

The North Face Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc 2014 by Steph Scott

“So Steph, you’ve just about got enough points for the UTMB, now.”

“The What?”

“The UTMB – you just need one more point and you’ll have enough.....”

After much googling, I found out what Will was on about and, of course, he was correct. I had 4 points from my Bob Graham Round and 3 points from La 6000D in La Plagne (another one of Will’s suggestions!). In order to qualify for the UTMB, you needed 8 points from a maximum of 3 races. I decided to trot round the Hardmoors 60, as you do, ably supported by John Telfer and gained 2 points for my efforts. I duly entered the ballot (yes there’s still a ballot after all that!) and didn’t get in! Hey ho, perhaps that was a lucky escape. The organisers then award you a “coefficient of 2” to carry forward to next year’s ballot and so that was me, successful second time round with an entry for the 2014 event. I’m quite good at putting my name and credit card details into cyber space and thinking later and this was no exception!

I was fortunate enough to have reccied the route in August 2013 with Bev Redfern who completed the UTMB that year. It was a really valuable experience, both mentally and physically. The main things that I learnt were ;

- that the climbs are miles long, literally, and like nothing in this country
- the trail is hard underfoot and therefore unsuitable for my favourite Speedcross shoes
- it can get very hot in the mountains!

Once your place is bought and paid for in January, there’s clearly “ages” until the race at the end of August so I decided to busy myself with a sprint duathlon in April and cycling the coast to coast in a day in June! Mine is not the conventional approach, perhaps, but it works for me because I can focus on the task at the time I need to and I don’t have a lot of time to train which usually means that I can’t over-do it. I ran a few long races and did a couple of hard (for me) weeks training concentrating on trying to ‘trash my quads’ and run at funny times. I was lucky that Steve Birkinshaw spent most of one week running round the Lakes and I joined in with a couple of his legs. What a privilege – thanks for sharing, Steve!

I had a major panic the weekend before the race and felt quite sick about the whole idea. It was at the point of becoming real and I decided to trot round Bruce Crombie’s Glendale Show race, just to get out of the house. I couldn’t get my head around packing and really needed to see some pals at the Show to take my mind off it all. I was quite scared of being out on my own for two nights and the enormity of the race was beginning to dawn on me.

Eventually I calmed down and got to Edinburgh Airport on Tuesday morning in a much better frame of mind. (There are no direct flights from Newcastle in the Summer). I got the Mountain Drop-offs transfer from Geneva to Chamonix where it was pouring with rain – oh joy!! Apparently on that Tuesday there was the most rain in a day that they’d had in Chamonix for decades. Wednesday was much better and once the valley cloud had lifted, it was a lovely day. I was fortunate enough to meet up with NFR’s Ed Watson who has an apartment not far from the race start. He took me on a gentle

jog along the Balcon Sud to La Floria which is the last place you come to in the race and is a gorgeous location for a café.



La Floria (about 3.5km to Chamonix!)

On Thursday, I registered for the race and had my kit checked, received my number, drop bag, t-shirt and wrist band. The queue was long, even at the start of the day, but the process was efficient, like everything else to do with the event.



I spent the rest of the day on the Aiguille du Midi telepherique and walking along to Montenvers with Joanne Lee who had arrived in Chamonix at the end of her cycling holiday. She ended up staying for the race and became my support crew which was an unexpected bonus.

Friday – race day was here at last! The UTMB start time has varied throughout the years and on the morning of the race I received a text from the organisers to confirm the start time of 1730h and that the original full route would be used. I spent the morning laid on the bed and the afternoon doing final race preparations like deciding what to wear, leaving my drop bag for the organisers to transfer to Courmayeur, sitting down and eating! The start area gradually filled up with competitors and supporters and the PA system was on “full blast!” No matter how much I tried not to think about the race, there was no escaping the fact that it was about to happen. I said my goodbyes to Jo & Bal and Ed & Sue and then tried to work out how to get into the start area! I didn’t want to start right at the back so I employed the tried and tested Blaydon race tactic of climbing over the barriers! In this case, it seemed to be the done thing and some guys helped me over and we all stood quite happily (ish!) waiting for the time to come. Meantime it seemed to be spitting with rain (ignore it! Surely the forecast thunder storms won’t arrive!). There was a lot of rustling in bags and when a French lady gestured to a large black cloud in the sky, exactly where we were heading, there seemed to be no option – waterproof jacket on! The announcer warned us of fog which was forecast for the night and reminded us to pay careful attention to the waymarkers. And then we were off! It was very busy and my main aim was just to stay upright as we wound round the streets of Chamonix and headed for Les Houches. I hadn’t paid much attention to times or pace, but I knew that the first significant point was Les Contamines which was 30.7km into the race (+1486m, -1368m) and I had 6 hours to get there.

