IN THE WORLD OF ULTRA-DISTANCE TRAIL RUNNING, THE ULTRA-TRAIL DU MONT-BLANC IS THE HOLY GRAIL: 172KM, 10 500M OF CLIMBING, AND 46 HOURS TO FINISH. ALANA DOYLE SET OUT TO TEST HER BOUNDARIES...

#UTMB

Magnificent highs and indescribably painful lows, Mont Blanc has it all.

Photograph by Pascal Tournaire © ULTRA-TRAIL DU MONT-BLANC®
As my headlamp began to dim, I wondered what kind of sadistic race organiser would ensure that the majority of runners are forced to endure two consecutive nights of non-stop running. But my fuzzy brain fantasised that I would conquer the final mountain passes in under six hours, and finish some time in the middle of the night. In reality, it would take me until 8.10 the following morning to finally finish the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc, in 38 hours, 10 minutes – all 172km, including 10 500m of climbing. In stark contrast, the previous evening had been incredible. Not a cloud in the sky, and the full moon – big and bright – lighting up the side of a snow-capped Mont Blanc kept me happy and content as I followed the string of headlamps over the silhouetted mountain passes. My morale was high as I was finally running among the breathtaking Alpine peaks that mark outside of Courmayeur, in 38 hours, 10 minutes – morning to finally finish the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc, in 38 hours, 10 minutes – all 172km, including 10 500m of climbing. In stark contrast, the previous evening had been incredible. Not a cloud in the sky, and the full moon – big and bright – lighting up the side of a snow-capped Mont Blanc kept me happy and content as I followed the string of headlamps over the silhouetted mountain passes. My morale was high as it truly hit home that I was finally running among the breathtaking Alpine peaks that straddle France, Italy and Switzerland to form the Mont Blanc Massif.

A two-year dream was coming true!

**NON-STOP**

Fast forward a day, and the dream is verging on a nightmare – intense, 35-degree heat, and I’ve been on the move non-stop for 28 hours. I can feel all my systems shutting down. And I can’t stand the smell of myself anymore! A strange, sickly-sweet stench has been following me all day. A strange, non-stop for 28 hours. I can feel all my organs are taking a brutal beating. And it’s not ideal that though I’m struggling to eat, my system is in overdrive. Anything that goes into my gut passes through in a speedy hour, and my tongue is fat with tiny little blisters from all the sugar. Savoury chicken noodle soup is all I can stomach. Struggling to eat and drink, I’m dangerously close to bonking, but I can literally feel my body cannibalising muscle for fuel!

My vision clouds again, and I blink several times. Come on, Alana, focus! You have to keep your eyes open. See, there are people up ahead, to the side of the trail, ringing a cowbell… you love the sound of that cowbell! Maybe the next aid station is just after this climb – the truth is, the sleep demons are prowling; the people are just rocks on the side of the trail, and their cowbells are a herd of cattle just over the ridge line. In a desperate effort to stay awake I force myself to think back to the Zimbabwean man who gave me the loking poles, just after the halfway mark outside of Courmayeur in Italy. He’d insisted I’d need them. I’d insisted I would be fine without them, and had been annoyed with myself for giving in and accepting his offer. As I drag my sorry ass up another narrow, rocky, pinch-black singletrack, I have to admit he was right… they’re invaluable. I pause again on the climb to rebuild morale, but instead, my mind drifts – to wondering if it’s possible that if I lean forward, not too much but just enough, that maybe I could stand and sleep for a minute… But no. Before I close my eyes to sleepwalk for another few steps, I think to myself: ‘This is my limit.

**THE SPARK**

Everyone wants to conquer some form of proverbial mountain in their lifetime. For some, it may be reaching the finish line on their first parkrun; for others, being promoted at work may tick the box. While for those like me, that mountain is literally a monstrous Alpine peak.

