

Sole mates

A complete guide to mixing love and your love of running

Words: Lulu Le Vay
Photography: Studio 33

I'd be lying if I said, at 42 and single, I didn't have some dating experience. Over the years, I've courted an array of the male species, from geeks to crusty rockers. As far as box-ticking goes, I've never been one to hover, biro-in-hand. Not like other girls I've encountered, who have reams of compulsory requirements relating to height, age, job, property ownership, shoes and hair (he has to have some). I've been easy to woo with just a bewitching grin and, though I've been known to reject men based on their record collections, all the other stuff never really mattered.

Until now. Thanks to running myself into better shape – four marathons, nine halves and what feels like millions of 10Ks in the last eight years – all this has changed. The endorphin-charged heights of fitness have not only improved my figure and sense of wellbeing, they've also narrowed my choice of partner. Now I have a box that *must* be ticked. Trainers will only impress if they've ripped up long distances rather than just the occasional dancefloor.

It's not about me preferring to get my hands on a more toned physique, but more about sharing a core interest and a partner showing their body and mind some respect. Running has become such

an intrinsic part of my life I am now simply not willing to compromise. These days, relationships start to pick up steam when running dates become a regular occurrence – sweat and tight leggings, what's not to like?

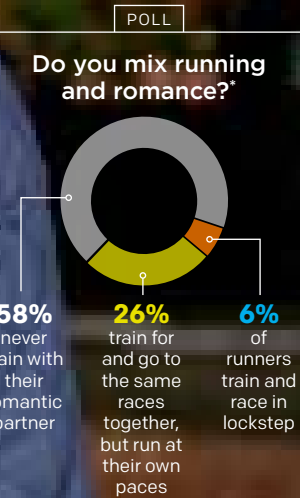
Is this stringent box-tick narrowing my opportunities? Perhaps. But for now, I'm just going to have to risk it and hold out for my personal best. And the growing number of fitness dating sites such as Fitness Singles and The Running Bug, plus the example of a couple who connected via RW's online forum and recently got hitched, tells me I'm not alone.

There are many ways our love of our sport can cross with our love lives. Perhaps you're a single runner looking for a relationship, other than with your size eights. Could a shared interest in pavement-pounding be the spark, or even – as in my case – a non-negotiable box to tick? Perhaps you're in a relationship and running is the third party in your crowd. Either you're the victim of your partner's sweaty affair with wicking fabrics, or you're a runner whose other half resents the 'me time' you spend with your running shoes.

If so, you may need some help to ensure your passions coexist rather than collide; that said footwear can nimbly dance through the relationship minefield of early starts, early nights and injury sulks. Over the following pages, we've gathered a combination of real-life experiences and expert input to help you keep running happily ever after. ▶

‘When I start talking about running, she has this look on her face’

The runner and the running widow



Louise Wooldridge, 36, Birmingham

I met Nick 12 years ago. We got together at an office Christmas party. We now have our son Sam, who's two-and-a-half, and I'm working three days a week.

Back then Nick wasn't that into running; now he's obsessed. He's had other hobbies, but they didn't last. Running has been consistent. I don't have hobbies; working and taking care of Sam are all-consuming.

I think Nick likes the solitary nature of running, the escape; but I don't think he's deliberately trying to escape from me. Nick does pull his weight, but I take on the majority of the childcare. There could be worse things he could be into, of course. He's fit and healthy, so that's good.

If he doesn't run he gets twitchy. I can sense that he needs his fix, which can be irritating. Another thing that bugs me is he goes to bed ridiculously early, at 8:30pm, as he often gets up to run at 5am. I go to bed later and get up later. We're on different time schedules, and as Sam is put to bed at 7:30pm that leaves us with hardly any time together.

Mainly I would just like some more downtime. I'm going to London soon to

visit a friend and I'm looking forward to the train journey. Sitting on my own for a few hours is the equivalent of one of his long runs. He won't be doing one that weekend as he's on childcare duty.