The first section of the UTMB is the most runnable, along the road and through a wood, through little villages and there is LOADS of support. It was easy running for me and I was careful not to go too fast. The rain continued but it was warm and some runners took their coats off, only to put them back on again when we came out of the trees. I can’t remember much about the specific sections of the race but the first part was generally wet and dark ! There were some steep grassy downhill which would have been dry the week before but were now mud slopes and I was not happy on these! Always in my mind was staying upright. I concentrated on this for the whole 168km, watching every step I made because falling could have ended my race and that was not in the game plan! Phil Smith trotted past me at some point during the mud fest, on his way to a fantastic race. I felt like a lot of people were passing me and I had to give myself a talking to. I hadn’t pondered much about the race but had seen some figures showing that of the 2300 runners, only 8% (216) were women and most of these were in my age group, too. Another thing that hadn’t dawned on me until I was in the race, was that as everyone has qualified to be there, therefore they are all good runners. There is no tail-end like you would normally get in an open road or fell race. So I switched my head onto that fact and rationalised that if I lined up with 92 fit mountain running men and 7 other women, I wouldn’t expect to finish at the front. It was ok for the men to over take me going up hill, really it was ! Stop worrying, drop the competitive attitude and concentrate on standing up!

I have no actual recollection of when I got to Les Contamines, but I was in good time and I helped myself to the food and drink at the checkpoint. I’m quite good at eating in long races and I know it’s necessary to keep re-fuelling, so I ate and drank at every checkpoint. There was all sorts of stuff – orange segments, apple slices, crackers, soup, bread, pasta, cakes, biscuits, coke, coffee, tea, raisins,

chocolate, energy bars..... I had picked up a really useful tip which was to carry an empty sandwich bag and put some snacks in to eat between food stops. This is a great idea and really simple to do. I was using a bladder pack and had worried a bit about re-filling it along the way, but there was no need! The volunteers were so helpful and happily filled up my water without me even needing to take my rucksack off – brilliant!

It was already dark as we left the support of the towns and set off on the first major climb up the Col du Bonhomme (one marathon completed !) to the Croix du Bonhomme (2486m). It was still raining but there was plenty of company along the way and a snake of headtorches to follow up the mountain. I had been going to save my trekking poles as a little treat (it's all in the mind!!) for the second half of the race, after Courmayeur, but I started to wonder why and decided to use them on the climb. I've never used poles before, but they were invaluable in this event and, for me, it was the right decision to take them. I guess it must have been bed-time as I started this long climb as I began to feel tired. It was the only time during the two days that I felt like this and I guess it was just my body's usual sleep time. There was only one way to deal with this and that was to ignore it (of course!). The path was well-defined and although it just went on and on, up and up, there was nothing tricky about it. I developed a nice little rhythm with my poles and made steady progress on the climb. Although it was dark, the time went by quite easily. I chatted for a while with an Indian guy from Korea who I saw throughout the event as his erratic pace led to him zooming ahead, resting for a long time, helping a casualty, visiting the physio and finally finishing just in front of me! Surprisingly, I didn't really chat to many people along the way. Partly because many of them didn't speak much English, but mainly due to my little mantra of concentrating on standing up! I have my own thoughts and lots of lovely wishes from people that I remembered along the way. I'm quite happy in my own little bubble, surrounded by positive thoughts.

