

2012 ULTRA TRAIL DU MONT BLANC (UTMB)

This is written primarily with myself in mind as there is much more than the physical involved and there are lessons for me to take from this. However, hopefully there are things of interest to others. It is great to discover that in your mid fifties you can engage in things that are authentically challenging and discover there is so much yet to learn about oneself.



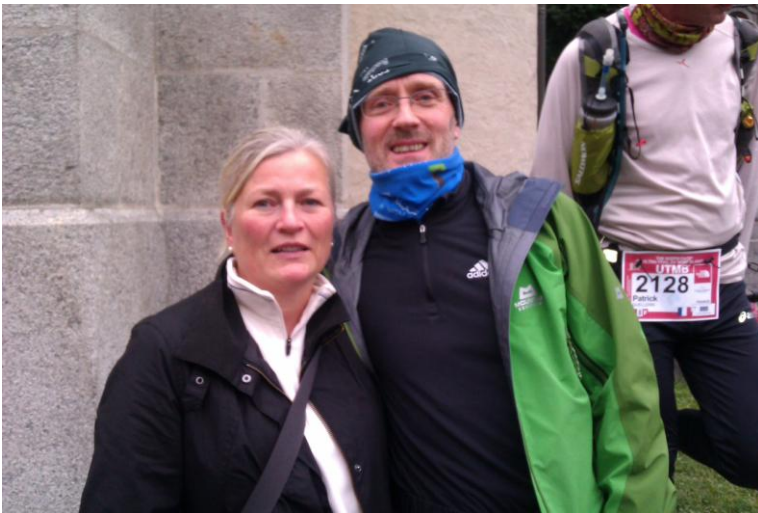
Bagged and tagged

Upon arrival Chamonix 2 days before start it was raining steadily. The whole town seemed to be taken over by runners. All in all the UTMB series of races involves about 6,000 runners and some 1,900 volunteers in 3 races– the CCC, TDS and the UTMB (which I was doing). There is also an expedition type event which was not classified and has its own rules (the PTL). All ages represented from 20 years upwards (Elisabeth saw an 80 year old complete the CCC to rapturous applause).

Thursday morning organisers were already warning of very cold, snowy conditions in the high mountain passes (around 2,500m) with a windchill of -10C. The registration process the day before was novel to me with an emphasis on proving you had the mandatory safety gear. The rucksack as well as yourself being tagged.

Eventually came a text to say that the passes on the border areas were too difficult and so the hard decision was made to modify and shorten the course to only be in France and not go above 2,000m.

This was disappointing and I had to deal with 8 months training for this only to change at last minute. However it was a testimony to the attitude of all involved that apparently only 20 or so dropped out. I respect the organisers' decision as in some places 70 cm of fresh snow had fallen. They live in these mountain areas and know how treacherous conditions can be. Runners came from about 70 nations and many of us would be unfamiliar with such weather. I was amazed at the administration that managed to reposition some 1900 volunteers and create and mark a new route in about a day. The new route would be on the Western flank of the Mont Blanc massif and broadly speaking went south of Chamonix for most of the course to return to Chamonix area and then go north for a final loop. However I was determined to enjoy it.



Elisabeth, my no. 1 supporter (she would say the one and only!)

It was also a change of plan for Elisabeth. She had faithfully come with me and fully expected to see me on a few occasions on the original route using the bus service for 'accompanying persons'. She now had to adjust to uncertainties and try and understand from the organisers what was going on. She coped superbly and did in fact manage to meet me at the 84Km mark. Elisabeth did a great job in supporting me over previous months and her believing I could do it was a big factor in motivating me.



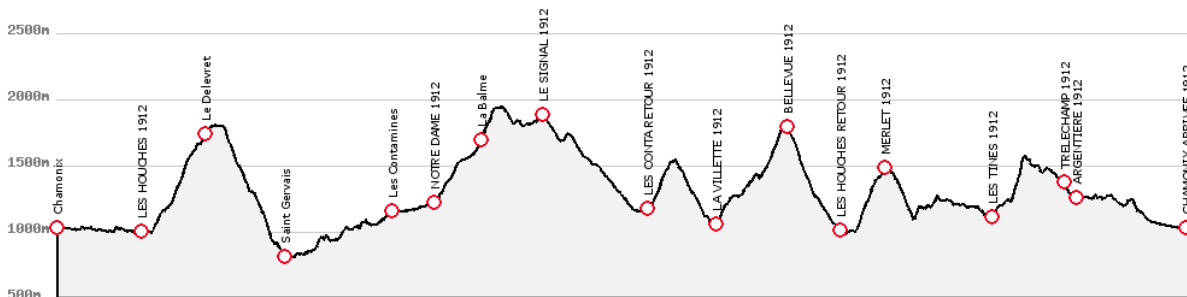
Ready to go!

