



THE DREAM RACE

TWO RUNNERS' EXPERIENCES
AT THE 2017 ULTRA-TRAIL
DU MONT-BLANC

BY DOUG MAYER

No gun went off.

For Oregon's David Laney, the start of this year's Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc in Chamonix, France, came as a surprise.

"I saw race director Catherine Poletti grab the microphone. She said something in French, and suddenly everyone was running through the streets of Chamonix."

"A moment before, I had been kidding around with Kilian." Kilian Jornet, arguably the world's most accomplished mountain runner, had already won UTMB three times. "Kilian was live on Facebook with his phone. I couldn't believe it. He filmed me sitting down, tying my shoes, and asked, 'Resting legs?' We both laughed."

As Laney sprinted past metal barriers keeping thousands of boisterous onlookers at bay, I was 2,000 runners back in a lycra and Gore-Tex mob. Had the UTMB started, or had U2 tickets suddenly gone on sale?

The resulting crush was very nearly the same. I moved with the swarm, dodging errant trail-running poles.

"I could get injured in the world's most famous trail race," I thought, "before ever reaching the start line."

A minute later, I crossed over the timing mat, and my own UTMB was under way.

Famous for its festive atmosphere and wildly engaged crowds, the UTMB winds its way around the glacier-capped Mont-Blanc range on the centuries-old Tour du Mont-Blanc footpath, passing through 19 villages in France, Italy and Switzerland. There's a quad-busting 33,000 feet of vert divided among 10 major climbs. UTMB's often listed as one of the world's toughest ultras.

This past September's 15th edition has been called The Dream Race. For the race's anniversary, organizers worked to sign up many of the world's top-ranked mountain runners. Once a few had registered, others took note and jumped on board. As the race began, any one of a dozen men or women had a chance to win.

Laney was one of those dozen. I wasn't. We had very different experiences.

Here's how it went down.



Doug Mayer begins his run. The smile disappeared after 20 or 30 hours.

LOCATION: RUE DU DR. PACCARD, CHAMONIX, FRANCE
DISTANCE: 0.5 KILOMETERS

Beginning at the race's blue starting arch in the plaza just feet from the Chamonix mayor's office and continuing for a kilometer or more, thousands of onlookers line the race course. It is outright pandemonium—a fever pitch of goodwill for the 2,300 runners setting off for their adventure around the range.

DAVID

POSITION: 50 (approx.) / **TIME:** 00:05:00 (approx.)
It was so crowded. It reminded me of images from the Tour de France. After the barriers, there was barely room to run. The crowd was pressing in. I tried to relax. I didn't want to do something stupid, like get sucked into the energy of the moment and run the first mile in five minutes. I wanted to save that energy for 10 hours later.

At the start of most ultras, onlookers don't really know what you're about to do. In Chamonix, it's different. Because the town is all about extreme sports, they get it. Everyone understands the immensity of what you're undertaking. That makes it a special send-off.

DOUG

POSITION: 2,000 (approx.) / **TIME:** 00:08:00 (approx.)
It was overwhelming. The crowd was roaring, languages mixing in the air. As a recreational athlete, I've never had that kind of support. Fans leaned over the barricades to high-five me. It was a send-off on a scale I had never experienced.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Mont Blanc. It towers 12,400 feet above Chamonix. The range, of which Mont Blanc is the high point, stretches for 25 miles. The view fed a nagging thought.

"How the hell am I going to get around that mountain in one push?"

LOCATION: NOTRE DAME DE LA GORGE
DISTANCE: 36 KILOMETERS

The 310-year old cathedral at Notre Dame de la Gorge is a sentimental spot for UTMB runners, who pass here during the evening. Supporters gather to cheer, as runners begin the steep 4,000-foot-plus climb up and over 8,131-foot-high Col Bonhomme. The valley farewell is one of UTMB's highlights, and includes a bonfire, music, bell ringing and the now-standard exuberant cheering. Within a few hundred yards after leaving Notre Dame, though, all is quiet save for the sounds of shoes landing on dirt, poles tapping rock and the heavy breathing that comes with a hard push uphill. Most runners won't see Courmayeur, Italy, the next major town, until morning.

DAVID

POSITION: 24 / **TIME:** 03:26:26

It was such a competitive field, I decided I needed to go out a little faster than usual to try to keep the gap down. I knew Kilian and Francois D'Haene weren't going to slow much. I didn't think they were unstoppable, though. I don't want to think that way about anyone against whom I'm racing. You want to give yourself a fighting chance.

I didn't think Kilian would win. I figured someone would beat him. There were a dozen really strong runners—odds were someone would have a great day.