The only other things I remember from the first night are;

- a guy asking me if I'd done the Hardmoors 60 in 2012 (yes I had) and saying that he thought he remembered me beating him (haven't a clue, but it was nice of him to say so!)
- Jo asking me if I wanted to swap my socks as I must have wet feet at one of the early checkpoints (no !)
- Headtorch disappointment ! The fancy Petzl headtorch battery didn't last the night – I don't think it liked getting wet! (you have to carry a spare torch and spare batteries so it wasn't a problem, just annoying!)
- lots of rain and splodgy wet ground
- no moon (I guess it was hiding behind the rain clouds and fog patches)

After Les Chapieux (approx 50km), you head up La Ville des Glaciers to Col de la Seigne. This was the worst climb of the race for me as I felt like it went on and on then got steeper and went on even more. Now I look at the route profile, it's not surprising I felt like I needed more fuel when I got to the top – it's a climb of almost 1000m and is 10km long! It reminded me that I needed to eat plenty as I didn't want to feel weak on the climbs. As we started to descend into Italy, morning was breaking but it was bizarrely cold – icy and eerie by Lac Combal. There was not much chat at the refreshment stop. I was conscious of being cold and wondered if it was my body playing tricks or if it really was cold! I looked around and noticed others had their coats on and hoods up, decided I was ok and cracked on. I was really looking forward to getting to Courmayeur. Mentally this was a good

place for me. On our recce, Bev and I had a lovely time in the town, my drop bag was waiting for me there (and I was secretly quite smug about its contents!) and it's almost half way in the race – what's not to like? There was still another 25km and a fair bit of climbing to do but I wasn't counting peaks or bothering too much with the route details during the event, I was just going to Courmayeur, changing my clothes then going to Chamonix. Simple!

At each checkpoint there was a handy poster telling you the cut-off time and a graphic showing the distance/ascent and distance/descent to the next checkpoint. I liked these as during the race I became quite good at predicting how long it would take me to get to the next place and it broke the race down into manageable chunks. The whole thing is just a mind game to me and I like numbers and could just about remember one stage at a time.

On the way to Courmayeur, you pass through Col Checrouit, which I remembered from our recce. Here they had honey on bread at the checkpoint – yummy! It tasted sooo good with a lovely cup of coffee and off I went knowing that there was only 4km, downhill (-756m !!) to Courmayeur. I was aware that my feet were wet and they felt gritty from the unpleasant night-time conditions, but I was looking forward to cleaning them up and putting on dry shoes and socks very soon.

As is often the case with these things, Courmayeur didn't look quite how I'd remembered but it was buzzing with UTMB excitement. Jo and Bal met me as I entered the town and a crazy guy with a microphone interviewed me as I ran towards the sports centre. I checked in, collected my drop bag, got Jo in to the busy support crew area and started to get organised with her help. I had a plan to change most of my clothes as I was wet from the rainy night, swap my headtorch batteries so that I didn't have to do it in the dark, wipe my feet clean and put on clean socks and shoes. I was quite smug about the shoes as I'd even thought to get a more cushioned pair, half a size bigger for the second part of the race! I wasn't feeling quite so smug when I took off my original shoes and socks to find that I was not going to be able to wipe the grit from between my toes as they were actually stuck together with blisters – nice!! This is not an ideal situation when you still have 90+ km to go. There's not a lot to be done about it other than putting on the dry stuff and getting on with it, so that is what I did! I did consider putting Compeed onto the other blistered parts of my feet but decided that my skin was so wet that there was little chance of them sticking properly. I envisaged rolled up Compeed stuck to my socks which didn't really appeal so I went with the ignore it and carry on routine. I still think that this was the right decision. I'm not prone to suffering with blisters and can only think that it was due to the wet conditions. I used my tried and tested kit so reckon that it was just a bit of bad luck. There was nothing that I could have done about it and really I was quite fortunate as that was the only thing that went wrong for me during the event.

As I left Courmayeur, I was quite happy as the route goes uphill on a road (I don't mind that, its easy miles) and Jo and Bal walked up with me for a few minutes. I was refreshed both kit and food – wise. I thought it quite funny how I was now about to start the CCC route, which is another race in the UTMB family, having already completed 77km! Doing the CCC alone is a huge achievement, so it was a bit of a scary thought too! Not surprisingly, there is a large climb out of the town (5km, 800m) to Refuge Bertone and an undulating path along to Refuge Bonatti. This is a lovely part of the course, with fantastic mountain views and is pretty runnable between the refuges for people without blistered feet! The day was now getting very hot making sun hats and factor 50 sun block *de rigueur*!



