

UTMB: DNF

by Andy Mouncey

'Bravo!'

'Courage!'

Late morning on Saturday and the Italian ski town of Courmayeur looks every inch picture-postcard under clear blue skies. I've just cleared the forest after a mind-bogglingly long & steep zig zag descent into what is the traditional half way point of the race after what has been for me nearly 12 hours of physical and emotional ups and downs on a truly alpine scale.

We've also had every type of weather thrown at us during the previous 78 km and some 4400m of climbing and descending, but that's not the reason for my haunted expression: It's because I know that my race will stop right here.

I've known that for the last few hours - it's just that the Italians are not making it easy. Men, women, young and old are out on the race route shouting and clapping encouragement to the weary runners. It's the children - *the bambinos* - that get to me, doing unbridled enthusiasm as only they know how. Thinking of my own boys just makes it worse and I feel the tears start to bubble. Then the UTMB race organisation works a leverage trick of their own. Every runner has their full name and the flag of their country printed alongside their number. The result is that spectators can make it personal. So I have my name shouted by smiling faces as I close in on the municipal sports complex in the centre of town which is the checkpoint. I feel a complete and utter fraud. My number is shouted ahead so that my dropbag with spare kit in can be found among the other 2299, and then the knife goes in. I'm handed it by a smiling young Italian boy not much older than my eldest: 'Bravo, Andy!'

Oh, Jesus...

I have to turn away as I'm in serious danger of bursting into tears right there, and walk the final few yards into the building trying desperately to smile and wave my thanks around a very wobbly bottom lip.

Up the stairs guided by kindly Italians and into what looks like a huge mess hall where runners are seated setting new speed records in food consumption. I look for the chair furthest away from everyone and everything and make a bee-line for it, As I sit down the dam bursts and the tears flow uninterrupted for what seems like many minutes. It's taken 25 years of racing but finally I have another first: Mouncey, Andy, UTMB 2011, Did Not Finish.

Is This Wise?

It all started a week ago as I flew out early to get ready to receive the six runners I'd be coaching who'd signed up with www.alpine-oasis.com/trail-running for a week in UTMB country.

'Andy, is this wise?' Phil & Annie (Mr Mrs Alpine-Oasis) could, I suppose, be forgiven their scepticism.

Four weeks earlier I'd had the small matter of the Lakeland 100, then I was proposing to complete UTMB on the back of an intensive week in the mountains with a client group. While the pace over the ground would be very comfortable for me, it would be full-on in all other aspects.

So honestly? I didn't know. And I wanted to find out. And I was OK with it not going to plan to get my answer. But I also figured a week in the big stuff would be good for the legs and the head - because adjusting to the sheer scale of the landscape out here is one of the hardest initial challenges. So I'd built a case and presented my arguments - but the jury was still out.

Taking A Look

Before the clients arrived I had a route reccie to complete.

'If you do nothing else then look at the final two climbs,' said Mr Fellsman Mark Hartell. (There is 10 in total, by the way). 'They're the steepest

and the hardest and will make or break your race.'

I only had time for a look at the final one, and realised very quickly that Mark wasn't kidding. It was a 700m monster all gained in 4km. Visions of grown men crying...

The Week Before

We had a superb week with our multi-national group of runners out and about from our base in Les Contamines on the UTMB race route. The sun shone as we introduced our folks to the joys of a glacial meltwater river bath post-run, English puddings, and a dog called Pickle. We also did some very cool running – culminating in an overnight stay at the high mountain refuge on the Croix de la Bonhomme – the highpoint of the race route.

Then on the Monday our special guest Stuart Mills www.ultrastu.blogspot.com arrived, and a greater contrast in pre-race routines you could not find.

'Andy, is this wise?' intermated the man who beat me by about 5 miles at the 2010 Lakleland 100.

Well, at least it gave me another chance to rehearse my argument. Heck, it sounded plausible – didn't it?

Stu was a big hit – not least because his approach to this ultra lark is not the most conventional you will ever find and therefore just perfect for busting some limiting beliefs and kicking off an argument – er, I mean, provoking discussion.

He was asked about his strategy: 'Go off as fast as I can while I can.'

Er, but it's a 100 mile race, Stuart – why would you do that?