So at 1900 Fri 31st Aug I was at the start line along with 2,482 others. We now had 26 hours to complete this new course with 5,862 m climbing and descending. Whatever happened I would only be out for one night and looking back I am glad! However as with the other ultras I've been involved in there is still a kind of gladiatorial aspect to things at the start. That sense of going into the unknown not knowing how you will fair. We started 6 mins. late and the first 15 mins or so was just shuffling through the throngs of well-wishers. At last out of town and a pleasant 8 km through pine woods along the Chamonix valley to Les Houches.

At this point I realised that on one level this would be a less social experience than the ultras I had done in Scotland. Many did not have English or French so language was an issue. Also for me and I suspect others there was also the lung bursting effort of steep climbs and descents which were not conducive to conversations. However there is also the unspoken sharing of experience (some might call it suffering!) which can be communicated regardless of background or language. The occasional wink or thumbs up from other runners served to communicate we were in this together!

To recall what happened where and when is a bit difficult . Never having run the route before and the original maps and route of little made me confused. Therefore some of the experiences I deliberately do not say where or when.

Below was the new route profile.



There were 2 pieces of equipment that to my mind were essential. Using poles I felt were a good decision. They give great stability and confidence especially when the legs are in pain and allow you to go a bit faster. 2 headtorches were part of mandatory equipment. I felt that my main torch was inadequate esp when compared to the car headlamps many seemed to have. Certainly the contrast whenever I was relatively on my own was stark and I would quickly revert to piggy backing of others' lights.

The greetings by the locals in Les Houches was enthusiastic and warm with cow bells and plenty of food. This was the pattern throughout whether in valley floor or mountain top.

After the warm up and gentle undulations of the Chamonix valley the next 84km was an almost unremitting rollercoaster up and down mountains so the aforementioned poles were the order of the day. It was only the last 10km approaching Chamonix from the north that was flat.

After Les Houches I was glad that the mist and damp restricted my vision of the steep slopes and kept me focussed on the present. Too much attention to what was ahead would have sapped my spirits. The disadvantage was no view, just the surreal effect of hundreds of headtorches snaking above and below me.



Checkpoints were generally gazebo type affairs where you were timed and grabbed whatever food you felt you could take. Coke, warm noodle soup and chunks of Emmental cheese were favourites. Didn't have much of an appetite for the various energy bars and big lumps of dark chewy meat the French seemed to favour. Did appreciate also taking warm tea and coffee. As the hours passed these pitstops became progressively more muddy and chaotic. They simply became places to focus on ingesting some calories and recalibrate how far ahead of the timing gate I was. As usual I had the nausea I had had on my 2 West Highland Way Races. This time I had a new insight. It was almost as if my stomach was saying 'this is unnatural, scoffing food and drinking every 90 mins. day and night as if there was no tomorrow.

← Pitstop

A word about timings. This was a race and someone of my 'back of the pack' ability has to battle with the timing gate. For me and many others the whole objective is to finish in under the max times allowed. If there is any competition it is keeping ahead of these timing gates. If you don't make a gate in time you are pulled out of the race as it's not judged either feasible for you to complete or safe to continue. Going through the second timed checkpoint was encouraging in that I built up 1 hour 40 mins. in advance of cutoff. However after that I could not build up more of a margin. I am glad that my strategy was working though. It had been my sense that I needed to push more in the first third if I was to finish at all. 1hr 40 mins. to work with was psychologically much more manageable over remaining 19 hours but not, say, 20 mins! I couldn't manage that pressure for so long.

There are a few differences between the UTMB and the West Highland Way Race and which have to be taken into consideration.

1. It is ran autonomously – that is, it is not allowed for friends or family to support only except in very limited opportunities at certain checkpoints. All your clothing, safety gear and emergency food must be carried yourself and your rucksack is tagged so not to be separate from you. No 'fresh' runner can accompany you even in the later stages. However, the checkpoints have all you need in regard to food and medical help.
2. You can use poles as an aid you if you wish. If you start with them you must finish. To my mind the poles saved my legs from cramp and gave more confidence in tricky descents.

Running through the night was much longer than I anticipated. I had failed to realise this and though I had ran through the night several times before it had always been with maybe a max of 5 hours of dark. Here it seemed so very much longer. More like 8 hours because of the dark skies and surrounding mountains. At

one stage I longed for light more than relief from the ups and downs. The experience of the psalmist expresses poetically what came to my mind as he wrote for the people of Israel climbing up to Jerusalem ... *"My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning."* Psa 130 vs.6

A welcome feature of the night was bonfires lit at strategic high points. As I've noted on other occasions it is only when you get to the heat you realise how cold you are. The negative is the extreme soporific effect of lingering around them too long.