This photo was taken on my recce in 2013 but it was just the same this year!

I don't remember much about the next section to Arnuva, but I think this is where my tracker didn't update and Ed had been planning to meet me and was wondering where I'd gone! I was merrily trudging up and up, for some reason not realising that I was on the ascent of the Grand Col Ferret. I had imagined that there was another smaller climb first and was starting to wonder how horrendous the Col was going to be if this climb was so steep! I was quite relieved when I got to the top and saw this :



Grand Col Ferret 2537m

Phew! Bizarrely the Indian guy, Girish was at the summit along with an English guy that he had buddied up with and after a quick chat, they whizzed off downhill towards La Fouly. Again, this section was quite runnable but I wasn't doing a lot of flinging myself around and was really focussing not just on staying upright, but also placing my feet carefully and as flat as possible to avoid any additional discomfort. I'm not bothered by pain but I am disappointed that I couldn't run as much as I'd have liked to because of my blisters. Ultimately, it doesn't matter because I finished and maybe if I'd run more something else would have happened, maybe I'd have been a couple of hours quicker but it wouldn't have changed the fact that I finished so I'll try to be happy with that!

As we descended through the trees, I had a lovely surprise of Ed coming up to meet me. I think he was pleased to see me too as he'd temporarily thought that I was lost somewhere around Arnuva! He told me my tracker hadn't registered there and I had a bit of a worry in case I'd somehow missed it out! Ed assured me that this wasn't possible and we trotted down to La Fouly, carefully avoiding tripping on tree roots. Sue was waiting at the checkpoint and ushered me into the refreshment area where I grabbed some food and headed back out to the road to wander along eating it with Ed and Sue. Due to Ed's local knowledge, he had filled up my water (and some others) at a hut just before the village so I didn't have to wait for a re-fill. Sue assured me that I was looking good and a lot better than some of the guys who were struggling to walk along the road by now! They wished me well and said I'd see them later, which I was really looking forward to.

There is quite a long (mainly) downhill section after La Fouly, but I knew what was coming next – and it wasn't nice!! The route takes a woodland path which is pleasant but you have to watch your feet as there are lots of tree roots and the path drops away at the side. There are a lot of paths like this, which are sometimes quite narrow so if you are clumsy like me, you need to concentrate, especially if you have blisters! I remembered this section and the right turn at the end of the woods quite clearly from our recce. As I trotted down towards Issert I heard someone shouting my name. I looked around to find Girish, again, still with Phil and now a Japanese lady. I don't know how they were behind me again, but I guess they stopped for a while at La Fouly. They asked me to come along with them, so I did. It was nice to have some company for a while as we headed through the little villages, even stopping for a couple of minutes to have a coffee made by some locals who were just enjoying being part of the event as it passed by their house. Phil had a formula for working out how long it would take to get to Champex. I knew that Bev and I had found the climb up to Champex soul-destroyingly long. Bev had said it was no better in her race. Phil was sure it was just a little climb up - "not too bad". He calculated our ETA. Now I love sums, probably more than most people, but I was not interested in his numbers at this stage! After a considerable amount of time going uphill in what seems like the totally wrong direction (lights on the right, path heads left!), it was agreed that this was a stiff little climb (approx 4.5km, 400m). It was getting properly dark and we were all using our headtorches that we had put on whilst on the roads in the village. I had decided that I preferred my own company and going at my own steady pace and whilst it was nice to see the guys again, I needed to concentrate on my own race. They mentioned having a sleep at Champex, getting various treatment and all sorts of things that I wasn't going to be doing so I encouraged them to do whatever they needed to do and said that I was sure we'd meet up again! As we got to the checkpoint, I was glad to see Jo and Bal and remember groaning at Jo about how horrible that climb was. Champex is a lovely place but you have to work to get there!