I got to Notre Dame in 24th position. I was fine with that. I like to move up in the second half of the race. But ... I had to go to the bathroom. A volunteer showed me to the toilet. I open the door, and saw a hole in the ground. I like that position. I'm used to squatting in the woods. I yelled a far-too-enthusiastic, "Thank you!"

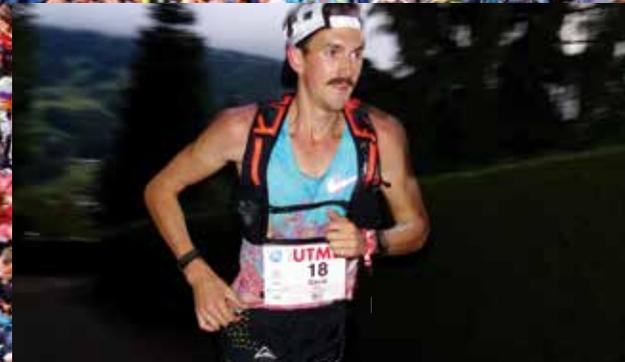
Getting up, though, I slipped and very nearly wiped out on the wet tile floor. Try explaining that DNF to your sponsors!

DOUG

POSITION: 1,843 / **TIME:** 05:23:27

I like starting in the back of the pack. Passing runners motivates me. Up to Notre Dame, though, I was in a long line and it's hard to run at your own pace. It was 11 p.m. Our headlamps had been on for hours.

Notre Dame is a turning point. Until then, UTMB is a friendly course. You've run along easy trails, connecting villages like dots. Notre Dame is a send-off into much harder territory. We'd already had cold rain, and I was anticipating snow and wind at the first pass. One of the last supporters lining the trail at Notre Dame saw my name on my bib and cheered me on with the usual French mispronunciation of my name, "Bon courage, Doog!" I double-high-fived him. The smallest gesture can cheer you up at the right moment.



David Laney's time, remarkably consistent over three UTMBs, was good for 14th place this year.

LOCATION: COURMAYEUR, ITALY
DISTANCE: 78 KILOMETERS

Courmayeur, a large but rustic-feeling town of 2,870 inhabitants on the south side of Mont Blanc, comes near the midpoint of the UTMB. Elite runners go through around 4 a.m., while recreational runners typically arrive mid-to-late-morning, after more than 40 kilometers of mountainous terrain since Notre Dame. The aid station is inside a large gym and is well-supplied with warm food, a place to nap, even massages. An assistant is allowed to support his or her runner here. If you're not careful, though, minutes can tick away.

DAVID

POSITION: 31 / **TIME:** 09:35:07

I arrived at four in the morning, running just about the same pace as my two past UTMBs.

The night had been hard. It was cold and windy up at Col Bonhomme, and it had affected my motor skills. I was awkward on the downhills. I knew I was burning calories a lot faster than I had expected. I was feeling sleepy coming into the aid station below Col Bonhomme. I was starting to bonk. Once I got to Courmayeur, I needed food. I got coffee and soup. That helped.

Leaving town, my plan was to start running harder. I felt ready to go, and excited for the next big climb and the fast, rolling terrain after that.

DOUG

POSITION: 1,170 / **TIME:** 15:26:38

I had been warned about Courmayeur. It felt like the Star Wars Imperial Deathstar—its force field was luring me in and if I stayed it would be over for me. I was intent on not succumbing. I love Courmayeur—it's a quiet, ancient town with great weather and cheery people. But anticipating its allure during UTMB, I started fearing the place. I was out of the aid station in under 15 minutes and relieved to have it behind me.

GETTING UP, THOUGH, I SLIPPED AND VERY NEARLY WIPED OUT ON THE WET TILE FLOOR. TRY EXPLAINING THAT DNF TO YOUR SPONSORS!



LOCATION: GRAND COL FERRET
DISTANCE: 100 KILOMETERS

With an elevation of 8,305 feet, Grand Col Ferret, located on the border between Switzerland and Italy, is the UTMB high point. Weather here can be severe. During this year's race, conditions deteriorated rapidly at the col. Race organizers were well-prepared, though, with winter tents, medical supplies and blankets. Getting up and over the col is a pivotal moment for UTMB runners.

DAVID

POSITION: 20 / **TIME:** 13:20:16

At Arnouva aid station, I looked up and saw Grand Col Ferret a few kilometers in the distance. Runners were disappearing into the fog and snow. I knew it was going to be bad. Sure enough, it was blizzard-like on top. I got really cold. I got off the Col as fast as I could.

