

UTMB 28-30th August 2009

Bob Sewell first told me about the Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc after my Bob Graham Round when he gave me his article under the guise, 'what next'. Nevertheless I blame David Atkinson. This year, the NFR line-up was Jane Grundy, back for her second attempt supported by UTMB veteran Lewis also doing the CCC (Courmayer-Champex-Chamonix), Peter Moralee (busy completing every long event before he turns 60 methinks) and me, another UTMB virgin.

I'd spent a gruelling long weekend with Jane and Lewis in July reccy'ing the second half (CCC) of this astonishingly beautiful circuit and realised that I was short of breath when running above 1800m.



Southern aspect MB massif from Mont du Saxe. Photo PJH

We were back as a family in St. Gervais-les-Bains two weeks before the start, reccy'ing the rest of the course and getting used to thin air and temperatures in the mid-30s. Following thunderstorms leading up to the race, we had near perfect running conditions with cool nights and 22 deg C by day.



Electric atmosphere but congested start. Photo PJH

Chamonix town centre is taken over for the 18:30 Friday night start. The atmosphere is electric, very European and meditational with Vangelis' Conquest of Paradise [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYeDsa4Tw0c>] and UTMB-adopted theme tune playing. Friends on holiday turned out in support, including NFR's Kath and John Dallinson and Ed and Susan Watson.

Regarded as the most difficult foot race in Europe, the course comprises three countries, 9400m ascent and descent and 166k (with or without zigzags) and was extended last year to include the Grand Balcon du Sud, an extra little sting in the tail. Ten big climbs, the biggest up to 2537m altitude, quickly expose lack of training and most competitors run through two nights without any sleep. For those who are interested, full details and maps of the course are on the website <http://www.ultratrailmb.com/accueil.php>.



UTMB website

I was initially put off by the very French and copious rules, regulations and interminable translations but, having completed the event, one of the major strengths is that very difference. It is totally unique and quite unlike anything else you're likely to do. Those used to UK mountain marathons will be surprised that the whole course is so well marked with reflective tapes that few bother to carry maps. Nevertheless, we still struggled to follow these in the dense cloud on the Cols during the first night. Headlights are terrible in the mist and I managed to walk off the path and bend a pole.

Approximately half of 2500 entrants typically fail to get round and 2009 proved no exception. I'd had pain in one Achilles insertion for 6 months which was just beginning to respond to physiotherapy. Four days to go and I had reccy'd the whole course. I anticipated a 50:50 chance of success and my goal was just to 'get round'. The fact that Dave Atkinson can run for 26½ hours and still crack a joke didn't inspire any confidence in my ability to do the same. I didn't know if it was still possible to even put one foot in front of the other after the 36-40 hours I was expecting to be out there. As a guide I carried round printed 36 and 40h schedules.

For a flavour of the event see this year's video: <http://www.chamonet.com/images-and-videos/highlights-of-the-2009-utmb.htm>. The UTMB was won by 21yr old Catalan Kílian Jornet in 21:33. He also won last year amid controversy about unfair assistance but this year he carried regulation kit. Lizzy Hawker, who some of us had met at her lecture in Wooler and first female last year, came 2nd to Kristin Moehl (USA) and 11th overall.

My race was slightly less exceptional but I hope interesting from a middle of the pack perspective. The start is very crowded and elements of 'single track' meant restricted running early on (which is

no bad thing) and even during some sections later on. Deborah received regular automated texts generated by the two ‘chips’, one wrist and one on the race-bib. For fellow running-nerds I’ve included the splits. I went through one extended bad patch and that was climbing out of Courmayeur to Refuge Bertone when it was warming up. This seems to be the low point for many.

Checkpoint	Light	Dist. (k)	36h schedule	Actual time	Deficit (mins)	Position
Chamonix	☀	0	Fri 18:30	Fri 18:30	0	
St.Gervais	■	21	Fri 21:47	Fri 21:21	-36	790
Les Contamines	■	31	Fri 23:19	Fri 22:55	-24	715
La Balme	■	39	Sat 00:41	Sat 00:31	-10	641
Refuge de la Croix du Bonhomme	■	44	Sat 02 :16	Sat 01:59	-17	590
Les Chapieux	■	50	Sat 03:04	Sat 02:50a	-14	584
	■			Sat 03:06d	+2	
Col de la Seigne	■	60	Sat 05:10	Chip failed	xxx	xxx
Lac Combal	☼	65	Sat 05:47	Sat 05:45	-2	509
Arête Mont-Favre	☼	69	Sat 06:45	Sat 06:49	+4	475
Col Chécrouit - Maison Vieille	☀	73	Sat 07:24	Sat 07:21	-3	446
Courmayeur	☀	78	Sat 08:11	Sat 07:59a	-12	419
	☀			Sat 08:43d	+32	
Refuge Bertone	☀	82	Sat 09:42	Sat 10:01	+19	400
Refuge Bonatti	☀	90	Sat 11:17	Sat 11:31	+14	405
Arnuva	☀	94	Sat 12:11	Sat 12:44	+33	438
Grand Col Ferret	☀	99	Sat 13:43	Sat 14:24	+41	443
La Fouly	☀	108	Sat 15:18	Sat 15:41a	+23	374
	☀			Sat 16:04d	+46	
Champex-Lac	☀	123	Sat 18:12	Sat 18:20a	+8	346
	☼			Sat 19:28d	+76	
Bovine	■	132	Sat 20:42	Sat 21:31	+49	365
Trient	■	138	Sat 22:02	Sat 23:09a	+67	367
	■			Sat 23:30d	+88	
Catogne (Les Tseppes)	■	140	Sat 23:32	Sun 00:55	+83	341
Vallorcine	■	148	Sun 01:12	Sun 01:55a	+43	325
	■			Sun 02:07d	+55	
La Tête aux Vents	■	155	Sun 03:55	Sun 04:16	+21	297
La Flégère	■	159	Sun 04:46	Sun 04:58	+12	294
Chamonix	■	166	Sun 06:30	Sun 06:08	-22	275



Sunrise from Arête Mont-Favre looking over Glacier du Mirage. Photo PJH

I'd always regarded Grand Col Ferret (Italian-Swiss border) as being the crux of the whole event and in terms of effort, the half-way point. I also thought that if I could get to Champex with three more climbs to go then I would complete, barring disaster. On my BGR I'd suffered with serious nausea and again found downing pasta at Courmayeur difficult. On cue, Deborah popped up with some anti-emetics at La Fouley. Together with a change of shoes and blister treatment I now felt a new man. The single file descent at night into Trient was slightly frustrating but probably conserved energy.



Italian Val Ferret above Refuge Elena. Photo PJH

Col des Montets marks the start of the last climb up to 2130m. I knew I could whittle more time off the schedule and overtake a number of fellow competitors who I could see were tiring more than me. I had no desire to stop for refuelling at La Flégère. The long descent into Chamonix at night is littered with rocks and tree roots but I felt as though I was flying. They'd changed the finish in Chamonix and in the dark I nearly went wrong. Competitors were coming in at an average rate of one every three minutes. I finished by myself and received a kiss from the race organiser Catherine Poletti. It was great to be welcomed home by Deborah, John, Kath and Ed.

There are no prizes, no medals, the only reward to be a "Finisher", to be able to say to one's grand children, "I did it".



Finisher Paul Hainsworth: 35h 38m, 275th. Photo John Dallinson



Finisher Jane Grundy: 42h 10m, 811th. Photo PJH



Finisher Peter Moralee: 44h 49m, 1179th. Photo John Dallinson

Paul Hainsworth