

Midsummer Madness

Or "Is that what teachers get up to in their holidays?!"

Crazy Days.....

Many of you will have heard (in fact is there anyone who hasn't?!) that I had a fantastic Jubilee Bank Holiday in the Lake District with a few other, rather more competent people.....



It was a lovely day for a picnic!

And a run around some mountains with your mates.....



And that was that!

Until Will Horsley asked if anyone wanted to do a race in France in the summer holidays. Well, why not? I like croissants and I can parlez a bit of francais. He sent me the link to enter the race and even though it was all in French, I managed to enter my credit card details and register for La 6000D. Excellent! It took me a while to work out what the 6000 bit meant and the race info did little to help as it seemed to contradict itself, but basically I think it means there once was a total of 6000m of ups and downs. We (Will & I) think that the course has varied slightly over time but the race name remains the same. Anyway in 2012, it had an advertised 4000m + of ascent. This meant nothing to me, but I had worked out it went through a ski resort called La Plagne. As the time got nearer and Will planned our itinerary (a few other people who read the instructions more clearly and had opted for the shorter races were travelling with us) I started to realise I had a long way to run (60km !!) but glossed over this. As I looked at the You Tube clips Will had forwarded to me, I began to get the idea we were going up a mountain towards a glacier, but having never done such a thing before, it didn't really bother me too much! When my Mum saw the same clip, she forgot to admire the scenery and said "Is that where you're running? Do you think you should be doing this?" Well, we are from Lincolnshire. We don't see many mountains!! I sought the advice of a few silly souls who had done this sort of thing before (ie been to the Alps, not La 6000D) but they couldn't clarify my concerns about the weather. I couldn't decide if it would be hot, and get hotter or freezing cold at the top. Nor could they! I did get the idea that it

was like climbing 4 times Helvellyn. Well, that's ok, I like Helvellyn! There's over 1000 other people entered in the race, it can't be that bad!!

Will was a fantastic tour guide and he arranged a whistle-stop tour of Chamonix, altitude training (a cable car ride!), accommodation, white water rafting, race day logistics, the whole lot! It was an action packed four and a half days including a brilliant, but mad, race day!

As I put my watch on that morning, it insisted it was 4.15am (English time but still it was the middle of the night whichever way you looked at it!). In the Alps it was 5.15am, of course, so therefore it was breakfast time! Will arrived in the kitchen looking almost as good as I felt! Nic, our new best friend and race expert, was up and about looking fresh as a daisy! He had done the race last year and stayed in our Maison the night before the race to focus on his preparation. We had questioned him on every single thing about the race all of the previous evening - poor guy! In France, there seems to be no end of opportunities to do crazy races through very high mountains! We agreed that Nic would do well and as we never saw him again, we assume he was home well before we finished!!

Will drove us to the start in the dark, but it was already hot and we both had concerns about what kit to carry. There was a kit requirement but it seemed very lax. As I stood in the toilet queue before the race (as you do!), a nice French lady seemed very interested in my back! In the end, she asked if I had a bottle. Clearly, she thought I was a strange foreign person (correct evaluation!) without a drink for the race. As I showed her my bum bag and its contents, she seemed relieved, but still bemused. I had stuffed my showerproof Montane kit in, along with a half litre bottle of water and some food. (I may have had a hat and gloves but I can't remember now). There was no need for the usual map and compass as the route is totally marked with arrows, orange stones, supporters and hundreds of other mad fools going the same way!! This all may sound very relaxed, but it was more a case of just not knowing what to do. Will and I had an agreement that we wouldn't leave each other stranded and if anything went wrong, we had other English pals in La Plagne to rescue us. And so it was that we stood at the back of a very large field of mainly French people, some with very large backpacks and poles, in the breaking daylight, wondering what was ahead of us and feeling hot already. Then, all of a sudden, it started to rain! Great! Now we weren't expecting that little trick. Will and I just hoped we hadn't got it so very wrong whilst the French backpacks were unpacked and all sorts of snazzy coats were put on. (A scene replayed in my head of Geoff and Paul H checking my kit before a day in the Lakes. I couldn't really be 'winging it' in the Alps, could I?) Should we both have known better? Time would tell! The race started and off we went - too late now!! Will said he'd stay with me going up the first climb. I thought 'Yeh, right, you'll be miles faster'. It was really nice, actually, running and walking up through the trees together. It was hot, hot, hot and so dusty. There were so many people too, but Will and I were moving easily through the snake of competitors, trying not to get skewered by their many walking poles. Both of us were

slightly concerned by the need to take on fluid so soon, but it probably served us well later in the day. I stopped to tighten my laces on my beloved Salomon trail shoes and Will carried on. I tried to catch up again but just couldn't get through the crowds. So we carried on up, up, up. There have been some 'big name' British winners of this race (Simon Booth, Rob Jebb & co) and as we climbed up on grassy paths, I could see how those guys would lope up that gradient on, for them, good paths. For mere mortals, walking was the preferred pace.



And so it continued - onwards and upwards. The first checkpoint/refreshments point was an education, to say the least! Loads of runners, grabbing pieces of cheese, ham, crackers, apple, orange, gels, bars, etc and drinking coke and water like it was going out of fashion. No time for manners here! I didn't do very well at this first fuelling station with my 'please may I have a cup of water' approach. I resolved to do better next time. In fact, I knew I had to do better next time as I have had it drilled into me to eat! Rob Carter has been heard to say that even if I stopped talking and ate instead, I would still need more calories at the end! He was talking about my BGR, but the same applied here.

