



CHARLIE FORGHAM-BAILEY FOR NEW STATESMAN

Stretching the limits of ambition: Min Bahadur Sherchan, pictured in Hampshire, ventured up Everest after retiring from the Gurkhas and farming

Rise of the super-agers

As the 100-year life becomes more common, the exploits of an extraordinary set of athletes are forcing scientists to reassess the relationship between performance and growing old

By *Xan Rice*

In 1952, the Swiss doctor and Alpinist Edouard Wyss-Dunant established the concept of the “death zone”, the altitude above which human beings are unable to acclimatise because of the lack of oxygen. The mark is generally set at 8,000 metres, a height exceeded by only 14 mountains, all of them in the Himalayan or Karakoram ranges in Asia. Of these, at that time, only Annapurna had been scaled, conquered in 1950. But by the end of the decade just two of the eight-thousanders were still up for grabs: Shishapangma in Tibet and Nepal’s Dhaulagiri, at 8,167 metres the world’s highest unclimbed peak.

Known as the “White Mountain”, and notorious for avalanches and fierce winds, Dhaulagiri had defeated seven previous expeditions before a Swiss-led attempt in 1960. The party included 13 climbers, with an average age of 30, and a handful of Nepalese sherpa guides. As was customary, the government also insisted they take along a liaison officer, in this case a 28-year-old former soldier called Min Bahadur Sherchan.

Climbing teams usually regarded the liaison officers as a hindrance, “happiest when there is little to do and much to earn”, as the expedition leader Max Eiselin noted in his book about the summit attempt.

But Sherchan, who learned English while serving with the Gurkhas in the British army, was different. “He was co-operative and

precise and his strong Mongolian features suggested a capable mountaineer; he very quickly became one of us,” Eiselin wrote.

To avoid wasting energy hauling supplies up the mountain on foot, Eiselin brought from Switzerland a light aircraft capable of landing in the snow and taking off on very short runways. But after several successful deliveries, and with the team preparing for its assault on the summit, the plane went missing, presumed crashed.

Sherchan and a porter were sent down the mountain to try to find the wreckage, which they did, before descending to a village in the valley where they could notify the foreign ministry. Instead of staying there, they decided to head back up, equipped only with an ice axe and a ski stick.

With no climbing experience, no footprints to guide them or rope to arrest their falls, the pair spent three days and nights crossing treacherous ice fields and crevasse-streaked glaciers, striding ahead “past all the lurking dangers, like lost children full of the joy of life going unwittingly to their doom”, Eiselin wrote. “All they had was their great strength, good and warm clothing, and an almost frivolous trust in their God.”

Late on the fourth night of their march, in thick mist and -35° Celsius cold, the two men ascended the mountain’s north-east col and stumbled upon the expedition tents at 5,700 metres.

“It was easy for me. I was stronger than the sherpas,” Sherchan, who is now 85, recalls one morning in late February while sitting in the narrow storeroom of a supermarket in Aldershot, Hampshire.

As a non-climbing member of Eiselin’s team, he was not given the opportunity to accompany the six men who completed Dhaulagiri’s first ascent on 13 May 1960. But he did go on to become a celebrated mountaineer in his own right.

It took him 48 years. In 2008, aged 76, Sherchan climbed into the death zone for the first time, becoming the oldest person to scale Mount Everest. Now, nine years on, he is heading back for another attempt.

Standing up in the storeroom aisle, surrounded by packets of rice and bottles of cooking oil, the 85-year-old flexes his right arm. “Feel it,” he says, smiling. His bicep is as firm as a new tennis ball.

There’s a scene early on in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* where the boy’s four grandparents are lying in the same bed, “shrivelled as prunes, and as bony as skeletons”. Like all extremely old people, they are delicate and weak, Roald Dahl reminds readers. This would have rung true when the book appeared in 1964 and also when my parents read it to me about 15 years later. Even for the most vital old people, a game of bowls ►

► was the limit of their exertions. What did seem fantastical to me were the ages of Charlie Bucket's grandparents – all of them over 90, with Grandpa Joe 96 and a half. As a child, I knew nobody that old.

