



#### **Thursday, 12:30 pm. Easyjet book in desk. Liverpool.**

“Did you all book together?” the Easy lady in bright orange clothing asked.

“Yes,” said John.

“No?” interjected Dave.

Kate and John looked at Dave and Janet. “I thought you’d booked all our tickets?”

“No, we just booked ours. I sent you an email telling you.”

Silence. John looked stunned. “Are there any seats left?”

“Yes,” said the orange lady, “you’ll need to go to the booking desk over there.”

Kate and John soon returned. “Six hundred pounds? That’s bloody ridiculous.” Kate and John went home.

Not the most auspicious start to a race. Our five man “Achille Ratti Ultra Team” was now down to four (Dave Makin, Richard Leonard, Rhys Watkins and myself – together with supporting “ultra chicks”, Mandy Goth and Janet Makin) and we’d hardly set off. Chamonix, via Geneva, was our destination; the North Face Ultra-Trail Tour du Mont Blanc our objective, billed as the toughest ultra in Europe. The race, an anticlockwise circuit of the Mont Blanc Massif, was 158 kilometres with 8700 metres of climbing and descent, taking us through France, Italy and Switzerland in under 45 hours; hopefully. I put it in perspective for the team, “It’s just a Bob Graham with an extra hill and a marathon to finish.”

“Bloody hell!”

#### **Friday, 18:30pm. Startline. Centre of Chamonix.**

We were, by now, back at full strength, Kate and John Broome having flown over that morning on a cheap flight from Gatwick. We struggled just to get to the start. Thousands of supporters crammed the narrow streets. Over 2000 runners were trying to line up, shimmying their way through the crowds. It was a scene from a sci fi movie, innumerable raidlight clones silently converging. An immense gathering of finely honed athletes, thin muscular bodies encased in body hugging lycra with a combined body fat index in the minus numbers. Ourselves excepted of course. Although we’d abandoned walshes and hellys for poncy trail shoes and smart fabrics we were still ruffy tufty fellrunners at heart. We managed to jump over a barrier and insinuate ourselves into the melee behind the starting banner. Dave attracted a few unamused gallic mutterings as his poles, fastened like antennae on the back of his rucack, came perilously close to piercing the nostrils of several, somewhat taller, runners.

What a grand occasion. The cameras panned the gathered competitors relaying nervous and impatient faces onto a giant screen. The speeches sounded cheesy, even in French. Motivational music boomed round the town square. 7:00pm and we’re off. Through the enthusiastic crowds lining the streets, far too fast at first, trying to hang onto John who was obviously aiming to justify his flight costs. We passed a Scottish chap on the first big hill. We could tell he was Scottish because he was wearing a kilt. “It’s my sports kilt” he explained. The stunning mountain scenery faded as we climbed out of Les Houches and darkness enveloped us. A head torch parade zig zagged up the hill in front of us; a glittering snake of lights following behind. The mountains faded to dark silhouettes against a starlit sky.

#### **Friday, 23.00pm Les Contamines**

“Can you hear that?” It sounded like Ski Sunday, a bedlam of cow bells and “Allez, allez.” Turning a corner our eyes had to adjust from dark mountain path to bright village lights. There were welcoming parties thronging the narrow track cheering us on and forming two lines to funnel us into the village centre. We ran through the narrow passage of bodies accepting the accolades, “Bravo,” they called, “magnifique.” Kids leaned out from the crowds giving us high fives, “courage,” they shouted. It was a carnival, a celebration of mountain sport in a style that the athlete worshipping French excel at. What an experience. We were plied with mountains of food and drink as a live band played to the revellers. Fuelled up on emotion as well as sustenance we ran off into the darkness.

#### **Saturday, 01:47am Summit, Croix de la Bonhomie**

More cow bells. These supporters get everywhere. Imagine climbing a peak in the middle of the night just to watch some runners come past; in the dark. Our way was guided by fluorescent yellow markers every 100 metres or so like cats eyes

