

Running participation 2026: global trends, data and five key trends

By Victoria Woollven | 18 August 2026

Races of 5K or less make up 54 percent of US events and two thirds of registrations. Gen Z is the fastest-growing runner demographic. Run clubs are now the primary entry point for new participants. The participation base has moved away from the competitive, marathon-focused runner. This report covers participation levels, geographic trends, demographic analysis and five key trends through 2030 with industry implications.

Executive Summary

Mass participation running has moved into a new growth phase after its pandemic-era disruption. Global participation in organized races peaked in 2016, declined through 2018 to 2020, collapsed during Covid-19, and has since staged a strong recovery, with marathon demand in several major markets now exceeding pre-pandemic highs. Younger adults are returning to the sport in greater numbers, and Asia is established as the primary growth region.

Structural shifts defining the current landscape:

- Running is becoming more social than performance-driven, with run clubs now a primary entry point into the sport.
- Women remain the majority of recreational race participants in most markets, but the marathon distance specifically has swung back toward men in the US since 2017.
- Gen Z and under-25 participation is rising again after years of an aging participant base.
- Running is increasingly mediated through digital platforms, Strava, wearables and run clubs, rather than standalone event registration.

Participation Levels

The most comprehensive study of participation levels in running remains RunRepeat's "The State of Running 2019," produced in partnership with World Athletics (then IAAF). The report analyzed 107.9 million race results from more than 70,000 events across 209 countries, from the period 1986 to 2018.

The results offer a clear indication of a pre-pandemic base level: a peak in 2016, followed by a decline; 7.9 million race finishers in the most recent numbers available; an almost equal gender split; and an average runner age of 39.

Pre-Covid baseline

Metric	Finding
Peak global participation (2016)	9.1 million race finishers
2018 participation	7.9 million finishers (–13% from peak)
10-year change (2008–2018)	+57.8% (5.0M → 7.9M)

Metric	Finding
Most popular distances	5km (2.9m participants in 2018); half marathon (2.1m participants in 2018)
Female share (2018)	50.24% – first time women were the majority
Average runner age	Rose from 35.2 (1986) to 39.3 (2018)
Average marathon finish time (2018)	4:32:49
Global marathon finishers (2018)	~1.1–1.3 million annually
Global sample	107.9 million race results, 70,000+ events
Countries represented	209 countries in the dataset

Source: RunRepeat's *The State of Running 2019*

The pandemic years' running boom

Of course, these figures are useful but no one can have forgotten the world events of 2020–2022 and the impact they had on exercise habits and the sporting goods industry, with running being no exception.

In 2023, another RunRepeat article looking at the impact of the pandemic “running boom” provides a more accurate picture of the running scene today.

From a survey of 3,961 current runners, it found that 28.76 percent of current runners started running during the pandemic. Physical health and mental health were the primary motivators, cited by 72 percent and 54 percent of new-pandemic runners respectively.

In this small snapshot, race participation was less of a priority than those who ran before the pandemic, perhaps because races took a back seat to Covid restrictions at this time, with 50 percent of new runners planning on entering an organized race versus 63 percent of pre-pandemic runners.

Further RunRepeat reporting from a much larger data sample size reveals most existing runners increased their amount of running during the pandemic, with runners who normally only participated once or twice a week increasing their participation by 117 percent on average.

In the second year of the pandemic, 2021 findings from Nielsen, the official research and intelligence supplier to World Athletics, found 4 in 10 people considered themselves to be “runners.” The data was taken from ten surveyed markets across the world, from a dataset of 8,414 people.

Nearly a quarter of all runners surveyed began in the Covid-era (the year since April 2020), with the majority of this group saying Covid was a contributing factor. Of the new runners, most said they would continue running with the same frequency or more frequently.

These new runners, with their differing motivations and intensity, represent the start of a shift in who we should now consider “the average runner,” as the five key trends in running below explain.

Post-pandemic

When it comes to the number of runners worldwide in 2026, there is a significant data gap. Much of the headlines are based on figures from prominent markets such as the US and the UK.

Strava offers annual, global data into its users' workout logs. In 2025, from its 180 million users across 185 countries, running remained the top sport on Strava. Although it doesn't give exact figures, the Strava Year in Sport The Trend Report 2025 points to a steady participation rate, with “more runners of every generation” in 2025. We can also assume that there are more runners than Strava users. 2026 data from SportShoes.com found that one in 10 UK runners (11%) who run up to 5K never time their runs.

Running remains a sport people would like to take up, with growth potential. In partnership with the UK's Running Industry Alliance (RIA), UK research and creative agency Redtorch looked at search data as an indicator of consumer behavior and signals. It found growth in “running for beginners” and “5k runs near me” searches.

In the UK alone, 6 percent of the population want to start running in 2026, according to SportShoes.com (4.6m people). 18 percent of the UK population want to run more, up from 13 percent in 2025.

