

Bling it on

We're in a medals arms race, with events competing to outdo one another by coming up with bigger and gaudier creations – and runners hoarding ever-larger collections. Duncan Craig investigates our obsession with bling



ACTUAL SIZE

SIZE MATTERS
The Little Rock Marathon and the Guardians of CODRC Marathon, Telford



TOUGH CALL
Peaky Blinders
vs The Joker

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hen I was seven years old I entered our village's inaugural three-mile fun run – and won my age group. The fact that there were only three of us in the under-10s category, and that the other two were barely five, didn't strike me as important. What did strike me as very important was

the medal I received: solid bronze, 22-carat gold leaf, with a teal-and-red ribbon embroidered by a team of fifth-generation artisans in a backstreet Venetian workshop.

Or at least that's how I remember it.

I'm looking at that medal now and, as with revisiting many things from one's childhood – an early house; the school assembly hall; episodes of *The A-Team* – I realise this medal is perhaps not all my young self thought it to be.

It's manifestly cheap as chips. Flimsy, too. Some numpty even failed to glue on straight the plastic disc with the picture of the heroically disproportioned runner (though, in their defence, my avid stroking may have dislodged it).

But somehow it doesn't matter. My pride remains undimmed, and just glancing at this medal unleashes a surge of warm, fuzzy memories. Such is the power of race bling.

MY PRECIOUS...METAL

In some ways, my village's three-miler was ahead of its time. This was the early 1980s. The London Marathon – that great engine of what has become an amateur-running juggernaut – was in its infancy and you'd go entire days without seeing a runner in the street. Now, as we know, everyone is at it. Halves, marathons, 5Ks, 10Ks, ultras, obstacle runs. Thousands of events, all united by one thing: there's (almost) always a medal waiting at the finish.

And, for some, that represents an irresistible allure.

Darren Smith's gold rush started when he took up running six years ago. Since then, the Treasury analyst from north London has banked 164 medals – something he refers to as his 'work in progress'. He freely admits to checking out the bling before committing to a race, and last year he even managed to earn more medals than races run; his 12 marathons in 12 months to raise money for pancreatic cancer earned him an extra medal from the Global Marathon Challenges company. 'It's my crowning achievement of last year,' he says. 'It's as big as a hubcap.'

His flow of precious metal isn't about to dry up. The 45-year-old, who writes a running blog, races 25-30 times a year and is aiming to join the 100 Marathon Club by the age of 50. He has created a medal wall in a spare bedroom, with one rack for marathons, another for halves and 10Ks, and a third for miscellaneous races. 'I look at the wall sometimes and think, "Wow, I've actually earned all of those". It motivates me – but it's also there to show others.'

'I'm quite privileged to be able to run abroad,' says Smith. 'I've run in 13 countries and do four or five foreign races a year. I like to share my experiences with other people who might not necessarily have that opportunity – and the medals are a way to do that. Take the North Carolina Half. It was the inaugural year, and I ran around a Nascar race track in a hail storm feeling ridiculously jetlagged, and couldn't feel half my body by the end. But the medal lit up and spun around.'

'Strip away the medals and the sport would definitely be the poorer'



Clockwise from top left: The Nascar-themed North Carolina Half; Ghostbusters; Martyn Ewers with his medal from the Top Gun Run (Top Grun: see what they did?); Darren Smith's 12 Marathons in 12 Months medal from the Global Marathon Challenges company; and Darren with some of his collection

Ironically, the medal he covets most is one of the least blingy around. 'I got injured attempting The Comrades Marathon, in South Africa, last year. So, even though it's a tiny, 1p-sized thing, that medal is the holy grail for me.'

So what is the overwhelming appeal of all this silverwear? 'I never won medals at school so, for me, it became this amazing achievement. Strip away the medals and the sport would definitely be the poorer.' Not that a race would dare to make such an error these days. A few years back The Dublin Marathon miscalculated its number of runners, which meant it ran out of medals. 'I remember it was prickly on social media after that race, to say the least,' says Smith.

