

Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc 2008 by Lewis and Jane Grundy

For Jane and I, it all began in an internet entry frenzy in early January, the 2500 places snapped up in 10 minutes. We were lucky and both found ourselves proud owners of a place in the North Face Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc 2008. Getting a number is probably now the crux of the event! Amazed that we both ended up with entries, we started to think about the challenge of 100 miles and 9400m of up AND down, without stopping or sleeping. It's probably 60k and 1400m more than a BG, with a day of 27 degree heat and no rice pudding!

The event took over the first 8 months of the year, always there in the background, an exciting challenge, but a scary commitment at the same time. We became proficient shufflers, doing more, longer, trail based events than our usual diet, and despite a good dose of injuries and work related gaps in running, arrived at the beginning of August with lots of ascent under our belts and personal targets of less than 30 and 40 hrs to finish (46hr cut off). I was inspired by Dave Atkinson's time and position in 2006, aware that the race was now even longer, and we both wondered and discussed whether we could do it and what would happen after 50 miles and 5000m at Courmayeur – halfway on the map, but probably where the race really starts.



The event takes over Chamonix for the weekend, and a real buzz is created over the whole TMB circuit of towns and villages, passing through three countries, over 7 giant cols and along endless miles of dusty, stony tracks, roads and paths. Just being in the starting line-up, in what is surely Europe's most prestigious continuous long mountain race, was a wonderful experience. Standing, packed in the start pen with 2300 of Europe's "traileurs" will last as a memory for a long time. Emotive music booms out over the town square, it's 6.30pm, a truly monstrous course stretches ahead, and a mixture of worry, excitement, determination and adrenaline course through the veins. Suddenly 8 months of waiting and dreaming are over and you're jogging (or trying to!) through the streets of Chamonix, the helicopter buzzing overhead filming everything that moves and thousands of people shouting encouragement, as you mentally cross your fingers that knees, weather, stomach, legs, head and feet won't let you down.

The first evening and night takes you west out of Cham, then round southwards into Italy, over 4 big climbs and through villages full of cow bells ringing, shouts of "allez!" and "bon courage!"; food stations and water stops. You run and walk, amidst a sea of runners in the night, but alone to your thoughts, your headtorch lighting your little LED defined world of heels in front and stony tracks behind.

Saturday dawns somewhere around Courmayeur and your first major rest stop, where you meet a drop bag. 50 miles down, but nothing like halfway in reality! I scoffed some pasta, was spot on my 28 hr schedule at 12 hours elapsed (silly boy!), rammed some Vaseline in unspeakable places and headed out into a new day, the heat building as I ground up the 700m ascent to Bertone. Hollow legs and a sick stomach were starting to intrude, and doubts about my pace were growing. By Arnuva, the traditional half way spot in time, I was berating myself for having started too quickly – the Fellsman experience all over again!

My race almost ended there – lying on my back in the grass, the helicopter seeming to film my despair and the prospect of defeat looming large. I had gone too quickly, and not used the rest stops to recover for 5 or 10 minutes. The Ultra Trail is not the Wasdale, a Mountain Marathon or even a BG – it's a massive grind, a super shuffle and an enormous head game. Slow and steady wins the day! Somehow, I convinced myself to carry on, one section at a time, over Col Ferret and on into Switzerland. When folk who are walking slowly pass you, you know you're truly buggered.

Meanwhile, behind me, Jane was facing her own demons! We both underestimated the race, despite being steady long distance joggers and having recced(?) quite a bit of it. Jane was slowing down, but fighting on, fuelled by hugs, shouts of "allez Jane" and sheer bloody mindedness. She had a real low point just past Courmayeur. down on time plans and unsure if she had enough time and energy to finish. Ask her yourself to tell you about that section – I wasn't there, but I can guess! A tearful, but logical retirement at Arnuva ended her Ultra Trail, but with lots learned and immense respect for those who kept putting one foot in front of another and who fought the voices in their head. It's a very lonely event in that respect – no support teams, no porridge at Dunmail and no-one around you who knows how to keep you going if doubts take over. In fact, well over 1000 of the 2300 starters packed it in, efficiently transported back to the start by the amazing shuttle system, to retire to clean sheets or a sleeping bag, and thoughts of what could have been. Jane now knows she can, but it's not that easy when you've be on move for 22 hours and have 66kms and 3500m still to go.



I carried on, no longer the Northumberland Fell Runner, more like the British Hiker, trying to not think about times and distances, just going from one food stop to the next, sitting down and slurping soup and full fat coke whenever I could. I had decided to finish the race, and as the long, hot, dehydrating Saturday turned into a warm, star lit second night, found myself trudging up the big climb to Bovine, facing another night of headtorch lit plodding – a night out that had not been in the original sports plan!



Many, many kilometres later, left knee shot and thighs cramping, a slight figure was waiting for me in the dark at the foot of the final descent into Cham. Jane had grabbed a few hours sleep, and then selflessly come out again to see me home. 100kms, 5500m, 4hrs sleep and then coming to see me! It was 5.30am Sunday, still dark and the streets quiet as we jogged the last few kms, mixed emotions going through my mind as exhaustion and immense sadness that Jane hadn't made it, coupled with disappointment at a race strategy poorly played out, slightly tempered finishing such an epic and wonderful event. We both had tears in our eyes, and were pretty emotional, - sad, but inspired. I asked Jane to let me run the final few hundred metres alone, to put the race to bed and to mark the personal end of a memorable journey, albeit a slow one, and the end of 8 months of dreaming. I wish it had been two of us.

We are both immensely glad we tried, keen to do it again (for some strange reason), and aware that even getting to halfway depends on health, injuries, weather and much, much more. We'll be back to Arnava some day to slay the dragons, no surrender next time!

The event is amazing, almost to the point where other long races may seem a poor second best – where else can you beast yourself to such a degree amongst such fine scenery, amazing organisation and inspiring support? Bon courage, les Traileurs de l'Ultra Trail!