



# Whistler ultramarathoner Vicki Romanin proving that age is just a number

AT 62 YEARS YOUNG, ROMANIN FINISHED GRUELLING TOR 330 RACE FIRST IN HER AGE GROUP

BY DAVID SONG

**THE MARATHON IS** the longest race on the Olympic program. Since 1921, it has spanned a length of 42.195 kilometres. For most people, the word “marathon” is synonymous with the idea of an ultimate test in endurance. Most people can hardly fathom the idea of running an “ultramarathon,” which is any footrace longer than 42.195 kilometres.

Vicki Romanin is not “most people.” She describes marathons the way that most would describe a 100-metre sprint: “very short and intense.” The longtime Whistlerite has done her fair share of marathons, but she prefers to experience a bigger, more immersive odyssey. Enter the ultramarathon.

Ultras, as they are sometimes called, come in various forms. You have everything from 50-kilometre races to 170-kilometre grinds like the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB) in the Alps. Even more epic are the multi-day, multi-stage pain trains like Italy’s Tor des Geants (TOR 330): approximately 350 kilometres mixed with more than 100,000 feet of technical ascent and descent.

For most of us mere mortals, events like the UTMB and TOR 330 are the stuff of legend. The physical abilities required

to complete them seem borderline superheroic. It can be hard to believe that those who wield such abilities, like American Dean Karnazes, Spaniard Kilian Jornet or Emelie Forsberg of Sweden, do not in fact hail from another planet.

Yet there is a cadre of such extreme athletes living right here in the Sea to Sky corridor, including Romanin. Originally from Prince George, she has called Whistler home for more than 20 years. Romanin grew up

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- VICKI ROMANIN

running, figure skating and riding horses, but turning pro in any sport was never on her mind. Instead, she became a dentist, and running became a key way for her to maintain her physical and mental health.

At age 50, Romanin’s equivalent of a midlife crisis was the decision to start running competitively. That was more than a decade ago. Today, at 62 years young, Romanin has completed the TOR 330—twice.

## A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

In September 2017, 52 per cent of TOR 330

competitors crossed the finish line, including Romanin. Since then, she has experienced a litany of injuries, including a ruptured ACL, multiple hamstring issues, and even a sliced-up Achilles tendon courtesy of her cat. From December 2020 to August 2022, Romanin worked her way through physiotherapy and tested herself in various races from Whistler to Oregon.

The final litmus test was this year’s Squamish 50/50 in August: 50 miles and 50

kilometres on consecutive days. Romanin had finished twice before in 2014 and 2018, and managed to do so again this time, but five hours slower than her previous effort. Even backed by veteran coaches in Eric Carter and Gary Robbins of Ridgeline Athletics, the odds were against her, and Romanin was sure that there was “no friggin’ way in hell” she could face the TOR 330 again.

So why did she do it anyway?

Romanin’s husband, Michael R., had supported her for years, and he needed a vacation. The couple had also promised their close (and recently widowed) friend

Karen that they would see the race through.

“I’m passionate about running, I’m passionate about being in the mountains,” Romanin said over the phone. “But the fact that other people had also, you know, invested in this particular race, it was a little push I needed to not just give up.”

In early September, Romanin, Michael R., and Karen arrived in Courmayeur, a ski resort town in northwest Italy that serves as both beginning and endpoint of the TOR 330. They were joined by two more friends: Michael H., who would also run the 330, and his brother Robert, who would be his crew.

Although ultramarathon running is an individual sport, competitors are blessed by the work of their crews: small groups of auxiliary personnel who change headlamp batteries, restock food and water, clean clothes and provide navigational assistance. Romanin’s crew consisted of her husband, Michael R., and Karen, and though Karen had never crewed before, she took to her new duties fast and well. Romanin described their presence as “the icing on the cake,” and their support allowed her to focus on race strategy.