As already stated, races are not the primary motivation for all runners, however they do give a good indication of participation levels, post-pandemic.

Race participation grew across 5K, 10K, half marathon and marathon distances in the US in 2025 compared to 2024, according to non-profit organization Running USA.

“Participation is strong and the sport's momentum is real.”

— Michael Clemons, Director of Operations, Running USA

RunSignup, the US-based race registration platform, most recent 2025 Race Trends Report shows a 5 percent increase in US per-race participation compared with 2024, although a slower growth overall compared with the last two years (10% and 8% respectively). In terms of the type of race which is popular, races of 5K or less make up the majority of events (54%) and two thirds of race registrations (66%).

World Athletics confirmed that in 2024, more than 300 Label road races (elite and high profile events with stringent organizational standards) were staged across 57 countries, drawing 5.5 million participants.

Geographic Trends

North America

The US running market is defined by: the largest commercial event ecosystem globally; strong charity-race culture; high sponsorship penetration; and mature timing/registration infrastructure.

- Statista-compiled industry estimates put annual runners/joggers at roughly 50 million in the US (around 14% of the 2026 population).
- The Outdoor Industry Association gives an even higher figure of 52.3 million runners in 2025.
- Growth was recorded across all major race distances in 2025.
- US marathon finishers hit 432,562 in 2024, surpassing pre-Covid levels.

Europe

There is a significant lack of recent data for running participation levels in Europe, particularly post-pandemic. However, major European marathons (London, Berlin, Paris, Valencia, Amsterdam) continue to see record oversubscription in ballot applications.

Youth athletes from Spain, the UK (Great Britain and Ireland), Turkey and Germany historically perform well in the U18 and U20 categories in European middle-distance events, possibly indicating a strong running culture in these nations.

In the UK, Sport England's Active Lives Adult Survey November 2024–25 Report lists 7.1 million adults who participated in running at least twice in the 28 days before the survey (approximately 12% of the 2025 population). Looking at the UK as a whole, SportsShoes Running Report: Running Statistics 2026 found 17 percent of the UK runs outdoors at least once a month.

The NHS Couch to 5K app has had 8 million downloads over the last decade, with 790,000 downloaded in 2024 (the most recent figures available).

As for British youths, running as an activity is most prevalent among the 7–11 cohort. 38 percent of children in this age group reported running at least once a week, according to Sport England, dropping to 21 percent for the 11–16s. These levels are “relatively unchanged” over the last three years.

Asia

Identified in the original 2019 RunRepeat/World Athletics dataset as the only major region sustaining participation growth, running retains a strong presence in Asia.

Growth drivers include: China's marathon boom; Japan's entrenched running culture; an expanding middle class; corporate wellness programs; and the rise of destination racing.

- Statista-compiled industry estimates rank running as the most popular sports activity in Japan in 2024.
- China Daily listed 749 road races in China in 2024 (compared with 699 in 2023), reporting figures from the Chinese Athletics Association. The number of participants increased by 1 million year-on-year.
- Searches for “parent-child run registration” increased 100 percent in China.

Demographic Analysis

Gender

Running overall retains a female-majority in most markets, but there is a marked split across distances. Essentially, there is a female majority in shorter distances, which tips to a male majority in longer distances.

- 2018 marked the first year women were the global majority of race finishers (50.24%).
- In the US in 2025, women remained the majority of all race participants (53%), but marathon participation has moved in the opposite direction.
- The female share of US marathon finishers peaked at 47 percent in 2017 and had fallen to 41 percent by 2024.

Age

The 2019 data from RunRepeat saw a rise in the global average age of runners, from 35.2 (1986) to 39.3 (2018). However, this does not reflect the post-pandemic market.

- 30–39 year-olds make up the biggest proportion of US race participants with 20 percent.
- Young adult participation (18–29 year olds) is on the rise, with a 17.9 percent share of race sign-ups in the US, the highest percentage since 2017.
- Under-18s hold an even larger percentage, with 18.3 percent.
- US marathon data shows a genuine reversal in age trends: the under-25 share of marathon finishers grew from 9.2 percent (2016) to 12.1 percent (2024), and the overall age distribution has visibly skewed younger since 2016.

Five Key Trends to Watch Through 2030

1. The rise and rise of Gen-Z runners

As outlined in demographic trends, Gen Z runners (those born between 1996–2010) are on the increase. This increased participation by those aged 20–39 reflects a pattern seen in other sports such as triathlon and golf, as Gen Z turns away from bars and pubs in favor of exercising.

Gen Z recorded the largest increase in share of runners recording races on Strava in 2025 versus 2024, up 38 percent for 5k, 39 percent for 10k, 31 percent for half-marathon and 33 percent for marathon.