Coming out of Champex (2013 recce)

By now it was properly night time, I was tired and hungry from that last effort and managed to eat a decent portion of pasta bolognaise whilst Jo rubbed a tired bit on my left leg. They encouraged me to take my time and get properly sorted for the last section which would be mainly in the dark. I had another full night out (get me, two nights out in one weekend!!) and would finish the next day, so it was important and sensible to eat and drink properly and just take stock. There was just over a marathon (46km) left to do and three big climbs. Mentally quite easy to deal with – 1,2,3 ! Another runner said it would be cold “up there” and advised warm clothing. I think I had a short sleeved tshirt and my OMM jacket on, maybe my buff too, under my headtorch. Jo & Bal walked round by the lake with me and I told them about the fireworks that Bev and I had watched there last Aug 1st on Swiss National Day.

I don't remember much about the climb out of Champex but I think this is the one that's on an unmade road. It's not too steep and is pretty easy going, all things considered! I didn't mind this bit and even had a look round for the moon, but still couldn't find it. I did see lots of stars but decided to draw the astronomy to a close before I fell over! At this stage, it wasn't cold but as the path entered a wooded section by the river, it was chilly. As I was able to yomp along at a reasonable pace, I decided that I'd be warm enough and resolved to keep moving. Unfortunately for the Chinese guy behind me, he wasn't finding it so easy! He was groaning and moaning out loud, so I asked if he was ok. “Sleepy, very sleepy” came the reply. I encouraged him to keep moving and said it would get better. Obviously I had no idea if it would as he probably realised because he was still moaning out loud and was “still sleepy, very sleepy” about half an hour later when I heard him again!

It didn't get much warmer as we followed the river for a while and then cut down a nasty path into the trees. Another one of those uneven woodland paths, but this time in the dark! It gives you something to focus on, if nothing else! This was the slight dip before the long climb up Bovine. I think the graphic at the checkpoint showed 5km up then 5km down to Trient with about 700m of

climbing. From our recce, I remembered this as being not as bad as I'd expected, smelling horrible, being splodgy with cow poo and having a gate most of the way up but not at the top! Due to the recent rain, Bovine was like a slurry. The initial part of the climb was relatively firm underfoot but as we got closer to the farm, wellies would have been more appropriate than Hokas! To add to the mess, the farmer has taken to feeding his cows closer to the trail as he is in some kind of dispute with the UTMB. He and the cows are making a good job of it! The sound of the gate clanking was reassuring and I was pleased that I'd remembered it correctly and knew where I was. When we got to the top, there was a lovely bonfire but I just looked longingly at it and splodged onwards to Trient. This would be the only checkpoint that I didn't expect to see any familiar faces at. When I arrived at the road, I recognised the place but found it annoying that the checkpoint was not obvious and seemed to be hidden away around some little streets. When I finally found the refreshment tent, I carried out my latest plan of soup and bread eating whilst swapping my tshirt for a long sleeved top. I also had to swap my number over but it worked out fine. I was trying to decide whether to swap my leggings as they were starting to feel horribly dirty and the seam at the back which had a small hole in was rubbing my back. I did consider just ripping the back pocket out but decided, wisely against this! As I left the food tent, I was still mulling over the trouser swap idea and spotted a building which seemed to be a first aid and physio area (I didn't know about these but lots of runners were receiving treatment). I asked if there was a changing room and a man kindly showed me to a toilet. This was quite exciting – an actual toilet! I made use of the facilities and got cleaned up and changed into my, well Will's, waterproof bottoms which was my only remaining wardrobe option. I was concerned that I'd be too hot as the day broke but my other clothes were just feeling so grubby that I wanted to take them off. I left the checkpoint feeling much better and hobbled down the steps, and on my way knowing that I had a good chunk of time in hand, another mountain to climb, then just one more before Chamonix.