Smith, though, has a mild case of gold fever in comparison with his good friend Martyn Ewers, from Devon. 'Bling obsessed' is how Smith describes him, and Ewers – whose 250-strong medal collection features in his Twitter profile picture – isn't about to argue.

'It's always been about the bling for me,' he says, with a chuckle. 'I just always needed that motivation to get me to the end. Otherwise, why not just run round the block? It sounds sad now, but in the early days I would always check with the race director to see whether there was a medal.'

Ewers believes it's extremely rare to find a race these days that doesn't offer some sort of finisher's medal to mark the achievement. But he stumbled across one earlier this year – a Long Distance Walkers Association marathon. His disappointment was palpable, but because the event was his 125th marathon, the 38-year-old contacted a company called Mega Marathoners, which helps runners recognise landmark races. His spreadsheet was duly verified and he claimed a nice little bit of bling to add to his collection. ▶



GREAT RANGE
The flip-open London Landmarks Half Marathon and the Star Wars-themed May the Fourth Be With You race



STATE OF THE ART
Texas just has to go one bigger

'Anything we can do to get people off their butts and moving is a good thing'

Some bling, such as Smith's Nascar medal, has moving parts. This year's inaugural London Landmarks Half Marathon offered a hinged medal that opens up to reveal an engraved map of the capital. Others are all about function: bottle openers, bottle stoppers, wind chimes, even stacking and interlocking ones; the Across the Bay 10K race, in Maryland, US, for example, has a five-part medal, with a new segment earned each year (culminating in 2018). It's quirky, original and ingeniously self-serving. Are you going to risk missing a year and not completing the set?

Plenty of races opt for a unique design that reflects the nature of their event, be this an oversized guitar, giant snowflake, an outline of a state, county or island, a skull (sinister), Santa (less so) or a horseshoe. My Tough Guy 2006 medal features the latter, or at least a miniature bronze version of it; for the real thing, you'll need to enter the Bird-in-Hand Half Marathon in Pennsylvania. It's run through Amish farmland (Amish children staff the water stations) and the medals are genuine horseshoes fashioned by the reclusive community's blacksmiths. It's *Witness*, with energy gels.

LORDS OF THE BLING

Remarkably, theirs is not the biggest medal out there. That title belongs to either the Texas Marathon or the Little Rock Marathon in Arkansas, depending on who you ask and which year you check. Little Rock's medal for this year is 21.6cm high and weighs more than a kilogram, meaning the injury risk for its 13,000 competitors doesn't end at the finish line.

The duo behind this proudly more-is-more offering are the self-styled 'bad girls of marathon running', race directors Gina Pharis and Geneva Lamm. The catalyst for what has become an exponential increase in both the scale and extravagance of the 16-year-old race's swag was an event the pair ran where the marathon runners and the half-marathon competitors got exactly the same medal.

'After that we said, "This will never happen in our race",' recalls Pharis, 54. 'It changed that very day. We got straight on the phone with our medal maker. It's called Little Rock but we have a big medal. I believe that's what you Brits call irony.'

The pair love the buzz around their medals, which they like to reveal each year in a pre-race video skit. This year's is a sub-Monty Python medieval-knight farce, complete with dodgy production values and even dodgier English accents. However, it's undeniably entertaining. The medal itself (shown on p55) is like something from the court of Louis XIV, only without the reserve and subtlety. With an emerald-eyed dragon, castle and golden goblet, it's gaudy in the extreme and, yes, unmissable. It's also expensive to make.

'Rival marathons spend about \$1 a head on their medals,' says Lamm. 'Ours are more than \$10.' But profit is not their motivation. 'We think that the achievement of finishing a marathon is magnificent and huge and wonderful, and so should the medal be,' says Lamm. She doesn't set much store by critics who say that medals such as theirs are fomenting unhealthy materialistic instincts among competitors and detracting from the purity of running for running's sake.

'I've run enough marathons – some 150 – to be able to say, definitively, that anything we can do to get people off their butts and moving is a good thing. If it takes slathering butter on Gina and making her run down the street, then we're going to do that. We have a health crisis.' Their strategy is seemingly working. Little Rock Marathon is growing

year on year, with a third of the field first-timers. 'We are truly getting people off the couch,' says Pharis, proudly.

