

The Ultra Tour Du Mont Blanc 2007 by Rhys Watkins

I found it funny, but in hindsight I should have been a bit more environmentally friendly and moved it out of the way. The Mount Blanc range is after all part of the UNESCO heritage. If you have a crap you are suppose to put the paper in a bag (provided at registration) and drop it off at the next check point. However no guidance is given on the treatment of Slugs.

The little Slug in question, idly and innocently making its way across the narrow path made me chuckle. Clearly the hundreds of runners in front liked their slugs, although I'm sure it's not a French dish. If it was in my garden I would have killed it as some kind of penance for its brothers (or sisters) eating my cabbages. However out in the Alps I viewed this slug as an adventuring warrior, not that it wore any armour but it was high up on the hill, and I think deserved respect. I adjusted my stride to avoid it. After all I wanted nature to be on my side today. But blimey that little fella must have been quaking in his boots (or her boots – I didn't have a close look). I wonder to this day whether it made it to the other side of the path.

For those that don't know Mount Blanc, the highest mountain in Europe, dwarfs its surrounding mountain range. The aim of the run is to circumnavigate the mountain up and down the high level passes, and up and down the interconnecting valleys and ridges. It amounts to just over 100 miles, and 8000m of up and down. This year the views were spectacular, although I find it sad that some of the views we don't see as it's dark. I'm sure that some of those long drags in the dark would probably be the best bits if only we could see around.

Lets get one thing straight. This is not some romantic race that inspires you to sing 'the sounds of music' on every top. Although the official video is great at inspiring you as the helicopter effortlessly flies over some of the scenic passes with some catchy tune playing (same music used, I note, on the current commandoes series on TV). If the first downhill doesn't get your quads then the second will, and you're not even a quarter the way round.

This was the 2nd hardest race I have ever done (the 1st incidentally being the Comrades in S.Africa). For most of the way round I was thinking that I must have been fit last year to get round. It certainly isn't given on a plate. I applaud the efforts of the other Toddies (Phil, Mandy, Chris P, John P) for doing the first 50 miles – which viewed on its own would be a considerable task. Jane from the Dales, and my partner from last year, did over 70 miles. A great effort.

I suspected that this was going to be a no win kind of race before it even started. I wanted to complete the race with Jane (from the Dales) but realised that I was probably now faster than her following my BG training. Had I gone around with her, would she have finished? Why can't running be simple.

Thankfully Bill (mate from Shropshire) offered to team up with me. As I've run with Bill several times it was one less thing to worry about. I favour doing this race as a pair. It's a long way and I feel that I needed the company particularly as other runners were not that chatty (due to language barriers). I often look back at Richard Leonard's effort last year – completing the whole race on his own – he deserves a special medal.

I left Bill coming down the steep descend from Bonhomme – he hasn't got BG legs I tell myself. It was after 5 minutes of waiting that I hadn't seen any Toddies that I thought maybe I went down too quick. Five minutes later the Prestons arrive but no sign of Bill. Second check point and I've lost him. About 20 minutes after arriving Bill thankfully turns up unhurt, moments I add before Phil and Mandy, stating that he had to look after his quads if he hoped to get all the way round.

For those that don't know, Bill and myself go back a long way, and it was partly due to him that I started this running lark in the first place. He is a great mate, and as such I instantly forgave him for taking it easy, but 20 minutes is 20 minutes. I just hoped that he would quicken up down the next hill. At this stage I remembered that Bill loves his food. His eyes opened wide at the first checkpoint. Taking his time to sample every delight on offer. It was a bit of a rugby scrum to get to the tables to actually get the food, but Bill persevered.

Me, I grabbed a bit of chocolate, some cheese, filled my water bottle and was ready. Bill was sampling the soup - that had to be individually ladled out and carried 20 feet, and took forever to get a small bowl. Mandy would not have stood for this, 'Bill we've got to get a move on, we've been here too long'. I think it was then that I realised that I was treating this as a race rather than 'just want to get round' run. I hadn't expected Bill to be considerably slower – he's always been quicker and more able than me.

The next checkpoint was just a bad. Our pairing wasn't working out. He was getting annoyed with me for constantly hassling him – don't get in between Bill and his food. We walked/ran in silence for a bit. We eventually discussed me leaving him at the next checkpoint for him to catch me up. This was ideal, with Bill being stronger than me. It was going to work.

The next checkpoint, as it happens, we slipped past John and Chris P. I was keen to leave so I left Bill there.

Faced with Bill, Chris and John just behind was enough to spur me on. If they are going to catch me up then they would have to work for it, I told myself. I was also still frustrated at wasting so much time at the previous check points. Of course moments later Bill is there, so much for making it hard for them. I expected John and Chris to merrily pass also.

However after the next checkpoint Bill didn't catch up. I often saw Sally (Bill's wife) and kids at various future checkpoints who reported that he was some way behind. Running on your own wasn't too bad as it happens. Constant updates by Sally and knowing that there were the gang of Toddies just behind me helped.

The irony of giving Bill such a hard time is that as the day got hotter and hotter, I was spending more and more time at the check points drinking and drinking. I started with a maximum limit of 2 minutes at each check point, but this soon became 4-5 minutes. The sun was baking and the temperature was soaring.