'Cos it's fun to race the big boys.'

It's fun??

I could see jaws dropping and eyebrows heading upwards, but there was no denying it, Mr Mills enthusiasm was catching.

What about stretching, Stuart?

'I don't enjoy it so I don't do it – why would I do something I don't enjoy?'

Pause. Fair point.

Bombshell

Friday morning and a bomb drops as 2300 runners receive the following text from the race organisation:

UTMB: important storm + cold weather + rain or snow. UTMB start at 11.30pm

Phil has been watching the weather closely over the last 48 hours and this is the one he's been waiting for. Clearly the race organisation do not want a repeat of last year – race stopped 3 hours in due to awful weather – and do want to get the leading edge of the front out of the way before the race starts. But they've also taken the final climb out of the route in favour of a valley bottom option because the snow line is now down to around 2000m and the forecast is for seven shades of hell to sweep the high ground.

A five hour delay – so most people will do two nights then...

As 2300 race plans implode, I check the obvious first: Can I still make my flight home (??!)

And then the rest of the day is given over to Plan B. I'm quite fortunate because I didn't have much of a Plan A to start with so there's really not much to change other than take advantage of the additional sleep and eat time. I do, however, change to more grippy shoes. For those runners who'd done the detailed scheduling, modelling and reccie runs it was a different story – and Stuart was one such runner...

Chamonix, 1.5 Hours To Go

It's belting down and we all wonder how busy the start will be. I recall watching here last year in packed crowds and with the whole place jumping. But 11.30 at night in a deluge?

I do the essentials and hand in my drop bag for the half way checkpoint, then Annie makes an emergency call to a friend who lives in town: 'Joy, can we call in for a cup of tea, please?'

Thank god she's in, and we sit out the remaining wait time slowly steaming and dripping over her floor while checking the race updates online. Phil joins us half way through. He's got full media accreditation this year which means he's covering the entire race – someone else who will be pulling a two night gig.

30 Minutes To Go

Back outside and the square is a sea of multi-coloured waterproofs. People have appeared as if from nowhere, and if it's not in full jump mode, it's pretty close with the bedraggled MCs giving their all to whip up the crowd. I shout into Annie's ear 'I need to be over there!' A hug and kiss sends me on my way to squirm through the bodies to get as close as I can to the start gantry.

I finally come to a halt about 50 yards away recalling that Stuart had said that would equate to around a 5 minute delay. If I turn my head I can see the big screen behind me which is showing shots of the front line of the start. There's Killian, Jez, Scott, Sebastian, Lizzy, all looking as reassuringly soaked as us mere mortals. All other movement is impossible so I try and relax and take it all in from under my hood. There's a lot to absorb: It maybe nearly midnight in godawful weather, but the square is packed, music is thumping, people hanging off balconies, and cameras going off everywhere. And even though I'm a repressed Englishman I can't help being drawn into the excitement...



Go!

A massive cheer, music cranked to maximum, a surge, then a stop, and we're off – kinda. It's stop start with bottlenecks frequent and a

crowd who are going nuts. The emotion is almost overwhelming and to my astonishment I feel myself welling up as we shuffle between the barriers. I had absolutely not expected this but have some real wobbly lip moments and damp eyes as every so often a face in the crowd comes into focus and our eyes lock if just for a split second. What's conveyed in that connection? Excitement, joy, fear, awe and... love? All I know at the time is that it is enough to move me...

Clearing the town I'm threading my way through the bodies as gaps open and trying desperately to avoid being skewered by a trekking pole. While around 50% of the elite field will use them, they are the kit choice of the majority as you go down the field. I have mine stashed and my plan is to use them from halfway. More bottlenecks as we enter the park: It's a large and clearly very scary puddle.

What the..?!?!

Ah, so continentals slow down for puddles, obviously.

I elbow through and splash down the middle leaving howls of derision in my wake.

Unbelievable.

The First Climb

It takes me around one hour of running along the valley bottom to find any meaningful space between the bodies – and I thought I'd got a reasonably good start position. An hour! I try very very hard to relax and just try and ease through as gaps appear but have to own up to the fact that impatience and claustrophobia get the better of me on more than a few occasions. Straight through the first checkpoint at 8km congratulating myself on avoiding any puncture wounds, and onto the approach to the first climb which will be a height gain of 800m in 6km to the high point at La Charme.