Their compatriot, Elizabeth Kalifeh, is fully on board. She has more than 80 medals (including a dinner plate-sized offering from Little Rock – it's insane) and she's just getting started. She is on a mission to run a race in all 50 US states – 'just a southern girl racing the states trying to find the best bling out there,' is how the 37-year-old's website, runningforbling.com, puts it.

'I definitely won't do a race unless you get a medal, but that wouldn't be the only consideration. It has to be a good race too,' says Kalifeh. As a 1:35 half-marathoner and 3:28 marathoner, she's what she terms 'competitive' these days, wanting to test herself as well as pick up the finish-line booty. But she has a soft spot for the 'blingkered', whose focus is only on the medals, having been one of them for most of her running life. 'If that's what motivates people into turning towards a healthy lifestyle, then I'm all for it,' she says.

Catering to this insatiable appetite for bling are a string of companies offering display options for collections. Racks bearing the name of individual events are common, as are those with motivational mantras such as 'always earned, never given'. Others are fully customisable, like Kalifeh's chalkboard with 50 hooks for the 50 US states, which is in her home office in Alabama.

Naomi Newton-Fisher, 36, would love to have all 120 of her medals on show in her house in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. But with twin 16-month-old girls, space is limited, so most are stored in a box, with only a handful that are particularly important to her out on display.

'My medals mean the world to me,' she says. 'Some are absolute works of art. The ones from White Star Running [which stages the Ox Races, as well as more niche events such as Cider Frolic and, for those who like a good phallus on their bling, Giants Head]. My other favourites are from the races put on by Traviss Willcox's Saxons, Vikings & Normans company – those have stunning medals.'

Ah yes, Traviss Willcox – one-time world record holder for the number of marathons run in one year (114, in 2011). I catch up with the legendary figure at his home near Canterbury in Kent. He's been staging races since 2011 and organises upwards of 70 a year. I want to know what makes his medals so special, why he goes to so much trouble and, in a business in which margins are tighter than an out-of-shape-runner's Lycra, the cost of it all.

'Medals are very, very important,' emphasises the 51-year-old. 'One of our mantras is "always leave the runners happy" and I believe that no matter how the run has gone, if you get a nice medal at the end, you walk away happy.'

'Let's not pretend there isn't a marketing element to this too,' says Willcox. 'For the smaller races, it can help define you and distinguish



IF THE SHOE FITS...
The Bird-in-Hand Half Marathon medal, fashioned by Amish blacksmiths

you from the rest.' The economics can be a challenge, however. 'The trouble with medals is that a lot of the cost is upfront, as a new mould has to be created' says Willcox. 'I've found this can cost up to £1,000. You have to try to budget it over two to three years and if you can use the mould again – say, for different-coloured medals in subsequent years – you can recoup some of the costs.' Some of his 'works of art' cost up to £24 each to make – and this in events with entry fees as low as £40, with a chunk also going to charity. 'Medals are our biggest ►

What do you want, a medal?

Five unusual finisher's mementos



GLASS ACT
Receptacles for getting your post-race celebration off to a flyer come

in all shapes and sizes, including shot – and even wine – glasses. But you can't argue with the Fuller's Thames Towpath Ten pint glass – particularly as the 10-mile course takes you close to the brewer's Chiswick HQ. **Next race April 14, 2019** west4harriers.com/ttt



TEMPT SLATE
Fitting neatly with the Snowdonia Marathon's commendable

attempts to become the UK's first entirely green marathon (the race T-shirts are made from organic cotton and even the race numbers are recyclable) is this event's unique memento: a finisher's coaster made from local slate. **Next race October 2019** snowdoniamarathon.co.uk