I had mentioned that there were relatively few conversations of any length but of the few I had one stands out. There was a large contingent of Japanese taking part and pre-race I thought I'd inflict my rusting kindergarten Japanese on some unsuspecting victim at some point (we lived in Japan from '92-94). My time came during the day on Saturday when a burly guy passed me talking loudly to himself in Japanese (probably to keep himself sane). Now was my chance so greeted him. This so surprised him that he immediately began talking in fast flowing Japanese. I couldn't make out a thing and despite my protestations that I couldn't properly speak he continued for about half an hour to chat in a very one sided conversation. I decided to keep quiet as a little language is a dangerous thing and inevitably due to my limited vocabulary was telling him lies.

*Above Chamonix on meeting Elisabeth – 20km loop still to go
(the worst was yet to come!)* →

After meeting Elisabeth above Chamonix she insisted on taking this rather sleepy looking photo. I was not in the mood as you can see and my mind was on the remaining 20km. My insight was that it was going to be hard and posing wasn't on my agenda. In order to keep an average 4km/hour I had to go up hills at 2km/hour and down at 6km/hour. I was barely doing this at this stage as the downhill were becoming painfully sore on the legs. My hunch was right. The last big hill up and over to Argentiere was the steepest of them all.



As we ascended I realised that I would have to adopt a technique which I had not had to use before. Medics may have other opinions as to what was going on but it worked for me. I was getting dizzy and knew this was due to sustaining too high a heart rate. I knew from training I could sustain 120- 130 BPM for hours but as I listened to the blood pumping through my ears I guessed it was 150BPM. This was unsustainable so I adopted frequent stops every 5 mins. or so to get the HR down and then continue. Another tip I had received was that when the effort becomes apparently too much listen hard and focus on the sound of your breathing. It takes your mind of the circumstances. For me the exercise made me realise what wonderful machines our heart and lungs are and that every second since I was born they have kept me alive. I should look after them and thanked God who has *"fearfully and wonderfully made us"* Psalm 139 vs 14.

Eventually I got to the top above Argentiere, a bit light headed but it would be all downhill, literally, for the last 15km. However that last ascent had taken its toll on many of us and within about 15 mins. met 3

people in difficulties. One fellow violently vomiting but insisting I move on. Another did something to his back and said the race was over for him – I felt sad for him as he had come all the way from Panama to do this and was only 15 km from the end. He had phoned for help which was on its way. Another fellow lay on the ground wrapped in survival blankets with a volunteer looking after him.

So down to Argentiere to take in more food and then the prospect of a gentle descent along the valley. From there on in it seemed every man and his dog was out to greet you and by the time I hit the outskirts of Chamonix you felt like some minor celeb. I really want to thank the French for the terrific enthusiasm they inject into you. “*Allee, allee, Bon courage*” I must have heard scores of times. A quick phone call to Elisabeth when approaching outskirts and she said she’d be somewhere near the end and shortly after that I upped the pace, ignored the pain and headed for the finishing arch. A mike was thrust into my face asking my name and it was over, some 24 hrs. 17 mins. after start! I was then told apologetically that there were no more finisher jackets in M size by the time I had come in and that I would get mine later. Ah well it was the finishing that mattered I said to myself. However, from then until leaving Chamonix I saw everyone who had a jacket proudly wearing it as if it was their only piece of clothing!



The following day’s prizegiving was enjoyable and a few things stick in my mind. Lizzy Hawker (GB) once again won the ladies for the 5th time and doing it over whatever distance comes up each year seems to be an emphatic statement of her dominance. Also to see the 2 men and 2 women who have each done the UTMB 10 times was a remarkable achievement. There was also an amusing incident when a Japanese lady was ushered on the stage with everyone clapping (not sure what it was for as everything was in rapid fire French). She seemed so self-effacing but also a bit bemused as she kept bowing to the crowd. Eventually she whispered to a fellow Japanese. It turned out organisers had texted the wrong person to come to the stage!! All these Japanese names had confused them!

← *Finished*

Was it more difficult than the WHW Race. No, not when compared to this modified course but if the original route had been maintained it would undoubtedly have been tougher. Organisers use a technical measure as to how much effort is involved (regarded as Km equivalent). This is length in km plus 1/100th of the positive height gain in metres. By this measure 2012 UTMB was $103.42 + 5862/100 = 162$. WHWR = $153.6 + 4995/100 = 204$. However the original UTMB course would have equated to a whopping **264** ($=168+9600/100$). Did I enjoy it – yes, it was a fantastic time and such a privilege to do it with so many nationalities. Would I like to do it again? Would love to but will have to see!

Allan Grant
10th September 2012