



BETH M. HOWARD

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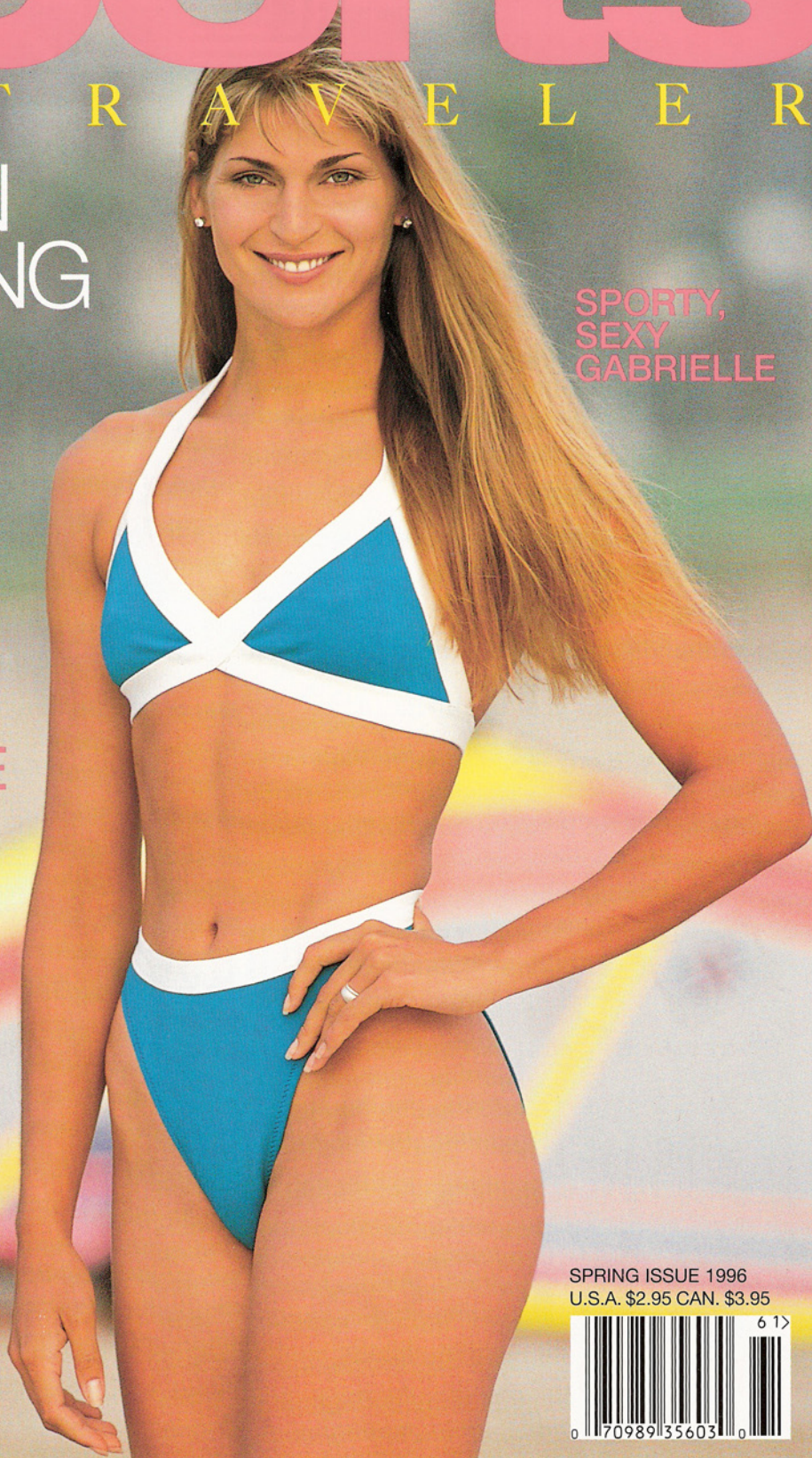
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A RUNNING START

Need inspiration to lace up your cross-trainers?

Meet Helen Klein, 73, who competes regularly in grueling ultra-marathons and beats plenty of baby boomers along the way.

Before you decide you're too old to run 100 miles across a mountain, rock climb in canyons, or take up scuba diving, think about 73-year-old extreme athlete Helen Klein and the advice she offers: "It's never too late."