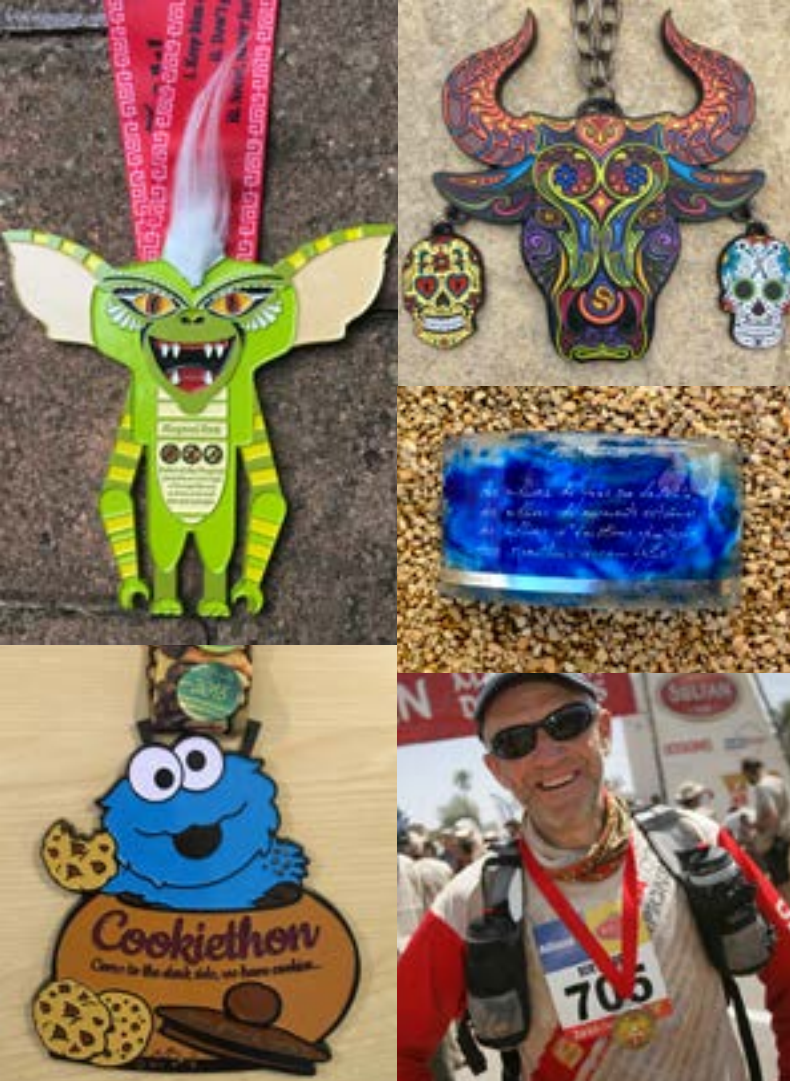
CRYSTAL HAUL
In the early days of the 95-mile West Highland Way Race, in the late

1980s, finishers were treated to everything from personalised paperweights to chunky water jugs. These days, waiting for runners at the finish line in Fort William is a crystal glass goblet. **Next race June 22, 2019** westhighlandwayrace.org



ROOT FINDER
With the men's, women's and

kids' races named, respectively, Knacker Cracker, Knicker Knacker and Nipper Knacker, few runners will be turning up to Surrey's Box Hill expecting a solemn post-race stash. Just as well, as child finishers receive...carrots. **Next race January 1, 2019** trionium.com/knackercracker



Clockwise from top left: this is what happens if you feed your Mogwai Run medal after dark; the glorious Day of the Dead medal; Rory Coleman's rather elegant trophy marking his 1,000th marathon; Rory finishes the Marathon des Sables, again; the 2016 Cookiethon: come to the dark side, we have cookies...



expense by a colossal margin,' he says, adding ruefully: 'I've had some financial disasters.'

But he's not about to change. There is a sense of a collector's zeal and, sure enough, he modestly confesses to having his own 400-strong medal collection. They're on display on three racks, and one stands out from all the rest. 'The Little Rock one is ridiculous,' he chuckles. 'I ran that in 2014 and people were clutching them even after they were hung around their necks because they were simply too big to let them hang. I have wooden ones, spiny ones, spiky ones – every conceivable type. They're part of the furniture and they all tell a story.'