Does this mean that there are more Gen Z runners, or that they embrace the logging and tracking aspect? Probably both.

Gen Z are certainly keen to invest in technology, with Strava also reporting that 63 percent more of Gen Z said wearables were their biggest fitness investment in 2025, compared with Gen X. Nearly a third of Gen Z (30%) also said they plan to spend more on fitness in 2026.

2021 findings from Nielsen, the official research and intelligence supplier to World Athletics, found that Gen Z was the most passionate about running, with 50 percent of those aged 25–34 agreeing that running is “a part of who I am.”

The impact of a growing body of Gen Z runners has an impact on other trends in running, as motivations shift and technology is embraced.

2. Social running overtakes competitive identity

Following on from the direction seen in 2024, which saw a 59 percent increase in running clubs, running continues to be social, especially for Gen Z.

There was a 3.5 times increase in running clubs listed on Strava in 2025, compared with a 5.8 times and 2.8 times increase in hiking and cycling clubs respectively. 37 percent of people surveyed by Strava said they view running clubs as a good place to meet people.

However, 27 percent of women and 20 percent of men still said they view running clubs as only for elite runners, a perception more prevalent amongst Gen X runners than Gen Z runners.

Global charity Parkrun, which organizes weekly free community 5K and 2K runs in park spaces, recorded an all-time high global attendance record in Easter 2026. 438,526 finishers worldwide took part on April 4, 2026. The UK set its own national record on the same day, with 240,599 parkrunners completing events across 875 locations.

In the 2024–2025 period, Parkrun saw 2.3 million people taking part, with nearly 900,000 first-timers. Participation was up across all regions:

- APAC +20.35%
- Mainland Europe +32.4%
- South Africa +20.5%
- Ireland +12.8%
- North America +28.8%

A shift in why people run, from competitive incentives to more holistic motivations, is likely behind the growth in social running. Looking at the influential factors on the decision to run from Nielsen research, top was general health and wellbeing (74%), followed by “the fact that I could go at my own pace” (68%). “Fun” also makes it into the top ten motivating factors, with 52 percent.

Running together also affects event participation. Offering teams boosted event registrations, according to RunSignup. The US registration platform also notes that group participation is increasing year-on-year. The average number of group participants is 7.2.

Running clubs, then, should be viewed as a dominant acquisition channel for younger, first-time runners and racers.

"[R]unning groups make the sport more accessible to newcomers, shift stereotypes about what a runner looks like (inspiring more runners of color, women, and people who may not have considered themselves athletes to join) and offer their participants the opportunity for genuine connection around a shared purpose."

— RunnersWorld.com

3. Deepening technology integration

Strava currently lists 200 million users across 185 countries, and approximately 50 million monthly active users. Running is still the most logged sport on Strava in 2025, with walking in second place.

Why is it significant that there are so many Strava users? Because it represents a larger trend of technological integration in the running ecosystem, not just in tracking, but in all aspects of decision making: from training cycles to shoe choices and real-time performance feedback.

Strava users are 2.1 times more likely to purchase digital content in-app, 80 percent more likely to be early adopters, and 30 percent more likely to trust technology to improve health, according to data from GWI cited by Strava.

2025 research by ABC Fitness (gym member management software) found 26 percent of "active consumers" are very familiar with AI-powered fitness and wellness tools. Furthermore, 33 percent of Gen Z and 38 percent of millennials "strongly agree" that AI can be helpful in achieving personal health and fitness goals.

Race registration behavior is now overwhelmingly mobile: RunSignup reports 74 percent of race website visits and 63 percent of registrations occur on mobile/tablet devices.

Wearable technology is no longer limited to GPS watches and heart rate monitors. In the near future, footwear and clothing alongside wearables are expected to integrate AI technology such as:

- Injury prevention through gait analysis
- Hydration monitoring
- Nutritional analysis
- Recovery analysis and training readiness

But for the industry, persistent consumer concerns about AI in running and fitness include:

- Privacy and data protection issues
- Concerns over accuracy
- Cost
- Accessibility (especially for older generations)

4. Marathon still on many runners' "bucket list"

When it comes to running, the most engaged with social media in the UK centers on long-distance challenges, according to 2025 search term research by Redtorch in association with the RIA. Running a marathon remains a popular goal amongst runners, as evidenced by record race demand.

The TCS London Marathon reclaimed the Guinness World Record for the largest number of marathon finishers in 2026, with 59,830 runners. It also holds the title of the most ballot entries for a marathon event. More than 1.1 million people applied for a spot in 2025.

It was also the scene of the first ever sub-two hour marathon. Sabastian Sawe set a new record for the fastest male marathon time, finishing in 1:59:30. Tigst Assefa extended her record for the fastest marathon

(female, women-only race) with a time of 2:15:40.