Today, as I read the book to my six-year-old son, it seems as though Dahl was merely ahead of his time regarding demographics. For much of the past 200 years, advances in tackling infant mortality and chronic diseases of the middle-aged, as well as improved nutrition, income and public health systems, have added two years to life expectancy every decade. As Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott note in their fascinating book, *The 100-Year Life*, published last year,

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we are now “in the midst of an extraordinary transition” in longevity.

Consider this. In 1914, the chance of a child living to 100 was 1 per cent. My son has a 50 per cent chance of making it to 104. Even someone my age – 42 – in the West has a near-even chance of living as long as Grandpa Joe, and a 60-year-old is as likely as not to witness another three decades on Earth. Within the next three years, for the first time, the global number of adults aged over 65 will exceed that of children under five.

This change in lifespans has huge implications for society. We will have to work longer and save more for retirement. And what of our health? Will we be confined to bed in our final years, delicate and weak, like Charlie's grandparents? Probably not. As Gratton and Scott note, it's not just that people will live longer: they will be healthier for even longer. Citing various studies, including US research that showed a sharp fall in the proportion of over-85-year-olds classified as disabled between 1984 and 2004, they write: “Older people seem to be fitter and also can achieve more as technology and public support improves.”

And some of them – the mountaineer Min Bahadur Sherchan and other “super-agers” – are demonstrating that “fitter” means not merely staying upright, but also fitter in the sporting sense. Their extraordinary achievements have led scientists to reassess the possibilities of performance and ageing.

Take Ed Whitlock. Born in London, he excelled at cross-country as a teenager. After moving to Canada following university, however, he stopped running, only taking it up again in his forties.

By then, he was already past his athletic peak. Michael Joyner, a physician-researcher at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota who studies human performance, says that our aerobic capacity – the functional capacity of our heart, lungs and blood vessels – generally declines by 10 per cent a decade from our thirties onwards. Our muscle tone drops in our forties and fifties, as does our speed, co-ordination and flexibility.

“We know, however, that the rate of decline into our seventies can be moderated by training and exercise,” Joyner told me.

After retiring in his sixties, Whitlock started to run seriously. In 2003, he became the first man over 70 to dip under three

hours for a marathon. The next year, aged 73, he shaved four minutes off that time and clocked 2:54:48. It is regarded as one of the greatest runs ever by an athlete of any age.

A friendly, laid-back man of slight build and with flowing white hair, Whitlock had no coach and no strict diet and favoured well-worn shoes. What he was disciplined about was his training. Asked by a journalist for his secret to a happy marriage, he said: “It probably helps that I go out like a bloody fool and run for something like three hours every day.”

Whitlock's times slowed, of course. But in October, aged 85, and just a few months before he died of prostate cancer, he ran a sub-four-hour marathon, the oldest person ever to do so.

At the same stage in her life, Olga Kotelko was barely getting started. In 2009 at the World Masters Games in Sydney, she ran the 100 metres in 23.95 seconds – at the age of 90 – faster than some of the finalists in the race for women a decade younger. Born in 1919, one of 11 siblings, she grew up on a farm in Canada and lived an active, if not sporty life until her late seventies, when she started to take track and field seriously.

According to a *New York Times* profile, she hit the gym three times a week and did punishing routines of planks, squats and bench presses. Even in her nineties she did push-ups and sit-ups, keeping her body strong and probably her mind, too. When researchers studied her brain in 2012, they found it had shrunk less than those of others her age. Two years later, aged 95, she became the oldest ever female competitor in the indoor sprints, long jump, high jump

and triple jump at the World Masters Athletics Championships. (She died the following month.)

Perhaps the most remarkable late-life achievements of all are by Robert Marchand. Born in 1911, the five-foot Frenchman fought fires in Paris before being taken prisoner during the Second World War, drove trucks in Venezuela, chopped trees in Canada, and tended gardens and sold wine. Only after he retired at 70 did he return to cycling, his pastime as a young man. He rode most days, on the streets or on an indoor trainer, usually at a relaxed pace. He kept going through his eighties and his nineties, maintaining a diet heavy on fruit and vegetables and light on meat and coffee.

In 2012, he set the one-hour record for cyclists over 100, completing 15.1 miles. Then Véronique Billat stepped in. A professor of exercise science at the University of Paris-Saclay in France, Billat had found that older athletes could increase their aerobic fitness with intense exercise, but had never studied anyone as old as Marchand.

