

Ultra Trail Tour du Mont Blanc 163 KM

Chamonix, France

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Poised at my computer keyboard at 1:00 AM on January 8th, I wait for the "Inscriptions", or registration, for the Ultra Trail Tour du Mont Blanc to open. Although only in its 5th year, the UTMB, as it's known, has gotten harder to enter every year. For this the 5th running, the race organization imposed entry requirements of an 80K or two 50K trail races. Any US 100 miler is accepted. The 2,000 spots offered online went before the hour was up.

The race date was 24 August, 2007 and just 6 weeks after the Hardrock 100, which I'd gotten into for the 3rd straight year. In 5 years of running ultras, I have a poor history of doing races so close to each other and I gave thought to canceling either Hardrock or UTMB. A tough decision between, IMO, the two best races in ultrarunning. I couldn't bring myself to cancel either one.

Well, Hardrock did me in and, after a 6th place finish and a trip to the Durango ER with a post race case of bacterial pneumonia, I thought my dreams of a trip to Chamonix in 6 weeks were over. After a few liters of IV and 4 days of Zithromax, I was back on my feet, but somewhat the worse for wear. I took about 9 days off from training and eased my way back into some short,

slow runs. I was worried that my lungs couldn't handle the heavy breathing of speed work, so I planned to save that for 3rd week before the race. I ramped up to a 50 mile week, then a 110 mile week with 3 weeks to go. Then back down to 50, with speed work and for the last 2 weeks, I did almost no running at all. With two races spaced so closely, I thought that rest was the best preparation at that point.

My wife, Tiff, dropped our three young children off with the grandparents and we were on a flight from DFW to Zurich on the Tuesday before the race. Arriving Wednesday morning, we transferred to Geneva, then rented a car for the one hour drive to Chamonix. Our hotel was located about 100 feet from the race start. I had delayed booking a hotel much too long and was fortunate to find one about 2 months before the race. If anyone enters this race, I'd advise booking your hotel as soon as you're in.



*Chamonix by the river
l'Arve*

Chamonix is basically a ski town, but it's got a nice French flair. There are pleasant outdoor restaurants, good pasta houses being so close to Italy, and small bakeries. Race registration went smoothly. Each runner is required to carry certain items throughout the entire race, including a jacket, pants, survival blanket, and a whistle. Inventory is taken at registration and runners are subject to gear inspections during the race. Each runner is issued two specially marked bags to use as drop bags. That's all you get, two. With the deposit of 20 Euro, I was also issued 2 race chip timers on a wrist band.

The race start was at 6:30 PM Friday. This afforded me the

opportunity to take a substantial nap in the afternoon prior to the start. When I stepped out of the hotel around 6:15 PM, most of the 2,300+ runners admitted into the race had already gathered at the

start along with thousands of spectators, who were dispersed among the racers and throughout the town. I didn't want to get behind a thousand or so runners and found an alley which allowed me to enter the fray not far from the very front. I wasn't confident enough to get too close to the

starting line, but I could peer over the crowd and see US elite runners Scott Jurek, Karl Meltzer, and Hal Koerner on the start line. All three were destined to drop from the race at some point.



My support team



*Leaving the hotel, race start
100 feet ahead*



*On the steps of the Hôtel
Faucigny, centre ville de
Chamonix*

To summarize the course, it's a lot like Hardrock. Big vertical and steep sections of very technical terrain. There are a lot more runnable sections than Hardrock and, of course, the highest altitudes don't match those of Hardrock. Aid stations had plentiful selections, but in the French section of the race, they had an infuriating policy of only serving their version of sport drink, called Maxim, in specifically labeled cups from the sponsor. They wouldn't allow you to fill your bottles. I thought this was not only odd, but unsafe since carbohydrates drinks throughout an ultra are so critical to success. At one point, I disregarded this policy and attempted to fill my bottles from the tiny cups and a very angry French women took my bottles away. I reached over the aid station table and grabbed them back and she returned a stream of French expletives.



The start

French hospitality, such that it was, gave way to the very different Italian version as we neared the first drop bag station of Courmayeur, just after sunrise and before the midway point in the race. The crowds, which would line the streets along every town and much of the mountain trail, would cheer "bravo" and "bravisimo", it was great. After a sock change, it was out of Courmayeur to enjoy a nice cool day of running in the Alps.

My lungs were feeling fine, but my legs were really starting to ache in this section. I had packed some Tylenol, but sometime in the night, it fell out of my running pack before I could get to it. Not good, I was going to take the pain like a man. I usually start taking 8 hour Tylenol beginning 5 hours into a race, thinking I need this to handle the pain in my quads of running downhills. I found that not taking Tylenol didn't make much of a difference. I still had the dull, often intense, but not quite debilitating pain I associate with big mountain ultras. At several points, I was actually hoping I'd get some type of flare up of my previous respiratory issues that would allow me to drop. This was just the type of low point familiar in these types of races and I worked my way through it.

A pleasant surprise late in the race before the 2nd drop bag station of Champex Lac, I encountered 2 Americans, Justin Snow and Buzz Burrell. Although both later dropped at Champex Lac, they were great company for a while in a sea of foreigners. While running through the Swiss town of La Fouly, Justin spotted American actor Steve Martin cheering by the side of the road. Once at Champex Lac (about 74 miles), I got my second and last drop bag and, before I departed, I walked through the medical section near the end of the aid station tent. There were about 8 or 10 beds, all full with race casualties. Blood streaming down legs and feet. Nurses with syringes draining blisters. Runners lying on their backs with wide-open stares, not moving. Normal ultra stuff.

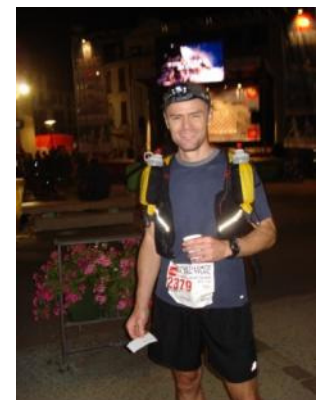


Just finished!

For the last 26 miles to the finish, I felt better as the miles went on. With about an hour to go, I could smell the finish and picked up my pace. During the last 20 minutes I passed about 9 runners. Where was this energy the last 28 hours? I crossed the finish line at about 11:30 PM Saturday. 28 hours, 59 minutes, 15 seconds in 84th place. While finishing at about the 3.5 percentile, it was a slightly better race for me than Hardrock.

I joined the huge party at the finish, stayed up way too late, and after 3 1/2 hours of sleep I got up for my drive back to Geneva and the flight home. This race is a terrific experience and unlike any ultra here in the states. It truly has a Tour de France feel with large, festive crowds, TV crews, helicopters, etc. All of the people, villages, and media give this race their whole hearted support. It's

a must-do for any mountain ultrarunner, but remember to set your alarm clock after doing the time conversion and get to your computer in time for registration.



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