The thing about the cold, though, is that it's temporary. I'll take the cold over the heat. During last year's UTMB, I was the hottest I've ever been in my life and starting to suffer from heat stroke. I stopped thinking clearly. When you're that hot, you're doing real damage to your body.

DOUG

POSITION: 887 / **TIME:** 21:50:28

Climbing Grand Col Ferret, the UTMB stopped being a race against others, and started to become a grudge match with the course. Driving, cold rain started at the bottom

of the col. Looking up, I saw thick fog and blowing snow. I wondered if they'd stop the race. I put on all my warm layers and downed two gel packets. The rain turned to sleet. The weather was so severe racers instinctively formed groups. We were keeping an eye on each other. Over the wind, we'd yell, "Ça va?" ("Going OK?") and we'd get back a tired, "Oui ... Ça va."

It was full-on winter conditions—snow on the ground, visibility of 100 feet or less, wind roaring. My eyelids started to freeze shut. I only kept warm because I was moving. There was no margin for error. I reached the Col and a guy in a huge parka and goggles came over and hugged me.

"Doug! How do you like it up here?"

I was confused—then realized it was Federico Gilardi, a friend from Chamonix. He was volunteering.

"This is insane! I gotta get out of here!"

With that, I was off the other side. During the next half hour of descending, the snow turned to rain, the rain stopped and the fog cleared. But the ferocity of what I had just been through left me rattled.

LOCATIONS: PLACE DU TRIANGLE DE L'AMITIÉ,
FINISH LINE, CHAMONIX, FRANCE, AND CHAMPEX,
SWITZERLAND

DISTANCES: 167 KILOMETERS AND 129 KILOMETERS

The finish of UTMB, through the streets of Chamonix, could not be more dramatic if it were professionally choreographed. Family, friends, fans and residents lean over the barricades along the course's final several hundred meters through town. For more than 26 hours, runners finish every few minutes and in all possible emotional and physical states—jubilant, bleary-eyed, remarkably fresh

and near exhaustion. Some are hauled in by friends, others sprint with a final burst of speed. The crowd cheers each runner. At the finish line, high-fives abound. Some runners are crumpled up, off on the sides. Others walk in circles, grinning wildly.

DAVID

POSITION: 14 / **TIME:** 22:20:22 (FINISH TIME)

Coming into town was a solitary experience, despite the crowds. I was still running hard, but it wasn't my dream race. It wasn't the exciting moment of the last few years, when I finished third and fourth. It was quiet and reflective. I was impressed with how well everyone had raced. I had a lot of respect for my competitors. I was happy, and I was glad to be done.

After a few minutes, five of us who had just finished were escorted to a van and driven to the sports complex for drug testing. They gave us water to get us hydrated, so we'd pee. Most of us waited for about 45 minutes. It was really cold. I was annoyed.

While Laney's race was winding down, Mayer's was taking a turn for the worse. He was in Champex, Switzerland.

DOUG

POSITION: 854 / **TIME:** 26:28:48

I mis-stepped. It was minor, but I felt a twinge in my ankle. Over the course of the next hour, it started to throb. I began compensating, leaning on my poles. I tried to focus on what was working well. But it was hard to put the pain aside.

As it got dark, the rain started again. In the Champex aid station, I sat in the corner, paralyzed. I couldn't think clearly. I didn't want to DNF, but I couldn't see how I could go on, either. I started to shiver violently. I got out my phone and managed to dial my friend Alister. He's done multiple UTMBs, and came in 12th this year at UTMB's sister race, the 120-kilometer TDS.

"I'm done. I'm just done. I'm freezing and my ankle is really fucked up."

"Before you do anything, go see the medics."

Alister always has good advice. I hobbled over to the medical tent. A physical therapist taped my ankle. I weighted the ankle, and it held. He looked at me and smiled broadly, speaking in broken English. "You go! Now! Chamonix!" I continued to shiver uncontrollably.

It was pitch dark and pouring rain. My gear was soaking wet. I could no longer run, and I had 38 kilometers to cover. My 35-hour goal vaporized.

I walked out of town, as advice welled up involuntarily—Kilian Jornet's comment that, "The important thing is to keep moving."

I summoned Ganesh, the Hindu slayer of obstacles.

"Ganesh," I said out loud, "Now would be a really good time to show your face."

IT'S AMAZING TO ME THAT THERE AREN'T MORE SEVERE INCIDENTS DURING UTMB. WHAT EVERYONE DID WAS TOTALLY INSANE. TRAIL RUNNERS LIVE IN A MICROCOSM OF INSANITY.