Nick Wooldridge, 41, Birmingham

At our office Christmas party, some colleagues and I had done a Miss World performance and I was still wearing the dress and wig when I chatted Louise up. I thought she was attractive and funny.

I've always done a bit of running, but

five years ago I got serious. A friend had signed up for a 10K and lost a lot of weight. Around the same time I tried on a shirt and I didn't like what I saw in the mirror, so I decided to do something about it. I started running three times a week, bought some decent shoes and a GPS watch, and that was it.

I value the 'me-time'. It's escapism. And I feel buzzing post-run. It's had a profound effect: it's made me healthier, more energetic. I struggle if I can't run – if I have to work early, or get Sam up, for example. I end up spending the whole day thinking about it.

I do understand Louise's frustrations. Sam has had a bigger impact on her time. It would be nice if she was into running, but she never was. A friend and I constantly talk about running, it gets really nerdy. I can't imagine having that with Louise. When I start talking about running, she has this look on her face. But I have no grudges, I love her and Sam.

My advice to couples like us is if you're the runner then be considerate when you do it – you have to compromise. If you're the non-runner, you have to understand that your partner is serious about it.



Side panel words: Jennifer Van Allen. Photography: Marathon-Photos
*Taken from an RW online poll: christinenorthamcounselling.co.uk



MAKE IT WORK BETTER

Christine Northam, counsellor for Relate, explains how to meet in the middle

Manage your expectations Couples in this situation need to be open and take a good look at these issues as it could flatten their relationship. You need to put your cards on the table and negotiate an equal relationship, otherwise it won't work. It's imperative to support each other's interests, but get the balance right. Couples need to agree on time allocated to themselves, but this can only happen if they communicate honestly with each other. The non-runner must air frustrations sooner rather than later otherwise the pattern will stick and resentment will breed.

Don't let running take over Although a passion for running is a good thing, Nick shouldn't make it a priority as it could cause issues later on. Nick has invested a lot of time into his passion. Who is he married to? Louise or his running? It's obviously good to value your body and keep fit, but don't let it become a dependency that gets in the way of life.

YOUR LOVE-ON-THE-RUN PLAN

There are plenty of reasons why you should run together. Just keep your love on track by treading carefully around the potential potholes

Sharing your love of running with the love of your life has myriad benefits. No need to justify early starts that cut short late nights, mysterious smells, ugly feet or £100-shoe expenditure. Then there's the ease of planning holidays around races, or genuine empathy when you're sidelined by injury.

Running together can improve your relationship, too. Learning to nurture and respect your partner beyond his or her role as your beloved – as a runner – can bring you closer. 'The great thing about running is that it breaks down the normal patterns of communication and the roles we play,' says Dennis Orthner, a professor at the University of North Carolina School of Social Work. 'That gives you an opportunity to open up new channels of communication and break down the normal barriers for intimacy.'

The bad news is that even with all those feel-good hormones pumping, mixing romance and running can be tough. Experts say on-the-run conflicts can stem from basic gender differences – shaped by nature and nurture – along with communication breakdowns that can start before your shoelaces are tied. Here's how to make sure that you don't just love running and each other, you love running *with* each other.

Understand your wiring

Some problems come from differences in basic brain chemistry, says Dr Shawn Talbott, a nutritional biochemist and multiple marathoner. 'When men and women compete, they have totally different hormone production.' Even at rest, men have 10 times more testosterone. This helps them be more driven, competitive, goal-oriented and focused. During competition – or even just a training run – testosterone gets even higher. 'It's all about going up against the other person,' says Talbott.

In women, competition prompts the production of oxytocin, the so-called 'cuddling hormone', associated with nurturing, collaboration, empathy and trust; it's the hormone that promotes bonding between mums and newborns, and people falling in love.

These differences can be further reinforced by socialisation, says John Gray, author of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (£8.99, Harper Element). And just knowing – and respecting – this can help you sidestep trouble, he says. The chattier partner won't take the silence personally and can bring music or other running buddies for entertainment.

