



SPRY, NOT RETIRING

The members of Veterans Athletic Club (VAC) agree on one thing above all else: growing old needn't mean slowing down. Indeed, it seems the opposite can be the case

→ THOUGH MANY OLDER RUNNERS

prefer to be known as masters rather than veterans, the Veterans Athletic Club (VAC) has another definition: 'Men and women athletes who are in their prime.'

'Well, we don't want to be written off,' says the club's secretary and committee chair, Ros Tabor, who won a gold medal, as well as two silvers, at the 2019 European Masters Athletics Championships in Italy, and set a W70 age-group record at parkrun on Clapham Common, south London, to go with her previous W65 record. 'Saying "in their prime" is a bit tongue-in-cheek but we like to think we're still competitive no matter how old we are,' she says.

The club, which was founded 89 years ago, exists to provide opportunities for

athletes to participate in age-graded competitions, and the youngest of the 600 members wouldn't even be classed as old – the first age band is 35-40. VAC is part of the British Masters Athletics Federation, which fields participants in events such as the European Masters

Indoor Track & Field Championships and the World Masters Track & Field Championships.

Though the area covered by the club is London and the surrounding counties, there's no official VAC base or regular training sessions, so most people join it as

Above: runners compete at the VAC 5000m Champs at Battersea Park, London. Below: Liam O'Hare and Gary Budinger compete in the Surrey Cross-Country League.



their second-string club and acquire the appropriately retro white-and-black vest for special occasions. Runners meet at VAC-organised events such as the series the club puts on in Battersea Park, London, and its cross-country championship, held on Wimbledon Common, or events in the East Surrey League, plus parkruns in the London area.

'The 35-year-olds can find the "vets" designation a little strange, as they can be running as fast as anyone, but once you get to the older sections, it's quite nice to have more people in your age group to compete against,' says Tabor. The club currently has 28 members who are over 80 and four who are over 90. However, the veteran's veteran is Dalbir Singh Deol, a 93-year-old 400m runner who has said he runs to stay in shape.

The club is not only for ageing elites, and the general standard ought to be far from intimidating, says Tabor. 'We do have some fantastic runners, but also plenty of average ones. Membership is increasing – I think parkrun is a factor in more people taking up running or doing it to an older age. If you go along to one of those events, you see that the people doing them are quite ordinary.'

While the club has an ethos of inclusivity, it also has as many stars as most running clubs. The new president, Anna Garnier, has represented GB at cross-country; Clare Elms won five individual golds and a team gold, as well as an individual silver, at last year's European Masters Athletics Championships; and 71-year-old race walker and 1980 Moscow Olympics competitor Ian Richards won five walking golds.

That 'in their prime' designation may be tongue-in-cheek, but only slightly.

Never too late

'Aged 49, while watching the first London Marathon in 1981, I vowed to start running. I ran London in 1982 and soon discovered the many advantages of membership of the Veterans Athletic Club.

At 87, I still enjoy VAC cross-country and indoor and outdoor championships.'

– Richard Pitcairn-Knowles

'VAC is the only club I belong to.

This suits me perfectly, as I don't want to feel under pressure to compete, but I am able to enter the occasional cross-country or track race, organised on a small and friendly scale. VAC has given me the confidence to go from being a parkrunner to an International Masters athlete.'

– Lucy Woolhouse

vetsac.org.uk, bmaf.org.uk