meandering across the hill. A few kilometers further and we heard another bell. “Another reception committee?” we surmised. But no, it was a cow, and it was eating the fluorescent markers. We spied the way ahead but pity the poor runner, who following behind us sometime later, might suddenly discover that he was following a trail of luminous cow dung. We ran down the rocky path to another village, passing lots of Johnny Foreigners who can’t run downhill for toffee, especially when it’s pitch black. Our bat training proved its worth. Another rapturous welcome from the villagers, their party was still going strong, no doubt fuelled by strong alcohol. We reluctantly stuck to Maxim energy drink. The fine selection of food at the first food stop had been followed by exactly the same selection at the second, and the third ... We were now at the seventh, with 12 more to go, and the same old menu of noodle soup, cheese, salami, biscuits, energy bars, chocolate, and crackers was becoming less and less appealing. This may have contributed to our dizziness on the next big climb (it certainly contributed to Dave’s toilet requirements – every 10km or so!). Dave and myself had decided to stick together for mutual moral support. We needed it. Staggering slowly up to the 2500 metre col the cold seeped through us. We admitted to each other later that the same thought had crossed our minds, “If we pack it in now we could be back in Cham for breakfast beers.” But, self pity was dispelled by a stunning sunrise. By the time we careered down the 1000 metre descent to Courmayer it was warm and our spirits rose. A longer pitstop at Courmayer to change clothes, vaseline feet and drink yet more noodle soup revitalized us and we set off with new legs.

### **Saturday 13:40pm. Arnuva**

We’d enjoyed the last four hours, passing group after group of runners as we negotiated undulating paths through alpine meadows. Disaster came close when the local residents took umbrage at our intrusion. The herd of alpine cows, obviously fitter and decidedly more vicious than our home grown Fresians or Jerseys, decided to cross the path and, if we were in the way, that was tough. Horns passed uncomfortably close to our swerving bodies as they skittered past. The Grand Col Ferret towered ahead of us, the highest point of the route at 2537 metres. A long, long pull but, still strong, we crossed over into Switzerland. Several checkpoints later, at La Fouly, a team of masseurs was on hand. You might have guessed that Dave would attract the soothing hands of a pretty young girl while I received the attention of a rather burly chap.

### **Saturday, 19:50pm. Champex Lac**

72 miles in. Only 26 to go! “There’s only two biggish climbs between us and Chamonix,” I assured Dave as we changed into dry gear in the village nuclear bunker, “and they don’t look as bad as the earlier climbs.” The bunker was cold but at least we were out of the rain which had changed from drizzle to torrential in the past hour. As we jogged off into the dark of our second night any vestige of new legs had dissolved. The climbs proved to be horrendous, zig after zag of steep, muddy forest path. The descents were more fun as we slipped and skied down the slime. Another bedraggled group of 15 runners appeared in front of us, slowly picking their way down the narrow path. We queued behind them like good Brits for a few minutes before impatience kicked in. “Scusee mwa,” I called in my best Lancashire French, “a la droyt.” We didn’t give them time to reply. We skipped by as they recoiled, taken by surprise and dumfounded by the fleet feet of these lunatic foreigners. “Aah, zee engleesh,” they shrugged. Further unintelligible mutterings were our only pursuers.

The last 15 kilometres were the worst. Cold and wet we trudged up a track. “I’m sure I just fell asleep,” Dave said. “Me too,” I replied. The Red Bull and caffeine tablets had worn off. We were in our own surreal world of torchlight, never ending paths, and painful feet.

“I was sure we were going fishing,” Dave exclaimed. His walking poles might explain that. His comment might explain the scattering of pink prawns I saw on the track a few minutes later. Further hallucinations followed. We were both aware of a third person walking line abreast but no-one was there. We saw imaginary people in the trees. I saw something move up ahead. A rabbit? No, it was a dog, but as we passed it proved to be an inanimate rock.

“Watch out,” I cried to Dave as I swerved while running down a road into Argentiere.

“What for,” he quizzed.

The street furniture that had been in our way dissolved into a pattern of reflections on the wet road. Weird.

### **Sunday, 07:43am. Chamonix**

The adrenaline kicked in and mentally overriding the pain from blistered feet we somehow ran the last couple of kilometers spurred on by Mandy, Janet and Kate who had walked out to meet us. Chamonix, at last! We ran through the streets, teeth gritted but grinning inside. We’d done it! We were cheered across the line by a few early morning supporters. Our time just over 36 and a half hours. Elated, we sat down in the finish tent. “That’s the best cup of tea I’ve ever had,” I sighed as I drained my third cup. Later, after a couple of hours kip, we returned to the finish. Thousands of cheering spectators were welcoming every runner in. Rhys, followed a few hours later by Richard, ran in to rapturous applause. John had finished in an amazing time of 31 hours. The Ratti Ultra Team had all made it round. Can you believe the race was won in 21 hours by a 58 year old Italian chap despite hundreds of young fit rivals. He’s obviously the Italian equivalent of Jos Naylor.

What a race, certainly the best organized event I’ve ever taken part in. The presentation was accompanied by the same stirring music echoing across the square. Janet told me it was from The Last of the Mohicans. I’m still humming it.

**Phil Hodgson**