A sharp turn then *boom!* straight up. This is our night run route with our clients so not only is this whole next section familiar to me, it's familiar in the dark. I focus in on a relaxed and steady pace through the tarmac switchbacks which give way to muddy forest 4 x 4 trails. I seem to be steadily gaining ground without

going into the red zone which is something to smile about as we thread our way upwards. And still people are out cheering on the course – not just a handful, but LOTS. Impromptu aid stations at the end of driveways, the noise of cowbells, entire families are out in the pouring rain at god knows what hour of the night.

We gain the top and I get ready for the 7km and 1000m plunge through the forest into St Gervais in the valley bottom. It's treacherous underfoot with much of the smaller paths now mud chutes. I bless my change of shoes and wonder briefly how many of the Europeans in their smoother shoes for the dry hardpacked trails will be getting on. I find that even being conservative and protecting my quads I'm passing folks here and there.

So it's a happy if very bedraggled chap who trots into the first big CP at 21km to find once again the place is jumping and the soggy cameraman lining up on me is – 'Phill!'

'I love your work, Mr Mouncey'

'Wonderful to be working with you again, Mr Coates.'

We indulge in a mutual grinning moment as I'm swift in and out gaining some more places in the process. I don't register it at the time but I'm already starting to pay for neglecting my eating and drinking in this first half marathon. One of the side effects in bad weather is that you just want to get your head down and get on with it – eating and drinking become less important, not least because the sensation of sweating is missing. And I've been remiss.



Into The Abyss

31km and we hit the CP at Les Contamines after threading our way along and up and down the valley. I'm looking forward to meeting Annie and our runners for a boost before we hit the big desolate stuff. Sure enough there's a smiling Annie with rice pudding and tea and an even more smiley welcome from Simon, Tiiu, Claudia and Lilly. I chow down and chat between mouthfuls realising that at last the rain has stopped but it's definitely colder here at 1100m. A handshake with Simon, kisses and soggy hugs from the girls and I head off on the approach to the longest climb and the high point of the race, the 1500m haul to the Croix de al Bonhomme at 45km some 2500m high.

As I leave the village I half register the time on a clocktower. I'd reckoned around 3.5 hours to this point – the leaders would have been through 30-40 minutes ago – and I'm sure I see clock hands at quarter past three.

There or thereabouts then...

But I'm now very cold and it takes me an age to warm up. I realise I'll have to stop and gear up before starting the long walk approach as the trail rises, and 4km later I do just that. On go the overtrousers, hat and gloves and out comes more food. Part of me registers the fact that I'm in France in August wearing full winter kit. Another part registers that it's been a very slow last 4km and that I'd better tune in 'cos there's a big-ass climb coming up.

So I walk, eat and do my best to appreciate the stars in a clearing sky. I'm on familiar ground having brought clients here over the last couple of years so know exactly what is coming. As we clear the forest and head ever higher the landscape broadens out so that I can see a line of twinkling headtorches stretching out for miles ahead. I'm doing fine on the lower slopes but as the path steepens and I engage another gear my breathing suddenly spirals out of control and I'm having to fight to maintain my pace.

Bloody hell!

I'm both shocked and seriously uncomfortable and am forced to slow down to retain some semblance of control. Looking back on the steep switchbacks I can see I'm pulling

what amounts to a train of about 20-30 people all following exactly the line I'm taking. To my amazement only a handful of these people charge past me on the steepest final part of the pull upto the col, but my attention is all over the place and suddenly I'm constructing all sorts of scenarios around packing it all in.

An abyss has opened in front of me and I'm heading straight down.

I realise the colour of the land is changing and am momentarily distracted from doing wallowing self-pity. It takes me a few seconds to make the connection: Snow! Fresh snow on the ground which has also lightened the shape of the mountains around us as the wind now tries to blow us off the col. This is the point of no return: If I continue from here I'm committed all the way to the next valley floor CP at 50km. And I can also turn back and retrace to Les Contamines and my own bed in our apartment. Fortunately I'm not thinking all that clearly and with most things on automatic I find my legs continue to carry me onward.

