines to live in a camper van for weeks on end.

Those who spend months planning routes and nutrition, only to find that everything needs to change once the record is underway. The cyclists who ride alongside the runner, motivating them to the finish line and making sure they stay safe. The countless family members, friends and strangers who are there to mop up the blood, sweat and inevitable tears.

To celebrate the unsung heroes and uncover what it takes to support a record breaker, we speak to four women who have all worked on attempts in the last few years. From project managing from afar to avoiding sunburn in India and dashing into pubs to get chips, they lift the lid on what it is really like to help someone achieve their dreams. »

Kate Strong supported
Sophie Power during
her record-breaking run



“We didn’t speak until we started peeing together!”

Sophie Power broke the Guinness World Record for the fastest woman to run across Ireland in May 2024, finishing in three days and 12 hours. Kate Strong, 46, was there for the ride

“I only met Sophie once before committing to support her in Ireland. I have broken three world records in static cycling, so I know how hard it is. Plus, with surnames like ours, we were always going to be friends!

I just thought ‘I’ll bring my bike, I’ll have a nice three-day jaunt’. But little did I know that I would be cycling for up to 18 hours a day – and I even risked my life.

At first, Sophie was running and I was cycling behind her carrying food and water. We didn’t speak because we didn’t know each other. I was just

looking at her thinking: does she even want to talk?

What broke the ice was Sophie trying to find a bush to pee behind every time she needed to go. I said to her, ‘For goodness sake, I’ll just hide you’. We started peeing together and when she chafed I was checking to see if her skin was broken. When you have seen someone’s vagina, you know you are friends!

It was the second night when we had heavy rain and winds. We were on a road used by trucks with a 100kph speed limit and no hard shoulder. For five hours, I stood on the bike and prayed the

trucks could see me. I was trying to block them from Sophie; if I was hit, I didn’t want them to take her out too.

At the same time, Sophie was begging to stop so she could sleep on the grass.

I kept saying, ‘Keep going, you can’t stop’. I felt terrible overriding her and I was trying not to show my fear. It was what I needed to do at that moment, but I had to take time to process it afterwards.

I will always remember the children who came out to cheer. Sophie just burst into tears because it was so overwhelming. I think it reminded her why she was running »



Support roles
often lead
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“Being around greatness has stretched my possibilities and my imagination”

» – to inspire others – and it reminded me why I was there too. “In the end, we beat the record by two hours, so it was on a knife edge all the way. It wasn’t until the last 5K that we really realised we had done it. We were so tired, it took a few days to settle in.

A few months later, Sophie mentioned a 48-hour treadmill record attempt. It was very similar to my records, so I knew what paperwork was needed and I became crew chief. That record included cuddling on the floor of the disabled toilet to try and help her sleep, and a 10-hour panic when the treadmill reset and we lost our beautiful mileage total.

With both, I had quite a battle with my ego. Like, why aren’t I being acknowledged? It was a great learning curve for me and I had to renegotiate with myself. Ultimately, the outcome is what I want, not the glory.

I have also found that being around greatness has stretched my possibilities and imagination. When I’m with Sophie I push past boundaries and dream bigger. The small stuff doesn’t matter as much; I certainly don’t care about things like whether the toilet seat is up or down. Even though it is stressful, I’m growing. And that is where the magic happens.

And, while breaking individual records is inspirational, the majority of people I speak to say they couldn’t do it. So now I’m working to translate inspiration into motivation, and show that doing something little can lead to a lot. In March, I organised a record for the most people participating in a river clean up (1,327) and Sophie came. From not knowing each other, we have now broken three records together in nine months.

“I found purpose in someone else’s dream”

Runner Alice Light was the project manager for Cape Town to London, a 12,000K run completed by Deo Kato over 581 days to tell the story of human migration from Africa. She opens up about the kindness of others and reveals what happened when she lost contact with Deo for a whole two weeks.

“ I started running in 2020 after some health issues. Running helped unlock something inside me, freeing me from past trauma when I ran my first marathon in Paris.

I met Deo in 2021, inspired by his Running for Justice campaign and soon we were a couple. Life was good. It was a year later that he told me he wanted to run from Cape Town to London.

Being Project Manager for Deo’s run required a lot of business acumen, commitment and an ability to think out of the box. I had plenty of experience so I knew I could help, but the lack of enough funding and a properly structured team made it difficult.