Also, if you do talk, pick your subjects with care. 'While your breathing is laboured, heart rate is up and adrenaline is flowing, it's not the right time to [continued overleaf]

The running club romance

Algy Batten, 38, London

I've been a member of London running collective Run Dem Crew (RDC) for four years. Two years ago I took along my friend Linda and a few weeks later she brought Caroline.

I noticed her straight away and I got to know her really well. It was marathon training time so a bunch of us trained together several times a week. It was very close-knit. After long weekend runs we would hang out over breakfast. We were all seeing each other more than our 'proper' mates. RDC boss Charlie Dark helped instigate it. One morning he sent us both a text, without either of us knowing, saying, 'I noticed a bit of chemistry in the kitchen this morning, why don't you do something about it?'

As we were already training together four times a week we only managed one 'date' before the marathon, which turned out to be our second and when we properly got together. It's funny going out on a date when you're not drinking because of training. The most we'd had was one glass of wine and then it was home early to bed. Separately. Because of this we made a more genuine connection.

Six weeks before London, a load of us

went out to do the Paris Half. You could call it a 'half date'. The night before we snuck down to the bar and had a drink. Then, although we weren't a couple, we ran the race together. Caroline is competitive so that rubbed off on me. We ran as a unit and it was the fastest half I've ever done. We definitely make each other run faster. I remember training at the track one day she said, 'I could do without you chasing me around all the time.' There's a competitive aspect between us. In Paris we ran flat-out, trying to impress each other.

Running is something I do a lot so it's nice to have someone to share it with. She's been more into it than any other girlfriend – and she's definitely the fastest.

Caroline Moorhouse, 35, London

If someone had told me I was going to meet my next serious boyfriend at a running club I wouldn't have believed them. I was just looking for a group to train with for the London Marathon, but I remember clocking Algy with his top up and thinking, 'Nice abs.' He was a friendly, chatty person and I fancied him straight away. But I was very conscious that I didn't want to get distracted from training, so I kept him at arm's length.

The lead-up to us getting together was really old fashioned. Sensible. Our first proper date wasn't a big night out as we weren't drinking, so we had dinner and talked. Dates have the potential to end up badly with too

much booze. For the first time I did it the right way. We got to know each other. It built slowly in a natural way.

I've always liked running but I've never run as much as I have since I met Algy. He's definitely brought that side out in me. And him being so passionate about it is really attractive.

When we did the Paris Half we really clicked. Back at the hotel after the race I remember looking at him on the sofa and I knew then I wanted him to be my boyfriend. I wanted to cuddle up with him, but I knew I had to wait.

It was definitely bubbling though. After London, a few of us went out for drinks. We were both meant to be knackered and our knees were hurting. He was like, 'Thought you couldn't walk!' But it had been brewing for weeks so we didn't care about the pain.

I've met my perfect man. We don't run to clear our heads or let off steam. We run as it's just something that we do.



