

THE MASTER OF MASTERS

Words: David Bradford
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Most middle-aged men consider themselves fit if they're able to lug a bag of compost across the garden centre car park. Martin Rees is anything but typical. He has no truck with age-based expectations, and runs at speeds that utterly defy his 59 years and when he races, no less than a world best will do

Martin Rees was born on February 28th 1953, just three months before Edmund Hillary became the first man to summit Everest. Four decades later, Rees would begin scaling heights of a different kind. His accomplishments, unlike Sir Edmund's, would bestow neither riches nor honours but they are nonetheless worthy of recognition: he is arguably the greatest veteran runner of all time.

At nearly 60, Rees is running times that club-standard athletes half his age would be proud of (I know because I am one). I spoke to him just three weeks after the Cardiff half marathon, where he recorded a scorching 1:12:14. For much of the race he kept pace with the leading women, two world-class Kenyans. The previous world best time for a half-marathon by a 59-year-old was 1:15:26 – obliterated by Rees by more than three minutes. Yet he barely registers my flabbergasted praise: "I don't think I'm really 100 per cent racing yet. I think I can knock a good minute off that." Nothing in Rees's tone suggests post-race posturing; this is an honest assessment of his first race after a long layoff.

"I was out for two years with the Achilles [injury]. I came back in January 2012... [Cardiff] was my first half marathon for four years."

He speaks with a strong Welsh lilt, matter-of-factly, emanating the calm self-assurance of a man with a long list of world bests to his name.

It's difficult to do justice to Rees's brilliance with a summary of times; the roll-call of astonishing performances is too

long. Here are just a few: 14:20 for 5,000m aged 44; 49:36 for 10 miles aged 45; 1:06:42 for half marathon aged 50; 32:02 for 10k aged 55; and – because it warrants repeating – 1:12:14 for half marathon aged 59.

In UK age-category road racing, Rees was untouchable for the best part of two decades. Then, in 2009, having just turned 56, he incurred a foot injury while racing, which led to an Achilles problem that sidelined him for two years. All he could do was walk and cycle to maintain a moderate level of cardio fitness. But now he's back...

Judging by recent form, Rees's comeback could be the springboard into his greatest period of running yet; his plans for next year, after he turns 60 in February, are ambitious, to put it mildly.

"The way I've been training and racing this year, I think I can get back to [the times] I was running at 55. I'm not far off it at the moment."

If he manages that, Rees will tear up the V60-65 record book and write an entire new one. One of the most impressive V60 records is the recently revised 10-mile mark: Mike Hager ran 56:49 at the Cabbage Patch 10 in October. Rees is undeterred, recalling that he passed the 10-mile marker in the Cardiff half-marathon in under 54mins. He is a man not easily fazed.

Training

Rees lives in Port Talbot, southern Wales, where he's been employed at the steelworks for 33 years. How does he fit in high-volume training around a full-time job?

"I work two 12-hour days, then two 12-hour nights, then four days off – four

on, four off, plus one day off every eight days... The day of the first night shift, I'll get two runs in, then [between night shifts] I'll do a steady eight-miler. The next four days [off], I'll run twice a day."

His schedule is about to get a whole lot freer; Rees opted for early retirement and will cycle the six miles to work for the final time on 27th February, the day before his 60th birthday.

"For the first time in my life, I'll be able to run without feeling tired."

I can't help but feel sorry for his rivals, whom I picture reading this, turning pale and shaking their heads in despair.

Early years

I wrongly assume that Rees has been a classy runner all his life, aware of his talent since his first school sports day.

"No. I ran at school but I was just normal, nothing special, I wasn't in any championships or anything. I didn't run for another 15 or 20 years, until I was 38."

How old!? In a sport that puts so much emphasis on youth development and laying physiological foundations at a young age, it's staggering that Rees was in his late-30s before he began to unlock his potential. Just as surprising is the casual and downright reluctant way in which he got started.

"A friend from work was asked to do a 10k... He didn't want to, so he asked me if I'd do it with him."