In July 2023, Deo flew to South Africa to start his run. The day-to-day was busy,

as I was planning the coming days and weeks, responding to messages, sorting visas and accommodation, recruiting Deo’s drivers, fundraising, writing content and connecting with people who could help. All whilst juggling work, parenting, my own training and launching my health coaching business.

Five months after leaving South Africa, I joined Deo in Uganda for a week to help finalise leg two. While it was great to see Deo, we were so focused on the project we had little time to be a couple.

The start of the second leg of the project was challenging and we were all exhausted. Conflicts in neighbouring countries and a lack of funds meant progress was slow but with a new driver and vehicle we kept Deo moving.

Then in early June 2023, I lost contact with Deo. I felt responsible, despite Deo insisting on the route through South Sudan. I reported

Deo and his driver as missing and had daily calls with police and officials. It was intense and overwhelming. Two weeks later, I received a message on Instagram from a stranger who had met them in prison. They had been arrested.

The focus shifted to getting them released.

During this time, I also put a plan in place for Egypt, for a route, new driver and various contacts, so that Deo could finish the African leg of his journey if he chose to continue. I was relieved when two weeks later

I heard they had suddenly been released. After their release, Deo and I met in Cairo, followed by Athens a few months later when the European leg began. The stress of what happened in South Sudan had taken a huge toll on us both though, and our relationship was over.

Despite all this, I continued as Project Manager, helping to raise thousands of pounds, connecting with people in Europe for support and planning a communications strategy for Deo’s return.

To be a Project Manager for a project like this, you need to think and act for the person on the ground and that’s what my strength was. I knew Deo better than anyone, which meant I was able to make key decisions at every step of the journey.

In December 2024, Deo finally made it back to London. He was reunited with his mother, siblings and the community. It was over.

So much was sacrificed for this project, not least of all our relationship, but this was about humanity and kindness with strangers coming together to support us for over a year. For me, this wasn’t one person’s achievement.

Looking back, I am proud of how I delivered this project, in the best way I could.



“I knew how much she was hurting”

Last year, 24-year-old Imo Boddy became the fastest woman to complete the UK's Three Peaks challenge, covering 680 kilometres and 10,000 metres in elevation in six days, five hours and 43 minutes. Her mum, **Laura**, remembers cooking in car parks, wishing her daughter would stop, but also the magical moment Imo broke the record.

“When Imo told me about her idea, my first thought was ‘Oh god, here we go again’. She had already become the youngest female to run John O’Groats to Land’s End. It’s all very well saying, ‘I’m going to run the Three

Peaks’ and, of course, I knew about the three mountains. But it’s not until you sit down and look at how far it is miles and how much elevation there is that you realise what is involved.

The enormity of the challenge was made even clearer when we got the race programme from Imo’s coach. Imo had to run 140K on day one! If she didn’t do that, she wouldn’t finish at the right time to get around Loch Lomond before the traffic got bad.

“As it was a race against the clock, it was also very demanding on the crew as we had to stay awake and be alert the whole

time. Imo only slept for about 15 hours in total, and, of course, the crew were on the same timescale so we didn’t really ever switch off. As much as I thought about going to sleep, I couldn’t; as a parent, I was panicking about what state Imo was going to arrive in at the next checkpoint.

We had a tracker so we could follow where she was, but there were times when the tracker wasn’t moving. The

rest of the team tried to keep my husband and I calm, but however many times I was told she was fine, I knew how much she would be hurting.

It was for this reason that we didn’t speak too much to Imo. I would dash into a pub to get chips, or be in a car park getting the food ready when it was needed, but then I would hand it to somebody else to give to her.

It was hard being there at arm’s length, but I think that was the best way to play it. We were too emotionally attached, whereas the others knew what to say. When I saw her and her feet and the swelling in her legs, I’d think, ‘Why? Stop now please!’