My mood is only momentarily lightened as I clock one of the Japanese runners who is clad only in a vest on his top half. *Just a vest! Everyone else I can see has got full winter kit on here!*

There's a final few km of rocky traverse and gently climbing from the col to the refuge at the high point. I'd hoped to crack on from here, but am reduced to what feels like a shuffle. I have no energy for anything remotely upwards and my spirits have just spiralled.

Brighter, Briefly

As the world lightens around us I wander listlessly down to the refuge which marks the beginning of a 5km descent to Les Chapieux which will see us lose 1000m in height. The path is steep frozen mud and shale going down and down as far as the eye can see. Treacherous in places. Above us is a different story: Clear lightening skies start to highlight the mountains in a stunning early morning display showing off the new snowfall in all its glory.

But I'm still doing 'listless.'

Two thirds of the way down I start to pick up and by the time we hit the valley floor I've re-

gained all the ground I lost on the climb – but I figure some serious calories are needed and proceed to make short work of two bowls of soup.

While I'm occupied I'm also chewing over the 'abyss' moment. I can see nothing good from that and a suspicion grows around some very empty reserve tanks. We'll know for sure on the next climb...

The next 40 minutes or so is the best weather window we'll get and we are treated to sunshine on the upper slopes of Mont Blanc ahead and to our left, clearing skies and freshly snow covered peaks. I've shuck my waterproofs, hat and gloves and rolled my sleeves up – a little precipitously because it's still very cold I have to grab my hat and gloves back on before I've gone too far.

We're now on the 10km and 1000m climb to the Col de la Seigne and as the weather closes in once again around halfway up, my breathing spirals and I'm reduced to a slow walk. This time even my Japanese vest-wearing friend does nothing to lift my spirits. I'm moving too slowly to generate the heat I need to stay warm so despite full winter gear on again, I am also cold. Which just depresses me even further. I can see no possible way of breaking this pattern so I can see no possible way of completing this race. I reflect ruefully that, hey – at least the experiment's working and I'm getting some answers...

I am a truly sorry son of a b**** who shuffles over the frozen high point in what amounts to a near blizzard.

It's Just Not Working

We're now heading down to the Italian side of the Mont Blanc massif and the landscape changes accordingly. We are much closer to the towering walls and as a result it all seems much more dramatic as we emerge from the mist. I have moments when I am able to gawp in amazement at the scenery, but they are getting fewer as I do depression with more frequency.

We have one more climb to go before the long drop to Courmayeur and I realise I've decided:

I will stop at Courmayeur. I also realise there is no lifting of spirits from that decision. I'm just too tired to care that much and anyway, there's still a way to go.

Despite all my mental skills I can still see no way to do another 50 miles and 5000m of climbing and descending once I reach Courmayeur. More importantly, I can't seem to make it matter enough either. I'm now paying the price for skimping the mental and emotional prep and figuring I could complete this little jaunt on what pretty much amounts to momentum. Lakeland was always my priority – this, (and the pre-race week) was an experiment. I was blasé and now it's back to bite me.

Full Stop

The fourth big climb is a 500 pull upto the Arrete du Mont Favre, a 2400m high point at 69km from which we start the 9km descent dropping 1200m into Courmayeur. The only way I can see me getting over this is with poles and so it proves despite my 'blow at halfway' pattern kicking in once again. I make time and places yet again on the descent as we drop into Italy and beautiful sunshine. I stop for an age at the final small CP just faffing about before the steep drop through the forest into the town preparing, I think, for it all to be over. The forest is quiet, beautiful, peaceful – and I am certainly calmer when I emerge.

It's taken me 78km & 4400m of climbing and descending to produce some answers to questions I probably had the answers to anyway – but sometimes the only way to really know is to do.

The Bigger Picture

The final race distance after the route changes was longer than normal: 107 miles

The finishing rate was 47%

35 hours into the race only 120 runners had finished

The greatest % of runners finished between 40-46 hours

Short photo montage here: www.mudswheatandtears.co.uk/2011/08/29/utmb-in-pictures

Results, pre and post race interviews, photos here: www.irunfar.com

7 minute film montage here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFWDUsvLCoE

Jez Bragg Blog here: www.jezbragg.blogspot.com

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