It was properly dark again as I headed out on the second leg of my final three. I wasn't feeling sleepy and apart from the blisters was happy enough and looking forward to seeing Jo or Ed soon. This leg was similar to the previous one but the climb was more winding and I had a vague recollection of it switching back quite steeply before popping out at the top near a building. I had to check with a fellow *traileur* whether it was foggy or whether it was just my eyes or torch. Foggy, it was! I merrily yomped up, managing to keep my little rhythm going and going and going. A few times I felt sure I'd seen the light of the checkpoint but perhaps it was someone's headtorch. We kept ascending through the woods where I saw some amazing carvings in the rocks, particularly the gnomes faces, a little dog sat at the side of the trail and a guy, who I thought had come to meet me, with really long purple poles.....Or did I!?!?

When we were almost at the top, I recognised it for certain with the steep zig-zags and out we popped next to a building! 'We' isn't me and the guy with the purple poles, its me and the guys who seemed to like following my steady uphill pace. There was a shelter and a bonfire at the checkpoint where we were told it was about 5km down to Vallorcine. (It was always 5km, it seemed which kind of amused and annoyed me!) I always had an eye on the time and could just about remember what time I expected to reach the next place. For me, 5km would be about 1h15 (no, that's not my pb!). I had a glance at my watch, decided it was ok and splodged off across some unexpectedly horrible fields through the fog and gradually downwards towards the village. I had thought that the foul ground conditions were over after Bovine so my new outfit became rather more unpleasant than I'd hoped which was a bit disappointing! Even more disappointing was seeing a sign post saying

Vallorcine 1h15 after descending for about half an hour already. This did my head in for a while as it didn't make any sense. Some marshalls confirmed after further descending that there was still 30 mins to go. I couldn't work out whether I'd now be an hour later than I had thought or if I'd remembered the time wrongly but it wasn't making me happy so I decided to stop thinking about it and concentrate on not falling over, particularly down the large steps and never-ending zig-zagging path. Eventually we came out onto a steep grassy slope and the refreshment tents were in sight. I could see some people and sure enough Jo and Bal were there waiting for me. They both managed to get into the tent and chat to me whilst I topped up my water and had a bit of food. Bal was good at working out the timings and he said I was fine and had plenty of time. All I had to do was just keep going and I'd make it. There was a bit of a upbeat, party atmosphere at the exit of this checkpoint as people "knew" that they were going to do it. Not for me. I would not be sure of finishing until I reached Chamonix town centre. Mentally, its not a good place to go, in my opinion. Concentration is key. When you cross the finish line, then you will truly have finished and not before – and definitely not with 19km and 900m of ascent still to do!! (And this one is the rocky one!)

The path followed the river for a while and Jo waved me off again. When I came out onto the road, my number was scanned again and the marshals directed me across the road to a place that was very familiar to me. There's a picnic area and building before you head up through a sensory plant garden and onto the rocky steps. Bev and I had tried to sleep on the benches in the picnic area on our recce, before doing the climb in the dark. It was quite breezy that night and our foil blankets just rattled too much so we didn't get much rest at all ! It was light for me and I found the climb ok eventhough there were a few bits that you had to scramble up. In some ways it was easier than relentless steep zig-zags because, I decided, each step was another half a metre or so up the climb. I considered putting my poles away so that I could use my hands, but decided that I'd probably need them for the descent. Bal had told me that a guy we'd met previously on the Montanvers train had taken 2h30 to reach the top so that gave me a bit of an idea of timescale. After a similar time, we seemed to reach a summit of some kind, but I wasn't convinced that this was the top. Some guys sat on the rocks said that it was and that it was 5km to La Flegere. I was rightly suspicious as we staggered across the rocks, past some (real) goats and a bright orange North Face tent came into view. It didn't take too much longer to get to the checkpoint at La Tete aux Vents (2130m), but what had dawned on me during the ascent was that I'd not really thought about how far it was to La Flegere. I knew that they weren't the same place but I just didn't think about them not being next to each other. In my head it was get to the top then it's La Flegere and down to Chamonix. I asked the guys at the checkpoint and was both annoyed and (slightly) amused to find that it was 5km!! At this point I may have sworn to myself – grrrrrr! Suddenly there was an 'extra' 1h15 that I just hadn't accounted for. I knew that I needed to allow 2hours for the downhill 8km to Chamonix but I just hadn't thought about this bit! The descent was really rocky to start with and was slow for people with short legs and blistered feet! I knew exactly what La Flegere looked like – it's a ski station that we slept at during our recce – and could eventually see it in the distance. I was getting concerned about the time and decided that I could run for the 20 mins that I estimated it would take, along a slightly undulating gravelly trail. As I trotted along quite happily, the building seemed to get further away and another bend in the path emerged. This was not a welcome sight and by now I was quite panicked! I was also hopeful of seeing Ed at some point soon but was focussed on getting to the checkpoint. La Flegere is the last checkpoint and you really do not want to get timed out after 160km with just 8km to go! I actually had plenty of time but I just wanted to get there. Ed was waiting for