Competitors have 150 hours to complete the TOR 330, yet it is *not* a stage race where everyone runs the same segments together. Instead, athletes must decide when to eat, when to sleep, and how far to push themselves each day, all the while meeting stringent time cut-offs en route to six major “Life Bases” and 34 smaller aid stations placed throughout the course. This makes the mental aspect of an ultramarathon equally as demanding

**GROUP GRIND** Italy’s TOR 330 ultramarathon is not for the faint of heart.

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**BEST IN CLASS** Vicki Romanin raises the trophy she earned for finishing first in her age group at this year's TOR 330 in Italy.

PHOTO SUBMITTED

as the physical side.

Fortunately, Romanin had experience to lean on. She and her coach, Robbins, prepared a variety of dehydrated camp foods so she would be well-fuelled while avoiding eating the same things each day. Robbins also emphasized the importance of getting enough sleep in a tactical manner.

"If I pushed it any further [than what was wise], I knew I would start hallucinating," Romanin said. "I have a history of that, and many ultra runners do. I needed every advantage I could get this time."

Above all, Romanin clung to a simple play that Robbins had called in the huddle before the race. "Six 60-kilometre days," he had said. "You can do this in your sleep."

### HELLO ITALY, MY OLD FRIEND

Romanin began the 2022 TOR 330 at noon local time on Sept. 11 as one of 11 Canadians among 1,100 athletes. She described the first two days as the "toughest two 50-kilometre mountain runs you will ever do" and by day three, the carnage was piling up. Romanin's crew was her safety net, and as Michael H. forged ahead, a chance encounter with a fellow athlete became an unexpected source of strength for her.

On the eve of day four, the Whistlerite spotted a lady that she refers to as "J," a younger competitor from Alaska. They quickly bonded, helping each other through the dramatic ups and downs of the event.

"J had some pretty serious doubts—and wild mood swings—which are absolutely normal on long ultras," Romanin wrote in her race blog. "The highs and lows are not something you can describe, but if you can't get over them, they can derail your race. Sometimes you just need a friend to let you vent and be the calm voice of reason that you

can put one more foot in front of the other."

A new adversary emerged on the final day of competition: a storm. Romanin and J began the final 50-kilometre stretch in high spirits, which were quickly obliterated by an incoming blizzard. Conditions deteriorated from pleasant, Whistler-like fall weather to multiple inches of horizontally blowing mixed precipitation that bested the athletes' top-flight rain gear like armour-piercing needles.

Race officials directed an increasing bottleneck of competitors to a nearby mountain farm for shelter. The 2022 TOR 330 was called off on Sept. 17 due to hazardous weather, with Romanin a mere 20 kilometres from the finish. Dauntless mountain guides rounded up everyone who was still on course, and all who had made the final time cut-off were given credit for finishing the race.

Romanin did more than just finish, however. With two years of recurring injuries behind her, she placed first in her age category among women: a better result than what she had achieved in 2017.

"It was just a miracle that I had [no injuries]," Romanin said. "It just went click, click, click, after all that hard work from physiotherapists and coaches. I'm truly amazed that it all worked out."

Romanin's achievement seems exceptional, and in many ways it is. Yet she observed that competitors around her age (and even older) were commonplace in the TOR 330, especially from European nations.

"Generally, as we get older, we get better at endurance, [becoming] a little craftier, a little more patient," the Whistlerite opined. "You learn not to wear yourself out at the beginning, you learn to take care of yourself. So, for all those reasons, people in their 50s, 60s and even 70s can do very well."

Perhaps, at least in some situations, age—and distance—are just numbers after all. ■





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## Whistler Nordics AGM

**Please join us for a social night of food and drinks at the Lost Lake Passive House for our Annual General Meeting on Thursday, November 17th at 6:00pm.**

Come hear what we've been working on and our future plans. All Board of Director positions are up for re-election and are voluntary. If you are interested in joining the Board please email the Administrator in advance and attend the meeting to nominate yourself. Please note you must be a current member of Whistler Nordics.



Email: [admin@whistlernordics.com](mailto:admin@whistlernordics.com)  
**Food and drinks will be provided.**

NOVEMBER 11, 2022

## Lest We Forget

*Thank you to all who fought for our freedom and to those who continue to serve to defend it.*



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