My passion for running up, over and around mountains started a mere three years ago, on a hiking path that made its way up to a popular peak in the Drakensberg, on the Lesotho border. But if I search a little further back, I see this whole running gig started long before I was born: I remember, as a little girl, paging through old scrapbooks that my mom had lovingly kept since high school, when my parents started dating. Having nurtured their relationship from the tender age of 14, they were the poster kids for high-school sweethearts.
Their relationship was cemented as my mother sat devotedly trackside after school and on weekends, watching my father train and race. With a powerful stride, by the time he matriculated my dad was a formidable athlete, at the top of his game. After leaving school, a promising athletic career was cruelly cut short, as life presented my dad with two of his own ‘mountains’ to climb: conscription, and the tragic passing of his own father – his coach, and greatest supporter – in his matric year.

It came as no surprise then that something inside of me sparked when I stumbled for the first time on those photos and newspaper clippings of him in full stride. Although it would take years for that spark to finally ignite, the culmination of my journey would be the sound of 2 300 runners chanting “UTMB! UTMB! UTMB!” on the start-line in Chamonix, France.

HEART OF THE ALPS

Nestled in the heart of the Alps, and offering some of the world’s best terrain for both summer and winter outdoor activities, Chamonix has earned an international reputation as being arguably the premier Alpine village to visit.

From the time I arrived, my fiancé (rightly appointed to be my super-second) was continually amused by me. He’d turn around to find me dead in my tracks on the pavement, mouth gaping in awe, staring up at another peak. I simply couldn’t believe they were real – and that I was finally at the foot of them! But over the 172km route, the UTMB also introduces runners to the darker, more aggressive side of the Alps, unceremoniously chewing us up and spitting us out at the finish line.

Preparing for and then actually running the UTMB would prove to be the experience of a lifetime. Taking us over wildly high mountain paths, past remote refuges and through spectacular valleys with traditional Alpine villages, this route has it all.

The continuous encouragement along the route was staggering. Countless supporters stood by the roadside, singing cowbells, playing music, and offering cheers of “Allez, Allez!”

At certain aid stations my super-second was able to help too – not only encouraging me, but more importantly prepping shoes, socks and food bags, and arranging for family and friends to send video clips to cheer me on. (Note: do not attempt a 100-miler without the support of an incredible second. The aid stations are fantastic, but you need someone who knows you to keep pushing you to the finish line.)

THE LAST CLimb
Summing the last climb in the early hours of Sunday morning, just as the sun was rising, brought the final aid station into view, signalling only 11km to the finish. I looked down towards Chamonix, and thought to myself: “My legs can’t carry me down this pass... I can’t do another downhill.” By then, my quads were blown to smithereens; every step was a painful reminder of the long road already done. But, I realised, my dream was in reach. I had to keep going – one small, agonising step at a time.

As I gathered myself for the final descent, Armand du Plessis – fellow South African trail nutcase, and a fan of the 100-mile pain cave – burst into the aid station, gasping for air. Incredibly, he had been hunting me down for the past three hours.

Seeing the pain written across my face, Armand turned out to be the light at the end of my tunnel. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s finish this thing together!”

When the supporters applauding, frantically waving their cowbells, was quite literally a sight to behold. Tears of emotion, more than 28 hours of pain, had finished more than 10km before the finish. It came as no surprise then that something inside of me sparked when I stumbled for the first time on those photos and newspaper clippings of him in full stride. Although it would take years for that spark to finally ignite, the culmination of my journey would be the sound of 2 300 runners chanting “UTMB! UTMB! UTMB!” on the start-line in Chamonix, France.

THE HUMAN SPURT

In fact, the most poignant moment of the entire event was a few hours after my finish. While we were supporting the last runners in, there was a shout from the announcer and row of his super-second as a patriotic Gandalf-the-Wizard lookalike held up the line. The crowd was mesmerised as 57-year-old Christoph Geiger crossed the finish line, just five minutes before the 46:30 cut-off – the oldest competitor ever to complete the event.

The prize-winning had started minutes before. It was immediately passed, and Geiger’s super-second assisted to the stage high next to the men’s race winner, who had finished more than 2 hours before him. It was a sight to behold. Tears of emotion and admiration流程 were all that were needed as they saluted this achievement.

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