

VERTICAL CHALLENGE

CHALLENGED

FORGET THE STAIR CLIMBER IN THE GYM – STAIR CLIMBING IS REACHING NEW HEIGHTS, SCALING SKYSCRAPERS ACROSS THE WORLD IN A CHALLENGE CALLED THE VERTICAL CIRCUIT

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Champions of the Swissôtel Vertical Marathon Women's Open and Men's Open, Suzanne Walsham and Matthias Jahn, at the top; vertical athlete Melissa Moon runs up a flight of stairs.

In thirteen minutes, the average human being can drink a cup of coffee, write two emails, smoke three cigarettes or individually toast four slices of bread. In less than this time, Suzy Walsham and Melissa Moon can reach the top of the Empire State Building – without using the elevators.

Both women competed in the Empire State Building Run Up, making it up 1,860 steps in less than thirteen minutes. That's 2.5 steps a second... and weeks of aching thighs.

Running up the world's tallest towers in as short a time as possible is not a hobby. It is part of a formal competition called the Vertical Challenge. In 2012, the circuit kicked off at the Empire State Building before jetting off to London for the 920 steps at Tower 42. The

As long as they can rack up enough points in the races they run, they can claim the world champion title and cash prize. It's hard to imagine the runners doing it for the money when the total purse for a year of stairs is US\$6,000. It's pocket money.

Melissa Moon won the Empire State Building Run Up in 2010 and 2012. A cross-discipline athlete, Moon has competed in track, road marathons, cross country and mountain running, winning two World Mountain Running titles and representing New Zealand at world championship level.

"I was looking for a new challenge in running, something that was going to test me both mentally and physically in a new way and get me excited again about seeing how =>

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vertical marathon at the Messeturm tower, Basel was a doddle at 542 steps, the least demanding of the series. Then it moved over the border into Germany, where Berlin presented the Park Inn Hotel's 770 steps.

Taiwan's Taipei 101 challenge topped out at a cruel 2,046 steps, followed by a small step down to newcomer Hanoi, Vietnam. The recently completed Landmark 72 tower, now the tallest building in the country, threw down the gauntlet with a fiendish 1,914 steps.

A stopover in Singapore for the 1,336 steps of Swissôtel The Stamford and it was almost time for the season to massage away its cramps and have a good lie down. But not before a dash up The Novo Edificio Abril in Sao Paulo, Brazil. An uncomplicated 672-step race held last month, it signalled the end of the 2012 season.

Singapore-based Australian Suzy Walsham holds top spot on the women's ladder, while Thomas Dold from Germany heads-up the men's rankings. The best results in four main races and one trial are counted, meaning competitors don't need to win every race, or even enter every race.





"There is something very empowering and humbling about racing up the world's most iconic buildings."

surprisingly won New York, so I have just taken it from there." It's hard not to be impressed by someone who "surprisingly" wins a race requiring sheer grit and determination.

Walsham competed in ten stair races in 2012, winning eight of them. In between she squeezed in seven road races. She is in constant training to maintain her competition-level fitness, with her training regime intensifying leading up to a race.

"My weekly training usually consists of two hard sessions on the stairs, plus another hard running session. I supplement this with two easy long runs and two days doing cardio and weights in the gym," she outlines. "I usually have a day off every three to four weeks."

With such intense training, it's no surprise that stair-runners don't need to diet. Walsham professes a weakness for dark chocolate and cakes. "Balance and variety are the keys to a good diet," clarifies Moon.

"When you are training hard there is more of a focus on carbohydrate foods. They provide your muscles with the fuel they need to keep running, and without them your body simply won't have enough energy to perform at its best." While chocolate is a carbohydrate, it's probably not a food Moon recommends.

On a race day both women say that they eat sparingly. Sports bars, bananas, honey and peanut butter regularly feature on the menu, designed to raise blood glucose levels and prepare the body for exercise. "I don't like to eat too much before the race as the lactic acid

generated can make you feel quite sick," Walsham says.

During fast-paced exercise the body can't produce enough energy through the standard aerobic processes that use oxygen, so the working muscles generate energy anaerobically, converting glucose to energy. High levels of the lactate by-product cause acidity in the muscles. That burning sensation where the muscles feel like they're ready to burst from your body like the creatures in *Alien* – lactic acid is to blame.

Lactic acid buildup influences race strategy. "The start of the run is critical; it is necessary not to start too fast, but fast enough," Moon says. "It has to be controlled; if it is too fast you accumulate lactic acid too quickly and by halfway it becomes very difficult."

Most vertical races are individual time trials, particularly for elites, so positioning at the start is not overly important. But Moon admits it can be aggressive with a little jostling as the runners fight to get into the stairwell.

MAGES: International Skyrunning Federation; Getty Editorial & Shutterstock.com



"After the second or third floor everyone settles into their own pace," she says. "During the race I am totally in a zone, all my thoughts are connected with the race and I am concentrating on pace, breathing, technique, being aware of the other competitors, and using self-talk to keep pushing." Moon has a Maori mantra that she uses when the race gets tough – *Kia toa, kia kaha, kia manawanui* – "Be brave, be strong and persevere."

Walsh advises not to count each step: "I try to focus on my form and getting into a rhythm up the stairs. I try not to count the floors, since if you are not feeling great, it can seem like it takes forever to get to the top!" The carrot at the end of the stick for Walsham is coffee and chocolate cake.

Moon takes a different path to recovery. "After getting a massage, hydrating and eating food to replace lost energy, I love to go out dancing," she states. Dancing? With burning thighs? "Vertical running is an intense form of exercise but recovery is very fast and there is very little muscle soreness," Moon insists.

Eight towers, 9,776 steps, four continents and bucket loads of sweat. If that sounds appealing, you have what it takes to start vertical racing, so long as you are blessed with thighs of steel and own a good pair of running shoes. I'll be waiting for you at the top. 🏃



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much I could achieve with this new sport," Moon explains. "There is something very empowering and humbling about racing up the world's most iconic buildings."

Suzy Walsham also cited the search for new challenges as an inspiration, although her entry to the sport was dictated by fate.

"After I moved to Singapore, I saw an advertisement for the Swissôtel Vertical Marathon, so I entered," she says. "I wanted to win the first prize, which was a trip to New York to compete in the Empire State Building Run Up. I won the Singapore race and then

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The Empire State Building; runners start the race up the Empire State Building; athletes rest after running up 920 steps of London's tallest building, Tower 42; Thomas Dold checks his time; London's tallest building, Tower 42.