Photography Tom Hull /susanwinter.net



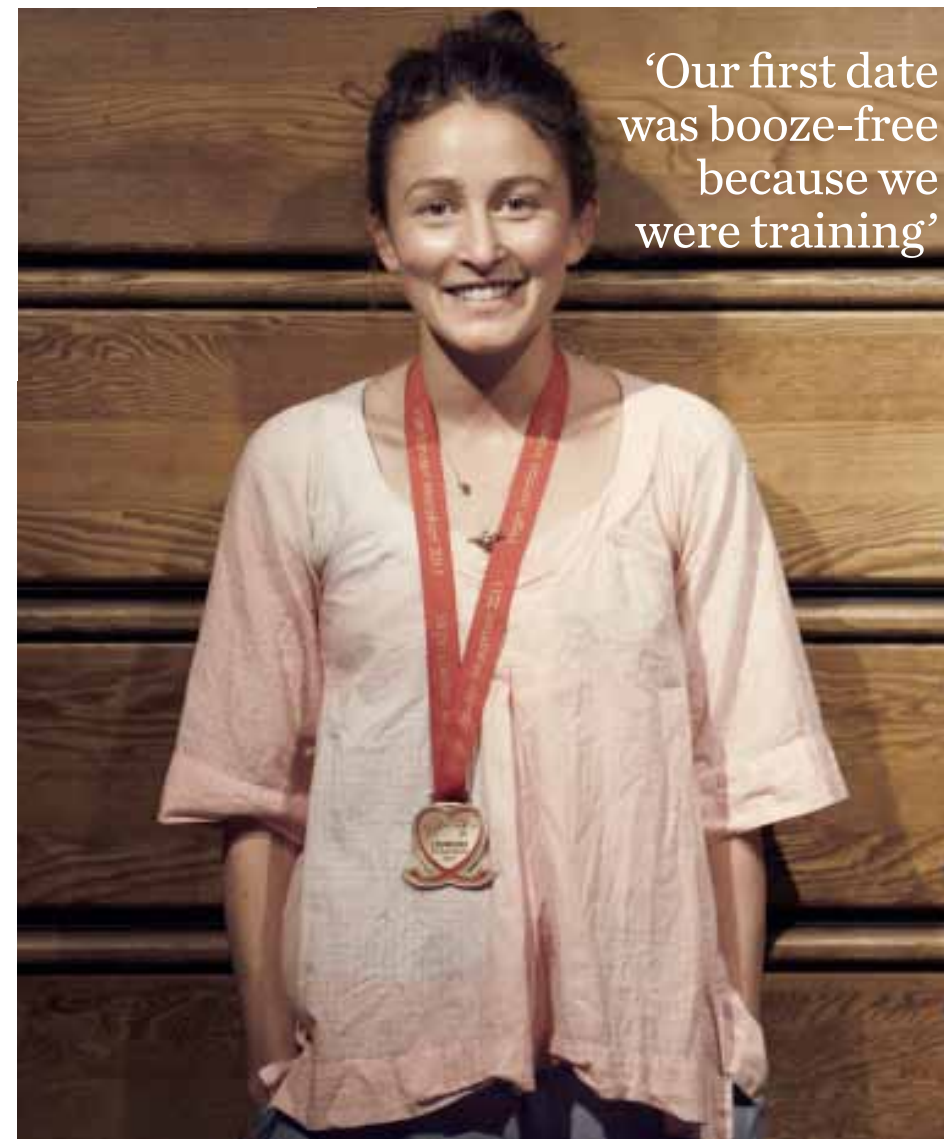
MAKE IT WORK BETTER

Susan Winter, relationship expert as seen on *Oprah*, on sharing a hobby

Connect through running With conventional means of future-mate contact, each person can be relegated to the awkwardness of hunting for some sort of conversational connection. Exploring natural settings, such as running clubs, is a better way to meet an appropriate partner. Here two people can make decisions about each other in a positive environment.

Common ground Having similar values, goals and lifestyles creates the glue for partnerships to flourish. A shared passion for running creates a connection that defines much of who they are as people. Often couples struggle to stay united when these basic factors are too varied.

Slow the pace Algy and Caroline have found the 'golden key' to relationship success. They allowed their mutual interest to create the flame that ignited that passion. They interacted with each other being their true, unmasked selves. Running allowed them to meet each other in their natural environment: no pretence.



RUNNING ROMANCE

have an emotional conversation,' says high-performance psychologist Michael Gervais. The physical stimulation 'can heighten the characteristics that occur during a fight'.

Your pace or mine?

Perfect love matches are rarely perfect pace matches, which often causes tension. This is why, says Orthner, it's important to decide *why* you're running together. 'If the purpose is to run as a couple and strengthen the relationship, you have to set aside your own goals and focus on the other person's needs,' he says. 'If the other person is doing the same thing, you'll bring home something positive.'

That said, if you run together at the slower person's pace, it's important to give each other permission to develop individually to prevent resentment. 'There have to be times when you can be free to develop your own skills,' says Orthner.