The remaining Abbott World Marathon Majors (the largest and most famous marathons in the world) also boast impressive participation figures and oversubscription:

- Tokyo: 38,500 participant places available (2026)
- Boston: 32,196 entrants (2026)
- Berlin: 54,166 finishers (2024)
- Chicago: 55,000 participant field (2026)
- New York: 59,226 finishers (2025)
- Sydney: 32,963 finishers (2025)

As of 2025, US marathon participation is back to pre-Covid levels, according to RunRepeat's The State of US Marathons 2025. US marathon finishers reached 432,562 in 2024, a 5.0 percent year-on-year increase and just 12.8 percent below the 2014 all-time peak of 496,178.

Female marathon participants now account for almost 41 percent of marathon participants, the same data found. The majority are in the 25–34 age bracket (32%), followed by 35–44 (26%).

5. Trail running no longer niche

Once a niche sport undertaken by a particular type of athlete, trail running is now bigger than ever. It has entered the mainstream and can boast growing participation and visibility levels.

Trail running grew 231 percent in the years between 2012–2022, according to RunRepeat's The State of Trail Running 2022. In data which excluded elite runners, focusing only on recreational runners, it found trail runners are getting faster and running longer. The average race in 2022 was 24.63K.

More recent figures from the US's Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) found “explosive” growth in trail running, with 17.2 million trail runners in the US alone (up 6.6%).

3.45 million runners worldwide now have an ITRA Performance Index score according to the International Trail Running Association (ITRA). Although the sport still remains smaller than road running, the number of ITRA certified races grew by 131 percent, 2019–2025, with certified races in 160+ countries, according to figures released in 2026.

In terms of who is participating in trail running, RunRepeat found trail running attracts an older crowd. The average age is 39.5. Overall female participation in 2022 sat at 46 percent (up from 13% in 1997). However, when broken down by race length, women favor the shorter distances, men the longer. These demographics have most likely shifted in 2026, to include a younger demographic.

In its most recent figures, the ITRA found women 35–50 is the fastest growing demographic in trail running. As in road running, distance affects gender representation. 2025 data from the ITRA found the longer the distance, the lower the female representation:

- 10K: 45.5% female participation
- Marathon: 25.7% participation
- 100K: 18.4% participation
- 100 miles: 14.4% female participation

There are also regional differences, with Europe and Asia having the lowest female participation, and Oceania and South America the best.

When talking about the growth in trail running, ultra running, which is classed as any run over marathon distance, also deserves a mention. Although “ultras” can take place on any surface, the overwhelming majority are trail ultras. And again, participation is up. Ultra running participation increased 345 percent, 2008–2018, according to RunRepeat in association with the International Association of Ultrarunners (IAU).

It's not just participation with trail and ultra running that is high; engagement is also rising. 93 percent of trail run activities on Strava get “kudos,” the highest rate of any sport.

The Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB) is a week-long trail running event, featuring eight races and more than 10,000 participants and 50,000+ spectators, and a remote audience of millions.

Arda Saatç■ recently completed a gruelling multiday run across California, running the equivalent of 14 marathons in 4 days. By the end of his challenge, his 120-plus hour livestream had almost 59 million viewers.

This love of the extreme, and sports and events which push the body to the limit, is the same environment that is driving the growth in Ironman competitions.

What this means for the industry

The data points to several practical implications for brands operating in the running category:

1. Product ranges should reflect where the running participation volume actually sits. Races of 5K or less make up 54 percent of events and two-thirds of registrations in the US, and 5K remains the most popular distance globally. Footwear and apparel built primarily around marathon performance risk under-serving the runners actually driving participation, since shorter distances typically demand different cushioning and support characteristics.

2. Brands need to guard against alienating beginners. Nearly 29 percent of current runners took up the sport during the pandemic, and search data shows continued growth in beginner-oriented terms like “running for beginners.” Products and messaging that assume competitive intent risk excluding the very runners fuelling the sport's growth.

3. Inclusivity across differently-abled and underrepresented communities deserves real attention too. Running's growth is increasingly driven by health, wellbeing and enjoyment rather than competitive performance, and running clubs are already credited with shifting “stereotypes about what a runner looks like.” Brands slow to reflect this risk looking out of step with the sport's actual participant base.

4. Brands should consider the digital layer surrounding the sport, not just the product itself. With Strava's 200 million users increasingly making purchasing decisions through app-based ecosystems, and race registration now overwhelmingly mobile-first, competitive advantage is shifting toward brands that integrate seamlessly with the platforms runners already use to train and connect.

5. Finally, brands should reconsider how they reach runners. Running clubs are now a dominant acquisition channel, particularly for younger, first-time participants; Strava recorded a 3.5-times increase in listed running clubs in 2025 alone. For brands still reliant on traditional retail and sponsorship models, community-based engagement may offer more durable loyalty than one-off campaigns.

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