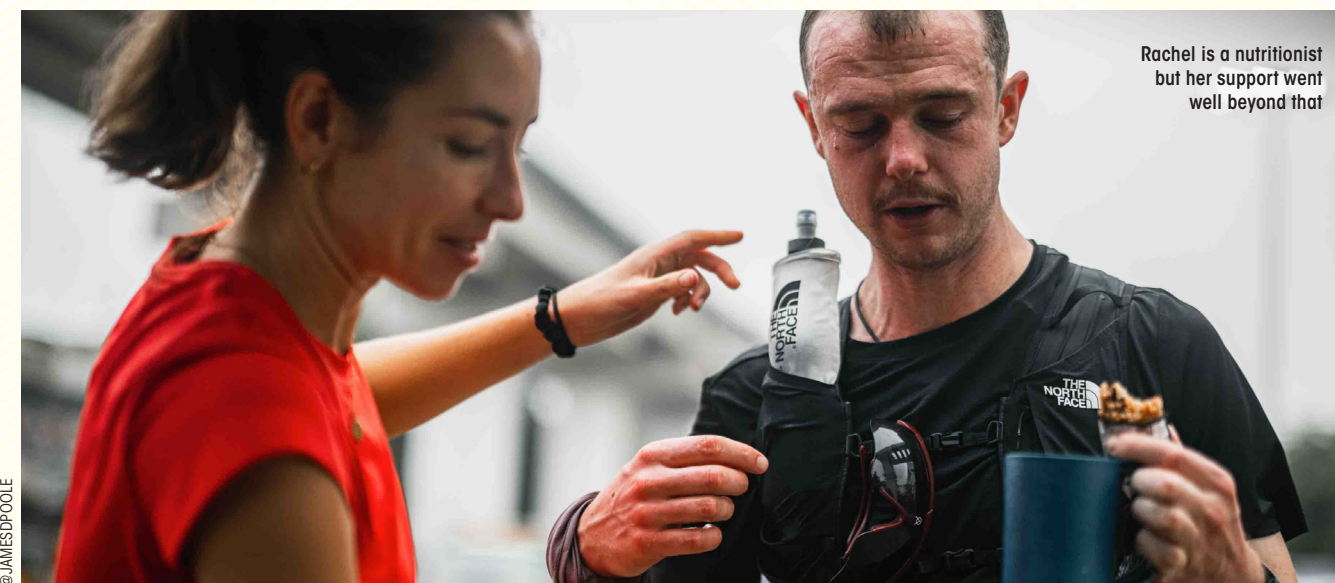
We are a very close family so Imo’s sister, aunt and uncle, and grandparents also came as they wanted to be part of it. Imo is so stubborn, I think we suspected she would break the record. But it wasn’t until the last day we knew she would do it. She had so much support when she climbed Snowdon, it was a really magical moment. The sun was coming up and it was surreal.

Watching her finish by touching the sea in Caernarfon made me realise that she is even more determined than we ever thought. Once she sets her mind to something, she wants to do it and prove people wrong. She also showed other people that they’re capable of things if they put their mind to it and really want to do it. She’s an inspiration. ”



Seeing her daughter in pain was not an easy thing for Laura Boddy

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Rachel is a nutritionist but her support went well beyond that

“I was the nutritionist – and Chief Sunscreen Applier”

Bristol-based dietician and nutritionist **Rachel White** was part of the Running Across India crew who supported Will Robinson on his journey from Chennai to Mangaluru – a total of 748 kilometres. The project took seven days, 11 hours and 2 minutes, and raised more than £3,300 for charity.

“I met Will at the Bristol Running Show last year. I love adventure so I was really excited to be involved.

I knew there would be nutritional challenges. We could only take a certain amount of stuff and then there was the risk of Delhi belly. The question was: how much do we focus on real food versus sports nutrition? Getting that much nutrition into someone who is running all day for seven days is huge.

My strategy was to aim for 60 grams of carbohydrates per hour – the equivalent of one or two gels or cheese sandwiches – but that was always going to be punchy. My suitcase on the way

out was jam-packed with food, but I also needed to shop locally. Things like chapatis and parathas were great options. I would go into a supermarket and raid the shelves for chocolate pancakes, noodles and juice.

It was a bit of a culture shock. India is mad. It is busy, vibrant and hectic. And it is hot. We had beautiful interactions with locals, particularly in the remote areas where I genuinely don’t think they had seen a tourist, let alone a runner.

There were times when it was quite tough. Sometimes I just wanted two minutes to myself and it was really hard seeing somebody struggle. There was a point on day six where Will pushed a little bit too hard and he was totally broken. I had to give him dinner, sort things out, and just keep my fingers crossed.

Nutrition was naturally a big part of my role, but there was more to it. We would start around 5.30am to make the most of the cooler weather so I would be up beforehand sorting breakfast and bags. I was Chief Sunscreen

Applier, which was a busy job given the climate! I also ran between 10 and 30K a day, and often held Will’s umbrella to shade him from the sun. Will had an incredible mindset so I always thought he was going to do it.

When he finished, we came together as a team and had a beer, which was lovely.

Taking part in this experience made me realise that anyone can do uber challenges like these if they have good motivation, a bit of support and really understand their why. The power of your mind and how you frame it makes all the difference. ”



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