Klein should know. She didn't start running until she was 55, when a neighbor challenged her to run a 10-mile race. With just weeks to prepare, her husband, Norman (a promoter of ultra-marathons), mowed a small track in the grass behind their house. She ran one fifth of a mile her first day and, though exhausted, kept at it, adding one fifth of a mile every day until the race. She finished it in two hours! Years later, two weeks before her sixtieth birthday, she took part in the Ironman Triathlon Championship in Hawaii. Now she has completed her hundredth ultra-marathon—each race from 50K to a multiday event—in places as far-flung as the Himalayas of Nepal and the sands of Morocco.

Equally impressive, this housewife, mother of four, grandmother of nine, great-grandmother of three, and former ER nurse successfully finished last year's Eco-Challenge, a 10-day multisport endurance race in southern Utah. During the event she ran and rode 36 miles on horseback (with three horses for each team of five people, two members were running alongside at any given time), hiked 90 miles through the desert, negotiated 18 miles through freezing water-filled canyons, mountain-biked 30 miles, and rappelled down a 440-foot cliff, only to have to climb back up 1,200 feet, paddled 90 miles on a river raft, hiked another 20 miles, and, finally, canoed 50 miles to the finish line. Many enthusiastic and buff 24-year olds didn't finish this race, but Helen did.

Klein had participated as a member of Team Operation Smile for the 1995 Eco-Challenge. She'd been invited to join by the team captain, Mary

Gadams, also a runner. Gadams knew Klein from the Western States 100 (a prestigious ultra-marathon organized annually by Klein and her husband). "Mary sent me all the information without saying anything about my joining. It sounded fantastic. She invited me to join her team but I told her she was out of her mind, that I didn't do any of these sports." Gadams argued, "But Helen, you have mental toughness."

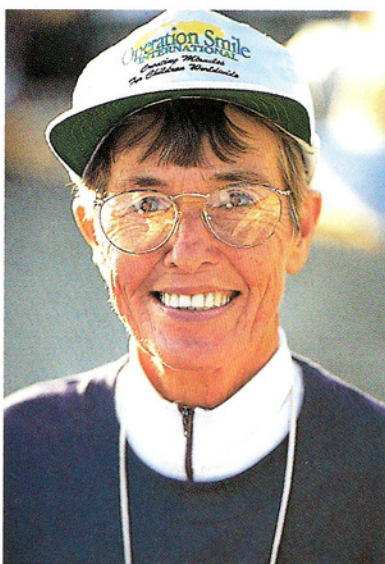
Klein consulted the race organizer, Mark Burnett,

to see what he thought about her ability to acquire the necessary race skills. He told her, "You will be great for the younger people on your team because they will overestimate their abilities. You will help them go at a pace that will allow them to finish."

Klein's team finished eighteenth out of 50 teams and won the Spirit Award, in part because it entered to raise funds for the organization Operation Smile (which supports children's orthopedic surgery) and also, no doubt, because of Klein's own awesome accomplishments. She was the darling of the race—even those fit 24-year-old dropouts were cheering her on. So heroic

was she that *Dateline NBC* devoted an entire segment to her story and Intersport TV awarded her the Arete Award for the most outstanding athlete of the year in the 50-and-over age group.

Klein usually breezes through the toughest of events, but the Eco-Challenge definitely tested her. "I wanted to stretch and grow. That's why I finally **Clockwise from top left: The Eco-Challenge demands proficiency in many sports: Here a turn on the 30-mile mountain bike route; a group of five rappels 440 feet to the canyon bottom, dangling precariously like spiders on their threads; the caravan of support jeeps with gear, food, and supplies for the racers; Helen persevering on the desert hike in blistering heat; members of the 50 teams begin the race by riding 36 miles on horseback.**



Intrepid Helen Klein

BY BETH M. HOWARD





decided to do it," she says, admitting, "the horse-back riding and mountain biking were scary for me." She had been taught to stay away from "dirty animals" as a child so was unfamiliar with riding; the biking was intimidating because she didn't train for it. Even Helen Klein is not invincible—she crashed on her bike during the race. "When I went down, I didn't even know I'd gone down. I had panicked and blacked out. I became furious with myself, angry for giving in to the fear." But she got back on the bike. For Klein, nothing is ever as serious as others make it out to be. She simply states, "My sunglasses cut my eyebrow, but it wasn't a bad wound and it healed perfectly."

Klein feels that what she does is not necessarily exceptional. However, any 73-year-old who runs 100 miles—let alone does something as grueling as the Eco-Challenge—is a rare breed. "I think that what I do is natural. I also believe that exercise slows the aging process. There are people of all ages who could be far more athletic, but they're not because no one has challenged them."