me about 1km before La Flegere and had run some of the way up, giving himself a good workout to add to that of the previous day. I was really pleased to see him but was still having 'checkpoint stress'! We finally got there and I studied the graphic showing 8km all downhill to Chamonix, cut off time 1530h! As I'm writing this, I think "hurray, I'll do it now" but I didn't think that on the day! I just remained focussed on getting to the end. I didn't have any doubts that I'd finish but I needed to actually get down that hill first. I knew what it was like from La Floria (the nice café) and was really keen to get there. The first part of the descent was unnecessarily steep, it seemed. We just went straight down the ski slope and then wound our way along the gravelly (ouch!) path. Ed told me how he often skis that route in Winter. As we were busy chatting, I heard a familiar voice and turned around to see Girish, yet again! I can't believe he's ended up behind me again, but of course he has another story to go with it! This time he has been delayed by helping a fellow runner who he found struggling with cold and stayed with him until the mountain rescue team arrived, giving the guy his coat and keeping him alive. According to Giriish, this took 5 hours, but his time-keeping had been dubious at best, throughout the race. The first time that I met him, he told me we were on for a 35 hour finish and he still maintained that this was the case when we had been going for 30+ hours ! He walked with us for a while, then couldn't help himself and zoomed off again! I don't know what became of the rest of his merry band because I didn't see them after Champex. If they decided to have that sleep, then I'm guessing that they didn't make it.

It seemed to take a while to get to La Floria, which was lined with vocal supporters, including a guy in a Lakeland 50 t-shirt who called out "Go on, Steph!" . I wondered later if it was someone that I knew – thanks for the encouragement, whoever you were, it was appreciated. Just 4km left to do and all I had to do was just stand up for another hour. It probably sounds like a long time, but even the elite men take around 45 min to descend the last 5 miles from the ski station. I had to remain focussed and be careful not to trip up on the uneven ground, especially with runners whizzing by for their 'sprint finish', supporters and walkers along the trail and the welcome distraction of Jo & Bal joining us part way along the final trail section. We were soon back on the road where Sue was waiting to greet us. She was delighted to see us, of course and told me that I'd done it now. Jo & Bal ran off to the finish to try to get a good vantage point whilst Sue jogged alongside myself and Ed to the roundabout and left into the town. As with all good races, there's always a convoluted loop of the town before you get to the finish! Ed had shown me this during our run on Wed so I was well aware that I had to run alongside the river (this seemed like a long way!), cross it three times, passing the North Face shop, naturally, before finally entering the centre of the town. The finish area was lined with spectators cheering, ringing cow bells and high five-ing you. The PA was non-stop with music and congratulations for all of the finishers. Ed ran into the finish with me and I was still being careful not to trip on the kerbs as the barriers snaked round the streets and back to the Town Hall. Finally, I allowed myself to realise that I'd done it, about 200m from the finish line. I felt quite emotional as I got closer to the finish, probably knowing that I'd done it but just not allowing myself to relax until the end was literally in sight. I tearfully said to Ed, "I've done it!" He gave me a hug as we ran along for a few steps and turned into the final, short straight and back to the arch. Being friends with a 'local' who knew the announcer meant that I got my name called out as I crossed the line and an extra big cheer. As I crossed the line, I remember punching the air with my poles and thinking 'Yes! UTMB, I did it ! I beat you!' And I did, on that weekend, I took everything that those mountains threw at me and I made it back to Chamonix. Little ol' me, I did that !



Thanks to John Butters for this photo from the UTMBLive feed