If the pace is too fast or slow, say so, says sports psychologist Barbara Walker. But instead of saying, 'You're going too fast!' say, 'I need to slow down.' That way, 'you're saying what you're experiencing and taking care of your own feelings,' says Walker.

Read the signals

Another key is to read each other's signals and silence. 'Men often complain that women ask too many questions and women complain men don't ask enough,' says Gray. That comes up a lot on the run, particularly when it gets tough. Constantly asking, 'Are you OK?' out of concern can send the opposite message to the man. 'You're implying that he needs help,' says Gray. It's important to draw on your knowledge of the person off the road.

Team up

Whether you run side by side with your running partner or not, the most important thing here is teamwork. Planning the run and discussing it afterwards will make it a joint activity, says Orthner. 'It really requires a feeling of partnership.' And that can happen even if you're not actually running together through the teamwork of juggling two training schedules, plus work, kids and life in general.

Don't race...or coach

It's never a wise move to try to outrun your partner. 'In competitive situations, each person is out to have his own needs met, and not taking into account the other person,' says Orthner. 'That can undermine the health of the relationship.'

Likewise, lay off the coaching. Unsolicited advice is almost always a mistake. 'The less proficient person knows you are more experienced and probably feels self-conscious,' says Orthner. Avoid awkwardness or arguments by keeping quiet unless you are asked.

TRAINING PARTNERS
Caroline and Algy at a Run
Dem Crew after-party

The 'me time' runner


JT Tyrrell, 45, Ibiza and London

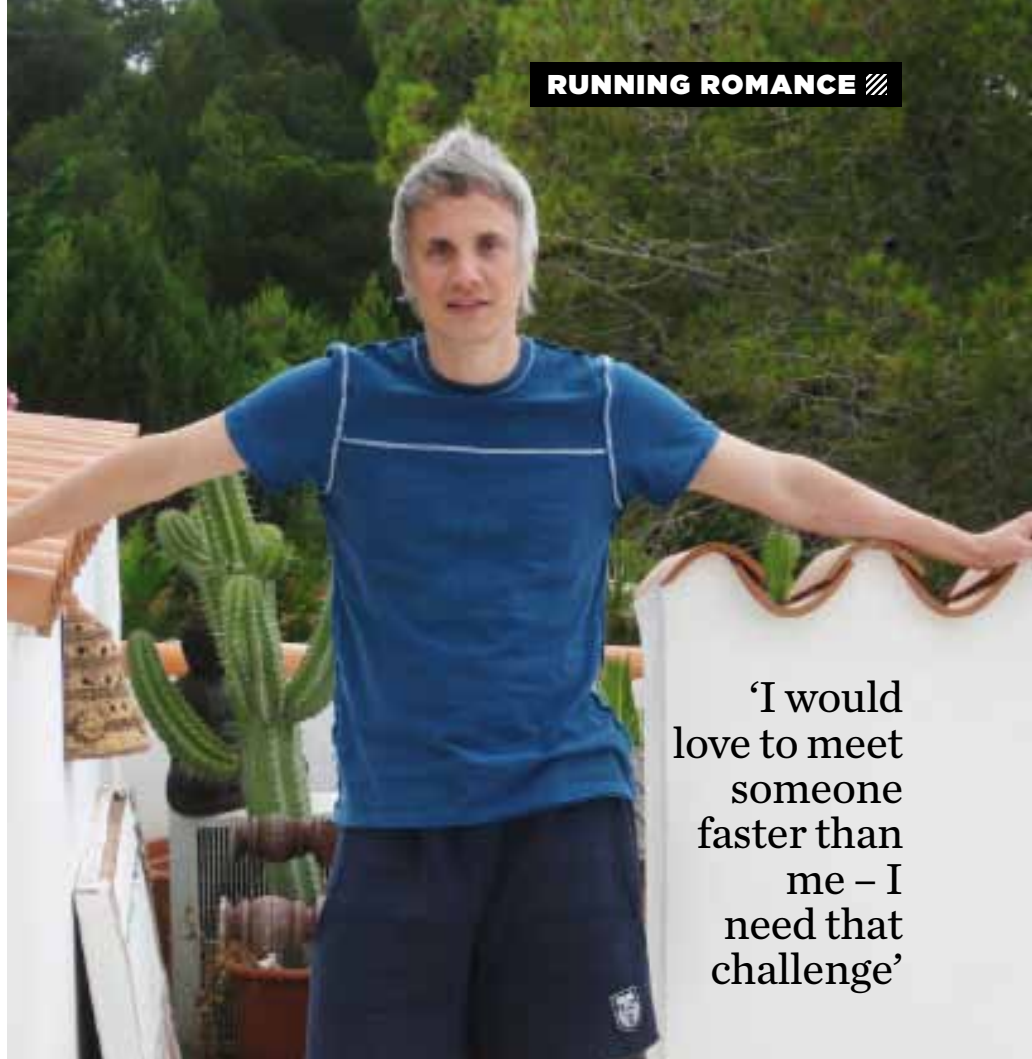
My last serious girlfriend moved out in June 2012, which was when I was able to really focus on my fitness. I started eating six small meals a day – a protein shake, then salmon and broccoli, that kind of thing. It was impossible for me to eat meals like this with her. She loved to cook and every meal had to have dessert, otherwise it 'wasn't a proper meal'.