Maybe Klein's ability to meet a challenge is a result of being older and wiser. Maybe it's because as an emergency-room nurse, she had many an encounter with traumatic situations that demanded immediate action. In digging a little deeper, we find she credits her mother with giving her the ability to cope. "On my first day of school, I was writing with my left hand when the teacher came up behind me and hit my hand with a ruler. You weren't allowed to write with your left hand back then. My mother taught me to be strong and stoic about it. If I didn't cry, my mom gave me a bigger hug. For eight years I wrote with my right hand at school and did my homework with my left hand. The incident helped me because I had to deal with it and try harder to overcome an obstacle. Now everything that comes my way, good or bad, I cope with."

Klein's coping mechanism kicked in during the Eco-Challenge, when she and her team had to decide whether or not to drink water from a contaminated source. "There were things floating in it, but we just put iodine in and drank it. You can't always wait until something better comes along. It was either drink or die." Other teams who passed on the same water were medically evacuated due to dehydration; her group never became ill.

Top: Climbers prepare to rappel by putting on harnesses and safety gear; bottom: the canoeing leg on Lake Powell is the grand finale of the Eco-Challenge. Opposite page top: This tent city is one of four transition areas where racers change gear and refuel; bottom: Helen takes her turn scaling the 1,200-foot canyon wall.



The payoff for this determination? She's the world record holder in her age group for a 24-hour run, a 100-mile run, and a 373-mile, six-day race. Norman Klein says, "Helen will deny that she's competitive, but you have to be to do these things." Klein counters him, insisting she races simply to finish. "It hurts me when I pass people. I get a sad feeling."

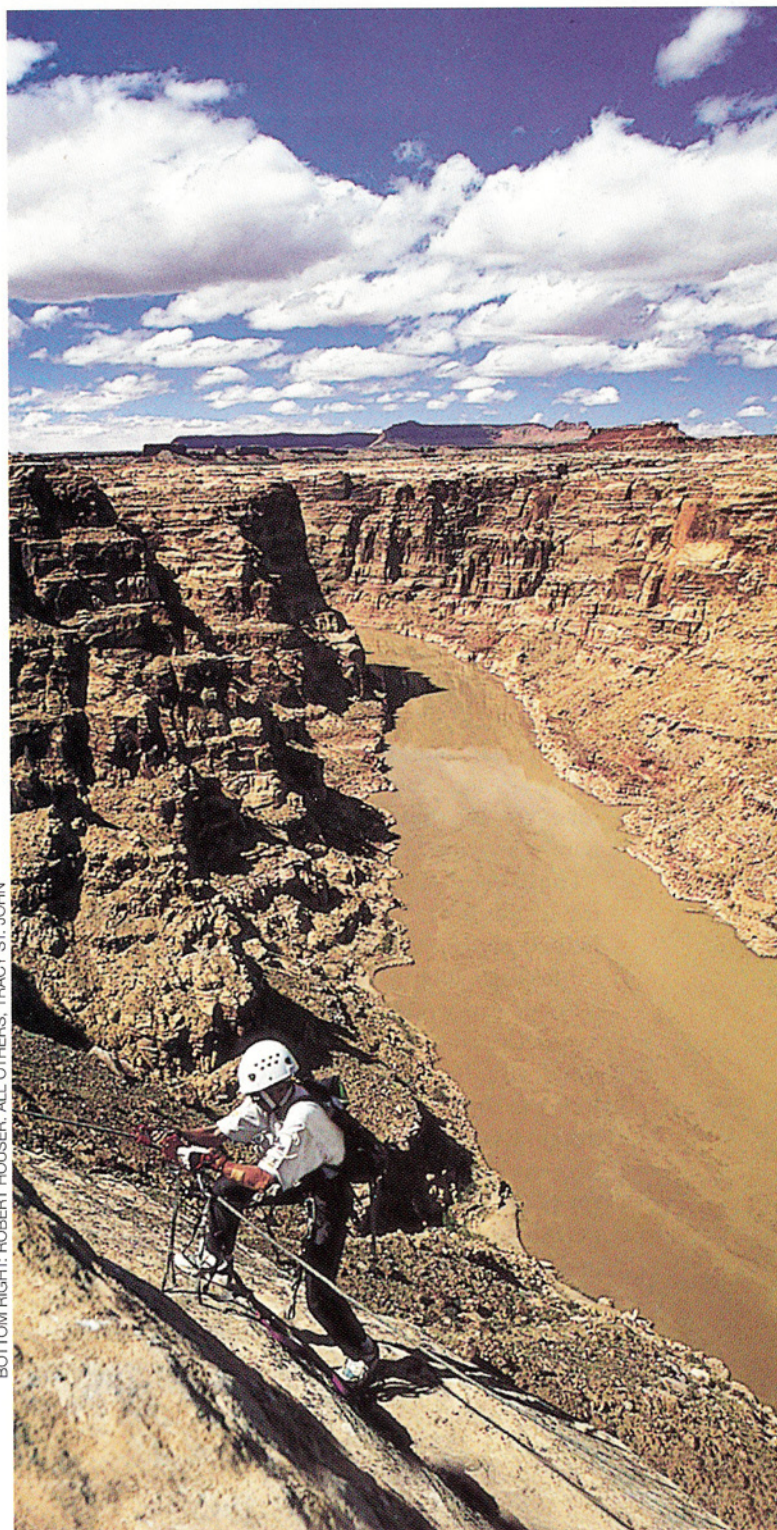
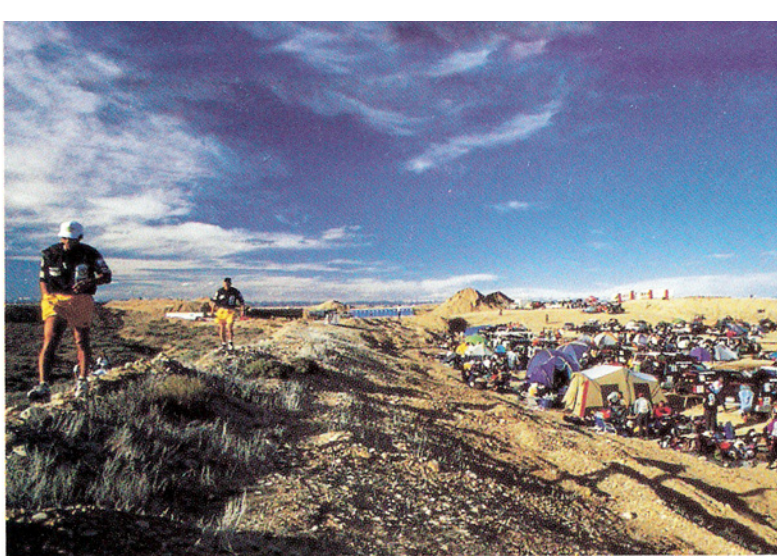
Though she won't admit to a competitive drive, she did make a revealing comment: "When I passed a 70-year-old man during the Marathon Des Sables, a 143-mile stage race over six days in soft sand in Morocco, it gave me the confidence to try for the Eco-Challenge." Yes, it must be that feeling of accomplishment that keeps her racing, aiming for the next Eco-Challenge in British Columbia in August 1996. This time, she'll be heading her own team of four men, all at least 20 years her junior.