REALITY CHECK

With this enormous appetite for bling, one of the ways to balance the event cost books is, perversely, to not stage an event at all. At least not in the traditional sense. Welcome to the world of the virtual race. No place for the London Marathon? How about running it, in your own time, and in a spot of your choosing, over the course of, say, a week? You pay £12 for your troubles, a proportion of which goes to charity, and assuming you can prove the cumulative distance via GPS-watch stats, parkrun times etc, a snazzy medal will be yours.

There are loads of these virtual race-medal outfits out there – such as powvirtualrunning.co.uk, virtualrunneruk.com, racethedistance.com – offering bespoke bling for every conceivable running challenge. The trend is slightly surreal, decidedly postmodern and rampantly popular. If my race schedule wasn't so busy I'd be chasing one of the highly sought-after *Top Gun* Run or *Star Wars*-themed medals. Or one that caused real waves in the running community: the *Peaky Blinders*

medal, created for the Peaky Runners group, which organises a virtual version of the Three Peaks Challenge.

'The response to that one was phenomenal,' says George Horner, sales manager for leading running event-service company Running Imp. Bespoke Medals, its bling wing, is growing exponentially. It has secured the contract for the London Marathon in 2019 and caters, it estimates, for roughly three-quarters of the UK running market. The Peaky Blinders medal was among 2.4 million it produced last year, with this year's tally set to surpass three million.

'From a race director's point of view, an attractive bespoke medal is becoming mandatory,' says Horner. The two key changes he cites in recent years are the features of medals – opening and closing; spinning; flashing LED lights – and the rise in virtual races. 'A lot of virtual companies are entering the market, which gives runners loads more choice and an extra impetus to run. There are no real barriers to entry and with no need for marshals, first aid or route marking, they're easy to set up.'

'As for the bespoke medal market, I think we're a long way off saturation,' he adds. 'People want bigger, blingier and more fantastic and that's not about to stop.'

Arguably the biggest, blingiest and most fantastic item of race bling of all isn't made by Bespoke Medals. And nor is it available to all-comers. It's a one-off. It sits in the Cardiff home of Rory Coleman, one of the most prolific runners of this or any age, and was presented to him last autumn on the occasion of his 1,000th marathon, in Nottingham. Commissioned by his wife, Jenny, a fellow enthusiast, it's a rock-shaped glass trophy, like an enormous paperweight, and it bears the words 'thousands of steps on the road, thousands of extreme moments, 1,000 marathons completed' (only in French, which sounds better).

'The bling to end all bling,' is how Coleman describes it, and it's difficult to argue with him. 'It's my most precious thing outside of my family,' he says.

Through Coleman's running career, which began late in life – but in earnest – in the early 1990s, it's possible to plot the evolution of modern race bling. And it confirms that the sort of fun-run medal I was earning back in the 1980s took some time to be phased out.

'When I started out, medals were rubbish,' says Coleman. 'They were mostly just blank with a plastic disc stuck on and the name of the race if you were lucky. My marathon-PB medal, for instance, is a really disappointing thing.'

Things picked up through the late 1990s, he says, as the market swelled and medal-crafting techniques improved, and began going a bit crazy 'around three years ago'. Now, he reckons some medals are more like world championship boxing belts than humble symbols of achievement, but he's not complaining. 'I think it's always important to get a medal,' said the runner and coach, hours before flying to Morocco for his 15th Marathon des Sables.

I like to imagine Coleman's medals suspended from every inch of wall space in his south Wales home, with the 1,000-marathon trophy in a temperature-controlled glass cabinet on a plinth in the centre of his sitting room. Alas, nearly all his medals sit in shopping bags. In his loft.

'Can you imagine displaying them all?' he says, with a laugh. 'All that gathering of dust – it would be a nightmare. But medals don't half strike the memory chords. All mine are in bags but I bet if we sat down and went through them one by one, I could take you through virtually every race I've run just by looking at them.'

That's the power of race bling. 🏆

'People want bigger, blingier and more fantastic and that's not about to stop'



PHOTOGRAPHS: LUCKY IF SHARP (MAIN IMAGES); GRANT CORNETT

FULL OF ANIMATION
Disney characters could have been created to adorn race medals