LOCATIONS: ROUTE COUTTET CHAMPION, CHAMONIX, AND TRIENT, SWITZERLAND.
DISTANCE: UTMB + 1 KILOMETER AND 139 KILOMETERS

DAVID

POSITION: STILL 14TH / **TIME:** UTMB + 2 HOURS
When I got back to my apartment, I took a really hot shower. I followed that with an ice bath. I got in bed and just laid there for a few hours. Finally, around midnight, I fell asleep for a couple of hours.

DOUG

POSITION: 891 / **TIME:** 32:18:51
That second sleepless night, I entered a semi-dream state. Rocks on the side of the trail turned into curious-looking animals. Trees became trail runners resting in contorted positions. We had another downpour. The mud was so deep, I saw someone lose his shoe.
My ankle continued to swell. It hurt with every step. I came to understand that I was now part of the carnage for which UTMB is so famous. Once more, the race changed for me. I became absolutely defiant. I was determined to finish. The awkward stumbling of Frankenstein came to mind. The connection made sense. In the book, Frankenstein walked these very same trails.

LOCATION: PLACE DU TRIANGLE DE L'AMITIÉ, FINISH LINE, CHAMONIX, FRANCE
DISTANCE: 167 KM

DOUG

POSITION: 1059 / **TIME:** 42:18:11
A kilometer from the finish, descending a gravel road, I spotted a friend. She had been following my progress online, and had come to run into town with me. We ran together. That really boosted my spirits.

Finishing was strangely anticlimactic, though. My brain was foggy, and the cheering crowds lining Rue Vallot only half registered. I found some energy and sprinted the final few hundred meters through town.

I thought, "You are finishing UTMB. Be present."
I tried to take it all in. I remember the noise of onlookers banging on the metal barricades. I saw friends but couldn't remember their names.

I finished 1,059th of 2,300 starters. I was seven hours behind my goal, but I didn't care.

LOCATION: MOODY'S COFFEE, 195 AVENUE AIGUILLE MIDI, CHAMONIX, FRANCE
DISTANCE: UTMB + 2 KILOMETERS

The day after UTMB, in the dozen or more cafes throughout Chamonix, there are no conversations other than who dropped, who ran well, who got injured. It is a day for mass processing, for trying to understand what the hell just happened out there.

It's as if the entire town had vanquished an enemy, though not without losses. Friends hobble toward each other and embrace, others avert their eyes, not yet ready to talk. Still more are not to be found, unwilling or unable to hit the streets.

DAVID

This year was extremely competitive. Adjusted for the course changes, I had about the same time as the past two years, but finished 14th instead of 3rd or 4th.

In a decade we'll still see 2017's UTMB as one of the classic races.

Races like UTMB can be thought of as virtuous experiences. We don't usually experience a lot of pain in our daily lives. For me, the suffering through UTMB teaches compassion. I become more introspective. I empathize with others in pain. Those feelings linger.

It's amazing to me that there aren't more severe incidents during UTMB. What everyone did was totally insane. Trail runners live in a microcosm of insanity. We do these things and think, "Yea, that's normal." But it's not. No one else thinks it's normal. No one thinks that not sleeping for two nights is normal.

DOUG

For a week afterward, I would shiver with the slightest chill. I became very introspective, almost withdrawn. It was so overwhelming, I just needed time to myself to frame it. To understand what just went down. To give it context.

I've been thinking of the story of Odysseus and the Sirens. The Sirens sing an enchanting song, and you can't help but want to get closer. They reveal your future. But get too close, and your ship crashes on the rocks. I want to dance by the rocks without getting shipwrecked. I'd like to run UTMB again.

EDITOR'S NOTE: "The Dream Race" lived up to its billing, if not for Laney and Mayer. There were record-setting finishes on a course that had been slightly modified as race officials worked to manage stormy weather.

For much of the first half, the men's race was a three-way battle between French ultrarunner and two-time UTMB winner Francois D'Haene, U.S. runner Jim Walmsley and Jornet, himself a three-time UTMB winner. In La Fouly, Switzerland, D'Haene pulled ahead, growing his lead over Jornet to 15 minutes at the finish, with U.S. runner Tim Tollefson in third.

In a women's race that lasted over 25 hours, a mere 2 minutes 35 seconds separated winner Nürja Picas of Spain over Switzerland's Andrea Huser. Picas, returning from an extended break from trail racing, dominated much of the race.

Doug Mayer is based in Chamonix for his trail-running business, Run the Alps. He recently ran a short section of the UTMB course without having a flashback.

Runners pass by Lac Combal, nearing the halfway point on the UTMB course.