All around the course, there were crowds of crazily enthusiastic supporters cheering and ringing cow bells. The race numbers have your name on them so this fuelled the frenzy! It was amazing to hear so many people calling your name, as if you were the only person in the race. It is like nothing I have experienced before - incredible! Meantime, we were still going up! It didn't really bother me, I was moving as well as anyone with poles and kept having a hopeful look around for Will, who had probably put a spurt on to get away from my incessant talking! I found myself to be around a group of women, which makes me want to be in front of them - particularly one lady who looked far too glamorous to be mountain racing!!

We were still climbing, when the thunder and lightning started and wow, the rain!! I decided it wouldn't last long and told myself that I wouldn't be put off by it as much as the French, after all we have much worse weather than this!! After maybe 10 minutes of freezing cold wind and rain, I had to admit that it was, in fact, decidedly chilly on this mountain and also wondered what the point of my Montane showerproof jacket was in this situation! Yes it is indeed small and light, but I thought it'd be so wet by the time I got it on that it'd be useless! Unlike the lovely OMM waterproof jacket that I have worn on every single outing in the Lakes since last Christmas and had left on the back of my bedroom door (yes I know it's no good there, but I didn't want to screw it up in my bag!). Aha, what's that, a ski station? Excellent! Even the fancy-coated people weren't enjoying this weather and tried to find some shelter. I had decided that I was just here to finish, hopefully in one piece so I opted to go inside, put my coat on properly and even go to the toilet. Wow, the luxury! Now I was prepared for anything and even managed to hold my own at the feeding stations, grabbing cheesy biscuits and pieces of apple comme les francais! I even managed to catch back up with, and overtake, the glamorous lady. As you can see, we can't all look lovely all of the time.....



It is at this point in the race that we think the decision must have been made to omit the final climb to the Bellecote glacier. Whilst the majority of the field were still amongst the ski stations, the leaders must have been approaching the highest sections of the route. I can only imagine that it was hailing and/or snowing up there whilst we were getting icy rain. The organisers turned the leaders away from the final ascent, reducing the course by 5 to 6km in the process. Much later using my legendary navigational skills, I began to wonder where the glacier was! Surely, even I couldn't have missed it! I was concerned about the altitude as well as the route across the glacier, but was feeling fine at this relatively low level. I asked a French lady who I ran through the next checkpoint with "Le glacier?" (I don't teach Physics for no reason!). "Ah, English anybody", was her reply. "Yes", said the nice French man, "The glacier, it is cancelled" (Really? Now I've heard of global warming, but I didn't realise that you could just cancel a glacier!). He went on to explain, as we ran downhill (there's a first time for everything!) that the course had been shortened due to the storm and there was only about 22km left from the next village. At that moment, that was such fantastic news. Only 22km! Wow, nearly finished then!! Hang on, engage brain, 22km, that's still around a half marathon left! Since when was that 'not far'?! Deciding to forget that and focus on the good bits, no altitude and no scary glacier situation, I slid down the now muddy slopes and back to La Plagne. Here there was a bit more refuelling, but I was working on a 'grab and go' strategy which seemed to allow me to make up loads of places at the feeding stations whilst everyone else stopped for a pique-nique.

As the race went on, I felt pretty good, tired but good. I was generally overtaking people, which had been part of the plan when we started at the back of the field. I was still managing to talk to people en route, even in French! I enjoyed the atmosphere in the villages and at the refreshment stations. The crowd continued to be so enthusiastic for everyone. There were a few road sections mixed in with some woodland trails. A really lovely section along an undulating trail towards Aime made me think of Karen and how much she would have liked it. I knew we would both fly through the trees on a training run along there and it kept my spirits up. It seemed like every time someone told you how far it was to the finish they said 6km, even though you had been running for 3km since the last time! The last section seemed to take ages. I guess you just want to get to the finish. We eventually came out onto the road alongside the river which was beautiful, but how far was it from the finish? A French guy told me I was very good on the uphills. I thought he was very nice to say so and wondered if this was a more valid comment than a similar one from an Elswick Harrier who told me I was strong on the hills at the Coastal run!

We crossed a bridge and I saw a sign for Aime, but I've learnt to expect the end to be further than you think. You just know that the race route will not miraculously come out next to the finishing funnel! So I was not surprised to find myself running past the car park at the far end of the village. I was, though, pleasantly surprised to see Will at the side of the road, cheering me on. He seemed very pleased with my performance. He asked if I wanted him to bring my bag and we had a little conversation about arrangements as I sped along the road.

You will see from Will's report that he finds it impressive that I could hold a conversation! He has a lot to learn about this - not much shuts me up, not even 7 and a half hours of running! Of course, there was the whole village to circumnavigate before entering the finishing area. I was catching a lady as we entered the finish and as it turned out, I was catching lots of people, so Will tells me from the results.



I had a few mouthfuls of coke and some water. A very astute official presented me with my race t-shirt, "Small, yes, very good Madame". My legs were a bit tired once I stopped, but I wandered back down to the car park to meet Will who was convinced that I'd had a 'stormer'. I was quite surprised to find that I had finished only around half an hour after Will. Once the results were available, it became evident that Will, too had had a 'stormer', finishing in around 7 hours and well up the field. I actually was 7th vet which was surprisingly good in such a race, but even better I was around half an hour slower than 3rd. In a long race like this, it would be possible to catch that sort of gap and ironically, had the race stayed at its full length I'm pretty sure that both Will and I would have done even better. For a first trip to the Alps, never mind a first race at this altitude, I'm very happy with my performance. It was another voyage into the unknown for me this year. I'm really pleased that I went and gave it a try and thank Will very much for organising it all and taking me along.

Steph Scott

Summer 2012