

Championat de Canigou

It's 4.30 am Sunday, my trusty Nokia squawks into life to tell me to get out of bed. Forty five minutes later and there is a knock on the door, as expected its Chris. Having only spoken to him on the phone he looks just like most other Vet 60. Grey, No 2 haircut and thinner than a matchstick with the wood shaved off. Come to think of it most Vet 50's look like that.

He explains that on the way we are going to pick up his son in law, Jeremy, who did the race last year in eight hours. Jeremy turns out to be built like I am but has yet to accrue the same level of life experiences as he is only thirty five.

Having arrived at the start it would seem that the whole of France has entered the Championat de Canigou, 31kms(20 miles) and 2200m (7220ft) of climb. There are eight hundred runners and all their helpers and hecklers. Having changed into our running kit we did our last part of race prep by having a coffee in the café, I could not resist a croissant nor indeed the second one. Jeremy and I decided that starting at the back would be a good idea. A great plan as it turned out as they all sprinted away from the start and left us behind. Thoughts of just what am I doing here crossed my mind, I took stock of what was going on. Seven o'clock in the morning, already about twenty degrees with a forecast of thirty two degrees, the summit of Canigou was ten miles away and well over a mile higher. Never mind I have my camelback full of disgusting chemicals, GO gels and some secret tablets recommended by Rhys.

As Jeremy had said once the initial sprint was over we would start catching people up, which is what happened. The French technique apparently is to go fairly steady on the way up and fly down the other side. I decided on a plan of trying to overtake someone every hundred meters or so. As it turned out it was a bit ambitious but by the first drinks station I had overtaken 82, which only left 717 to go. The drinks stations are exactly like any road run in UK, water, glucose drinks, cake, raisins, salt tablets, watermelon and obviously a choice of red, white or rose. Strangely I didn't see anyone drinking the wine.

The day got hotter but as we were climbing it didn't feel like it. After about five miles I decided that I could go a bit faster than Jeremy and set out to catch some more frenchies. Obviously the more you catch up it becomes progressively harder to catch the next one so by the time I started the grade 4(whatever that means) climb to the summit I had lost count of my French scalps but guessed I was about 450th at the summit. The view from the water station at the summit was awesome, with all the by now normal fare but the watermelon was nearly frozen, as were the marshals.

The vast majority of other runners now began a banzii descent down the other side of the mountain, not the safest method of descent for an alarming number of my fellow competitors. But at least I wasn't losing too many places. Although being down instead of up the descent was exactly the same as the climb, hard and, often rocky with exposed tree roots and big steps to jump.

With five kilometres left I met a young mademoiselle walking, on enquiring if she was OK she said she was tired, we then had a little discussion about who was most tired and decided we should help each other along to the finish. I can now do a very encouraging "Allez". With about 2 kilometres some guy at the side of the road gave her some serious verbal which I was about to react to when Sandra(first name terms in less than 3k's) said if we really try her father thought we could do it in less than six hours. So we pushed each other all the way to a fantastic finish in the village where everybody was cheering everybody who finished. We both beat the six hour mark by a few minutes, 499th out of 800.

Then there was the party in the park, brilliant.

- Stuart Bolton

Need any new kit?

MOUNTAIN WILD

Crown St Hebden Bridge

are still giving Tod Harriers 10% discount for anything bought in the shop. Possible bigger bulk discounts.