The checkpoint before Grand Col Ferret (a beautiful place once you get up there) I was sitting on the grass in the shade finishing off a 2 litre bottle of water. I was a bit wasted. After a few minutes I moved on but only to sit on one of the benches inside the tent to have a couple cups of soup

The massive climb up Col de Ferret was a struggle. The hut you can see faintly high up the hillside turns out not to be the refuge. Where I need to go is even further. The contour map I had indicated 1hour 54 minutes of climbing. My mind wanders back to the video of the helicopter that effortlessly flying over this Col. Put a bit of a sound track on and you are captivated, but out there in the real world it's so different. Two hours of willing yourself up this hill. You're knackered and you could easily drift off if you rested your eyes for a few moments. Still there was a lovely breeze to ward off any real discomfort.

You think it's over once you get to the top. A quick spin around looking at the majestic views (this is highest point of the whole run), and it all seems so worth it. I knew I was slipping behind so I had to run the next downhill bit. It works out to be just over 3 hours of flipping downhill. That was a big hill. I felt good as we had walked this section last year. Well that was until this 10 year old kid skipped past me. Who was I kidding. I did overtake a few runners, which I convinced myself was balancing things out. That pesky kid.

Many things fire you along in the small hours. I would drift off and think of my mate Mike who sadly is now longer with us. I would think of Tracey back at home probably watching me as little red dot on the internet. I was not alone.

For this race I had to done some considerable mental training. As every long distance nutter knows, it's all about having the right mental attitude. Last year the theme, when hallucinating, seemed to be fish and crabs (don't ask). It took some effort, and considerable research, but this year I had trained my mind to see voluptuous ladies. Sadly I didn't hallucinate but I'm sure the training was not wasted.

Whilst I did a good half of the run on my own I gained strength from the fact that there was a field of Toddies also doing the run. It was a bit tough when I heard that all the rest of the Toddies had stopped at half way. I loved the first half. You're all fresh and you are constantly bumping into other Toddies at check points. Now, for the second half, I felt lonely and vulnerable.

Bill thankfully is stubborn though. At Champex (the 2nd major stop, and ¾ round) he arrived some 20 minutes after me. I decided that I would wait for him (he texted Sally to say he was just about to arrive), but I really wasn't for hanging around once he arrived. To his credit, he only took a few moments before he was reviving to go. He admitted that he had pushed himself in the hope that I would be there. I missed Bill so it was great to be teamed up again.

For the odd Brit that asked 'What's your plan, what time are you going for', I must have looked a stupid with my glazed blank look. I didn't even have a watch so I really struggled with this question, what time?, what plan?. For most of the race I had no idea how I was doing. Although this year I ran more than last and I didn't stop as much, so I knew that I was going to improve upon last year.

Bill, who had a watch, mentioned that we would probably do it in just over 36 hours. This kind of spoilt it. If I could do it in 36 hours then I would be so pleased. Why oh why did I hear myself saying to Bill, 'what if we were to push it, do you think we could get under the 36 hours'. It's only down the valley, and it's suppose to be improved route from last year. I was told there's a short climb from the last checkpoint, then it's down hill all the way. We grabbed some food and we're off. Bill took the lead and started running up the path. I knew that I had blisters like never before, and my legs hurt. I didn't know at the time but the back of my legs were badly burnt from the sun which didn't help. Odd how you know something is wrong but you can't put your finger on what it is at the time. But we're running up the hill. Bill you're killing me, but the bugger isn't going to get away. I hang on.

We get to the top of the hill having overtaken loads of people struggling on. Nobody mad enough to run I thought. The next bits flat so that's okay, then there's another uphill bit, followed by another one. There must have been half a dozen uphill bits, with loads of downhill flat bits. I had got this wrong, I was cursing the advice I was given, and we're still running uphill. Bill I'm fucked, we need to slow down, I can't do this anymore. Then there would be a downhill bit just long enough to recharge your battery. Stop running up those hills Bill.

And then it switched - no longer was Bill in the lead but I was. I just wanted the race to finish. You are so close but so far. Up, down, on the flat, I didn't care now. Just run it as fast as you can. A chap in front sees us coming up. He gathers enough energy to sprint forward for a few hundred yards. Over the next few minutes we slowly catch him up. He sprints forward again, we catch him up. Like some prey fighting for his survival he desperately pulls away. Only we wear him down and overtake him. We catch a few other people. Some people staggering forward, others walking quickly, but all quite jovial. One team tags on to us, another overtaking us. It was getting a bit savage. We're fighting for position, and that clock was getting closer to 36 hours, so Bill was saying. We plough on, through the square. I knock into one of the marshals that misjudged the speed we were going. The guy directly behind me thankfully didn't overtake at last minute, but I was gunning for it. What a finish. Bill came in moments later. Funny how you can hardly stand up after running for miles. Enough was enough. I had treated my body like some piece of garbage. Still I was probably in better shape than that Slug.

I was delighted with the time (36hours, 1min, 28s). It knocked bucket loads off last years time, but it doesn't seem as rewarding as last year - maybe because last year it was a new frontier for me. My body suffered too much this time. As it was my legs were bandaged for 10 days due to excessive sun burn when I got home.

It is not surprising that this race is receiving large international recognition. Little niggles and some bad planning that I noticed last year had been ironed out. It is a superb race to do, but do it to get round and not for a time is my advice, and note that mud doesn't act as sun block.