

Hi sorry this has taken a little time to write.

I was a finisher of the **Ridgeway 85 mile Challenge** which took place on the 24th August. I ran the first half to 43 miles in 11 hours which I was pleased about, however after that the trail decided to give me a very hard time and my feet slowly broke down.

The race is 85 miles from Ivinghoe Beacon through the Chiltern Hills and North Wessex Downs taking in Barbury Castle and Liddington Castle with 9000 ft. of ascent. My aim was to finish, quite literally come what may, such that I had sufficient points to enter the North Face Ultra Trail Du Mount Blanc.

The madness of ultra-running started 3 years ago and they say that to undertake distances of over 50 miles to work up to them slowly. I attempted the Centurion 100 North Downs way last summer, but after 12 hours and 50 miles I was a DNF (Did not finish). This year, the preparation started in January with walking in the Italian alps prior to skiing, two 50 milers in Yorkshire and Kent and the Braintree Boggle marathon as well as the cross country races. The Yorkshire Ultra was run at the end of January in deep snow over the moors in gale force winds. Exhilarating.

In March and April I did a fair bit of cycling for a trip to Spain, but returned to training at the end of that month clocking up 30 to 50 miles a week. However, injury struck at the beginning of July when my left foot suffered what I thought was a stress fracture. Immediately I stopped running for a month, then on holiday in Italy I ran up and down Mount Vesuvius in 40 degrees of heat to mentally prepare me for Ridgeway Challenge. No foot problem and a piece of volcanic rock sitting on my desk to show for it.

On the morning of the 24th August the forecast was dismal with heavy rain. I started at 10.00 am. You had 28 hours to finish it. Those attempting to complete the race in under 24 hours started at 12.00. The wet limescale rock on the path was as slippery as ice so caution under foot was key. A total of 106 runners started and 31 retired along the route.

The day time went well and underfoot the trail was amazingly dry. At about 20 miles, incredibly, I was in about 10th position, but this did not account for the fact that the 12.00 o'clock runners were about to come through. Indeed

at 3.30 I was overtaken by Dan Lawson, who holds the world record for the longest distance run on a tread mill in a week, poor chap. He was great and checked I was ok. He finished in 13 hours 54 minutes.

As on previous occasions my plan was to spend the least amount of time at check points as possible. There are 10 in all, each with a cut off time, and you can waste allot time at them. Certainly during the day time on the Saturday I stuck to this plan. It can seem a bit rude, but also not speaking to much at check points saves time.

The half-way Point was Goring, just prior to this the lack of training became apparent as I struggled to get the legs to even trot. By this point also my small toes on both feet had hot spots. Goring at 9.00pm meant hot food and my first sit down. Any ultra-runner will advise, avoid the chair. However, at this point all the competitors I was with took the opportunity to sort themselves out and eat and have a hot drink. Each check point is manned by a local running club so you are extremely well looked after.

I met my brother Chris here who crewed for me through the night. He was brilliant, the absolute best. However at Goring I made, what turned out to be a very poor decision, and changed from a pair of Salamon trail running shoes to ordinary running trainers.

In the dark I set out with another runner to Bury Down, Check Point 6 about 9 miles. The first 3 miles is a long continuous climb. By the top I had blisters and stopped and taped them. I had read that women are incredibly good at looking after their feet on Ultras and men tend to decide just to carry on and end up as DNF's. . I opted for the stop and sort them out approach. It worked.

However by about 11.30pm the feet were very painful. Generally if you're going to pull out of an Ultra you do it at a check point. Again I had another rule and that was come what may, I must leave every check point. Chris had his car parked in the car park and for the first of many times I sat down took off the trainers and he rubbed gel into my feet and sorted out the blisters.

Navigation was not a problem, but I had never gone through the night before. I had read about people having hallucinations. I was therefore pleased to see two small dinosaurs on the track and a large hoarding on top of the downs!

At 61 miles, check point 7, a chap was wrapped in a survival blanket with hypothermia. Allot of these guys travel light and with low body fat even in summer if it's wet and the air temperature is low there is the possibility of this. I decided again not to let negative thoughts into my mind and again got out of the check point to have the feet sorted out. The mind continued to play tricks and throughout the rest of the night I had this idea I was being followed by someone, but by sunrise the brain stopped playing games. Throughout the night anyone that passed me made a real effort to check I was ok. Again this was superb support for any competitor.

By this time my legs felt tired, but at 70 miles in my mind the job was done, 15 miles and about 7 hours to do it in. For one year I had not taken any form of oral pain killer. However at 8.40 am, on a stoney track at about 75 miles I took the pills. A little later the blisters erupted, but kept moving. Two more decent hills remained and then I dropped into the village of Avebury. I managed to run in to the finish, it's amazing what you can do when someone points a camera at you. I was the last to finish on the cumulative time in 75th place in 26 hours 44 mins, but given the state of my feet I was pleased with this.

In the days that followed my swollen hands shrank bank to normal. The nails came off the small toes but the blisters healed. My right foot swelled to about a third bigger and again I seriously thought I had injured another bone as I suffer with osteopenia. However it healed and in a couple of days' time the running shoes will be on again. Anyone wanting to have a crack at this madness I'd be happy to point you in the right direction.

Best wishes Mark