I enjoy my new independence. After recovering from a glutes injury I was ready to get back into running. I am concerned that this new freedom and ability to focus on diet and exercise will make things difficult in future relationships. Honestly, I really can't imagine dating someone and showing them what I eat on a daily basis.

Many of my previous girlfriends have been smokers. My last serious partner would have a cigarette with her morning coffee. She found running too challenging. She did give it a go but she was terribly slow, stopping every five minutes. I've always met women through nightclubbing, so automatically that's putting me among a certain group. They become aware of my running, but generally there's never a question that I'd want them to run with me, as they're clearly not runners. I had a girlfriend when I trained for my second marathon in 2007, but it wasn't an issue as I wasn't living with her. I had my own space, my running world was separate.

I much prefer running alone. I don't listen to music, I like listening to the world: cars honking, people talking. I've always preferred solo sports to team sports. I'm self-employed so I work mostly on my own, so it must be a personality thing.

Now I would love to meet someone who was into running, but she would have to be better than me. I would need the challenge of trying to keep up. But she would also have to prefer running alone, so we could both run by ourselves and just occasionally together. That would work for me. So far I've not met anyone remotely like that. Perhaps I need to join a running club. Until that point I think I'd rather be on my own. 



'I would love to meet someone faster than me – I need that challenge'



MAKE IT WORK BETTER

Life coach Alice Stapleton* on setting your sights too high – and how to adjust your standards

Manage your expectations JT is setting high – perhaps unobtainable – expectations and standards for the type of relationship he's seeking. He's told himself that he now needs a partner who's better than him to challenge him. Is this a realistic goal? He's putting pressure on a future partner to fulfil *his* needs.

Get creative in your relationship Freedom and independence is possible in a relationship. Be creative and curious as to how it might work alongside your exercise and diet routine. You can still have your goals, you might just need to obtain them through a different approach that works for you.

SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE

Translate what your partner says to avoid misunderstandings

She says 'Are you OK?'

She means 'I love you. I want you to know that you're not alone and that I care.'

He hears 'It's obvious you're struggling. Weakling.'

Solution Don't ask! Before you head out, say something like, 'I'll let you tell me if something is wrong.'

He says Nothing.

He means Nothing. He's simply focused on his running.

She hears Awkward silence. Why is he angry? When I run with friends, we talk the entire time.

Solution If you know your partner isn't a talker, don't push it. Bring headphones.

He or she says

'You go ahead.'

He or she means 'Really, go ahead. I'd rather run solo than worry about holding you back.'

She or he hears 'You're struggling! You don't mean that. I wouldn't want to be abandoned.'

Solution Decide before you run what to do if one of you fades.