Rees wasn't in the least bit keen, declined the offer and almost wrote off running as a mug's game there and then. But his friend persisted: "He kept on at me for a couple of weeks, and I eventually decided, go on then,

I'll have a go." Given the lack of enthusiasm, it was an impressive debut. "Basically we hadn't trained, and we ran it together in 44 minutes."

Even so, Rees still wasn't sold on running. His workmate coaxed him into doing another race a fortnight later, but both were still treating it as fun rather than competition. Over the next few months, the pair continued to do the occasional race together, and at some point during that time, something clicked.

"After about six months, we joined the local running club, Neath Harriers," explains Rees. The club's future star was not an immediate sensation. "I was last in every session for about six months. But I did like it."

Fired by enthusiasm, despite being outpaced by his club-mates and having limited training know-how, Rees drastically increased his mileage.



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"I didn't really know anything about running but I started building it up. Within two years, I was running 70 miles a week." The results were spectacular. "In that time, I lost three-and-a-half stone, and I went from 44 minutes for 10k down to under 32 minutes, which is still a club record."

Rees's weight dropped from 12.5st to 9.5st, where it has remained for the past 20 years. At 5ft 9ins tall, he is thin but not gaunt, and doesn't deprive himself of treats; namely "a couple of pints two or three times a week" and "chips maybe once a week". He can afford a few high-calorie rewards, given the fact he runs 80-90 miles every week, including regular high-intensity work.

"We do two hard sessions a week, Tuesday and Friday, and a long run on Sunday, anything between 15 and 18 miles. The rest is just recovery runs and maybe a tempo if we're feeling OK at the end of the week." He values consistency above all and doesn't periodise his schedule for specific events. "I run the different races all off the same training."

The mainstay of that training is solid, old-fashioned fartlek sessions, usually run with a small group of local athletes, including his son David, who at 36 is himself a veteran by UKA standards. So there's a useful smidgen of father/son rivalry?

"He still hasn't beaten me!" I take that as a yes. "It's getting closer, but if I can hold him off till I'm 60, I'll be happy."

Beating injury

From my experience of training among older athletes, I know that many – perhaps most – find it difficult to fend off and recover from tendon injuries. How has Rees managed to bounce back so strongly? Does he take injury-prevention measures?

"I've got a physio who I see every fortnight, and my wife works on the back of my legs for me. I get a niggle now and again but I keep on top of it, keep an eye on my trainers, and I know how to manage [niggles] now."

The wily veteran knows his body well and avoids the track, opting to train mostly off road to minimise stress on his Achilles. He describes the area surrounding his home as offering hills, fields, forest trails, seafont and even sand dunes. "We're lucky here, we've got it all really!"

Poring over the age-category world records on the Association of Road Racing Statisticians website (arrs.net), I lose count of the number of times Rees's name appears. For 10-milers by runners aged 55-59, for instance, the top three fastest performances are all his, as are six of the top 10 best times over 10k in the 50-54 age-group ... Hang on, though, it's not the name "Rees" at the top of the latter list, but that of his compatriot Tecwyn Davies.

"Yes, he holds the 10k record," says Rees with barely a trace of bitterness. "After I turned 50, that was the only record I didn't manage to get!"

Davies's V50 10k record has stood for 24 years – little wonder, since it's a super-fast 30:35. Rees came agonisingly close in 2003, aged 50 years 219 days, when he ran 30:37 – just two seconds shy – in a race in Bourton-on-the-Water, Gloucestershire. Does he know Davies personally?

"I haven't seen him for a long time, but I did speak to his son at the finish of that race [Bourton], when he told me I was two seconds outside of his father's best!"

Is this the one that got away, the uncaptured record that still haunts him?

"No, not really. I would like to have run under 30 minutes for 10k [at a younger

age], I didn't get there... I ran 30:08 [as a V40] and I thought I was very close that day, but they said the course was 150 metres too long – I would have run about 29:50!"

Doesn't he regret not taking up running at a younger age, when he might have been swift enough to compete at national or even international level?

"Sometimes, now and again, but the reason I'm running well now, at the older ages, is maybe because I didn't run as a youngster, so maybe that's helped me along."