She tested his VO₂ max – a measure of how efficiently our bodies use oxygen, and a strong indicator of fitness – and his pedalling power. She then gave him a new training regimen. Four in five of his workouts were still performed at an easy pace, but for the other one he pedalled much faster. After two years, and 6,000 miles on the bike, Billat tested Marchand again.

He had improved his peak power output by 39 per cent. His VO₂ max was 13 per cent higher and in the same range as a sedentary man less than half his age. Marchand then made another attempt at the world record, now aged 102. This time he covered 16.7 miles.

In a paper published in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* in December, Billat and her fellow researchers said they had proved for the first time that it was possible to improve the performance of a centenarian through better training. Beyond breaking records, the quest for progress served to “add life to the life”, rather than trying to “kill the death”, they wrote.

“Robert treats each minute of life as though it's his last,” Billat told me. “And he does not take himself too seriously.”

She credits the surge in competitive older athletes to several factors: an increase in leisure time, better health, the popularity of sports such as running and, crucially, disposable income. But she wonders whether it will continue if pensions become smaller.

“Super-agers” such as Whitlock, Kotelko and Marchand also share another characteristic, says Joyner, the physician at the Mayo Clinic. “If you look at a lot of them, they are humble on one level but also, in a way,



Carry on flying: Olga Kotelko was a star track-and-field athlete into her mid-nineties

pleasantly aggressive. It's like: 'Limitations? Who says?'

That could be Min Bahadur Sherchan's motto. He grew up poor in the village of Tatopani in the central Nepali district of Myagdi. In 1948, aged 17, and having spent a total of two months in school, he was recruited by the British army and sent for training in the Malay Peninsula before joining the Queen's Gurkha Signals.

After five years he returned to Nepal hoping to study and then see the world. When his plans fell through he became involved in politics and, through his government contacts, was assigned to the Dhaulagiri expedition.

Afterwards, Sherchan forgot about mountaineering and set about providing for his wife and seven children. He established an apple farm, which failed. "People thought

I was crazy," he says. "Apples were then a new thing in Nepal."

Overseeing road construction was less interesting but paid the bills. By the time Sherchan retired he was living in the capital, Kathmandu. Though he often drank alcohol, he had never smoked and he kept up a stretching regime. He felt fit. And one day, when he was 72, something clicked in his head. "I should summit Everest. Yes, why not summit Everest?"

At that point, nobody older than 65 had climbed the peak. Ignoring protests from his wife, children and friends, he began to prepare, walking alone across Nepal from north to south and east to west to prove his fitness. He struggled to convince the government, though, and only in 2008 was the permit for his "Senior Citizen Everest Expedition" approved. The climb went smoothly and on 25 May of that year he crossed into the death zone and stood on the summit.

Back home, Sherchan resolved to stay healthy in case he had the chance to climb again, cutting rice from his diet in favour of maize, wheat and other grains, and cooking all his own food. Every night he drank a glass of hot milk with sugar.

In 2013 he saw his opportunity. The 80-year-old Japanese adventurer Yuichiro Miura, whose record Sherchan had broken, announced that he would attempt Everest again. Sherchan decided to defend his title. (He is a year older than Miura.)

Miura reached the top and took the record – though he had to be airlifted to safety on the descent. But Sherchan didn't get to climb because of a bureaucratic mix-up with dates. He tried again in 2015, but the terrible earthquake that struck Nepal ended the climbing season early.

In mid-April, Sherchan will once more head to base camp. He is confident of success, thanks to his fitness regime. At the supermarket in Aldershot, owned by an ex-Gurkha hosting his brief fundraising visit to the UK, he demonstrates the twice-daily workout he has performed for the past five years: swinging his arms marching style, lifting them from his sides and rotating them in circles, stretching his hands above his head, doing squats and bicep curls.

Since the start of the year he has added two-hour walks carrying a 25-kilogram backpack to his training, in the hills or up and down the stairs of a five-storey building.

Does he not feel that age is against him? "Three things can stop you on Everest: your heart, breathing issues or the altitude," he says. "I don't have problems with any of these, and though I don't have any special powers, I'm fit and have determination."

He hopes to make Nepal proud and inspire elderly people. And even if he doesn't make it this time, there's always next year.

"Until I'm 87, it will be OK. After that, you never know." ●

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