Back at her home near Sacramento, California, her life is not so extreme. In fact, it seems relatively balanced. She cooks, she sews, she cleans. She quit nursing at age 53 and has dedicated herself to being "fit and mobile" ever since. She gets up at 4:30 every morning to soak in the hot tub and drink a cup of coffee. Afterward she stretches, reads the paper, then runs a mile to the workout center to lift weights and runs home. "I do something physical every day," she says, though she neglected running last summer so she could hike and camp in Yosemite with her grandchildren. "I have a good base. I don't train a lot, I just race frequently. That's my training."

Helen Klein is strong, beautiful, dedicated, feminine, and positive—the new role model. Her own secret formula for success: "Desire, dedication, and discipline." But what of her need for inspiration? "Everyone who gets to the starting line of an event is a role model for me. I draw strength from all the people out there." Plus she has a mantra that keeps her going strong: "Relax and move, relax and move, relax and move." Should you encounter in a competition a petite, gray-haired woman whispering this to herself, there will be no mistake about who she is. Just be prepared to be passed. □

Beth M. Howard is the West Coast editor of *Sports Traveler*, a freelance writer, and an extreme athlete who also completed the 1995 Eco-Challenge.

Note: Registration for the next Eco-Challenge, scheduled for August 1996 in British Columbia, is closed; 73 teams have paid the \$10,000 entry fee. To be put on a waiting list for 1996 or for information on the 1997 race, contact Eco-Challenge for all the details: Eco-Challenge Lifestyles, 9899 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 208, Los Angeles, CA 90212; 310-553-8855, fax 310-553-7497.



BOTTOM RIGHT: ROBERT HOUSER. ALL OTHERS: TRACY ST. JOHN