Rees is referring to the theory that everyone starts their running career with a limited timespan in which their body will tolerate and respond to hard training; once it's used up, that's it, game's up. It follows that if you start later in life, you have a better chance of remaining fit and fast into your 50s and 60s – in Rees's case, fast enough to beat the majority of younger folk.

How do competitive young athletes react to being beaten by someone old enough to be their granddad?

"They hate it! I remember running for Wales [veteran cross-country team] once in an inter-area match. We were coming up to the finish, climbing a steep hill. Ahead of me was a young boy, only about 18, and his father or coach was shouting at him, 'Don't let that old bloke beat you!'" Big mistake. "That motivated me and I got up the hill first and beat him. I said to the bloke [who had shouted], 'Thanks very much for that, you really motivated me.'"

Record breaker

Outrunning impudent youngsters must be damn good fun, but I hazard a guess that it's breaking records that really spurs Rees to keep training hard.

"Yes, it's age-group bests. When

you see it [fitness] coming along, it's just nice to have a go at them [records]."

He's keen to point out that he isn't obsessive about running, that it's just something he enjoys, one leisure pursuit among many.

"When people say, 'You've got that running bug'... No, I haven't got that. I treat it as though I'm working, like a profession. When I come home, I'm not talking about running. I've got loads of hobbies... You hear some of these boys, they're just talking about running all the time, [whereas] I can switch off."

I wonder if Rees has a view on why, despite a continued rise in the popularity of recreation running in Britain, the depth of quality in road racing has fallen sharply over the past 20-30 years.

"I think it's the [lack of] racing. I train with the boys now, and they're training as hard as we did 15 years ago, but it's all 5ks and parkruns these days; they haven't got the big 10-mile races – hard, hilly races – where they're all pushing each other. I don't think they're racing enough."

Rees cites the example of Steve 'the race' Brace, the Welsh former marathoner, who, while in his prime in the Nineties, was renowned for "racing basically every week" while progressing to Olympic standard. What about the swelling multitudes of fun runners and joggers, why aren't they coming through to competitive standard?

"They seem obsessed with fancy kit," ventures Rees, "water bottles and all that, when they

don't need it. [They want] watches and modern devices, instead of just going out – you never see anyone just doing hard training."

No slowing down

There seems little chance of Rees shying away from hard races and slowing down as he turns 60 and starts drawing his pension. He'll be fastest to the front of the post office queue, no doubt about that, but just how long can he carry on pushing his body to the limit? Can he dominate every age category, V65, V70, V75 – where will it end?

"As long as I'm enjoying it, I'll keep going... My motivation is high now, coming back from two years off, and I'm really enjoying it – the spark is back!"

I mention speculation posted recently on the letsrun.com forum that he's the best veteran runner of all time. How does that feel?

"Yeah, it's nice when people say things like that. But you've got the likes of [Haile] Gebrselassie coming through, who, if he keeps it going, could smash everything!"

That would have near-perfect symmetry, too – the Ethiopian whom many regard as the greatest runner of all time turns 40 shortly after Rees hits 60.

"It would be nice to have a bloke like that break your records. That would be something." ^{RT}



GROWING OLD RACILY REES'S BEST PERFORMANCES			
AGE CATEGORY	45-50	50-55	55-60
5k	14:51	15:00 (WB)	15:31 (WB)
5 miles	n/a	24:44 (WB)	26:11 (WB)
10k	30:17	30:37	32:02
10 miles	49:36 (WB)	50:43 (WB)	53:21 (WB)
Half-marathon	1:06:29	1:06:42	1:11:15

*WB = World Best / Source: www.arrs.net



HOW TO BE
NIFTY AT
60

REES'S TRAINING: SAMPLE WEEK

MONDAY:
8 miles easy

TUESDAY:
Fartlek: 2x 4mins at 5:20/mile; 2x 3mins at 5:10/mile; 2x 2mins at 5:00/mile; 2x 1min flat-out. (2mins recovery between efforts)

WEDNESDAY:
AM 40mins recovery PM 30mins recovery

THURSDAY:
8 miles easy

FRIDAY: 8-mile tempo @ approx. 5:50/mile (hilly)

SATURDAY:
AM 40mins recovery PM 30mins recovery

SUNDAY:
17 miles steady