

World Class



Jez Bragg



(l-r) Stephen Watts, Jez Bragg, Spyke and Lizzie Hawker

In a quiet and typically understated way, on a wet weekend at the end of August, British ultra-runners put in some world class performances; winning the overall men's and women's categories of the rescheduled UTMB and providing the first team in the arduous Petite Trotte

The Ultra-Trail de Mont Blanc is the biggest event of its kind in Europe and has been recognised by many of the top Ultra-runners as the most competitive in the world but before the big day, all you would have heard about were the top European and American contenders. Jez's blog admitted that UTMB was his focus for the year and that he had high hopes but that's all; it's the British way. Go back four years and two of the top US Ultrarunners were openly predicting a one, two finish and taking bets as to how far under 20 hours they would "smash" the course record – neither finished. That year's winner, the 58 year old Marco Olmo obviously decided to let his accomplishment talk for him.

Of course 2010 was a controversial year with the UTMB suspended part way through due to bad weather. Runners were only notified of

the hastily rescheduled 88km event at about 2am and some did not make it but, in a way, that just shows how hard it can be to switch and refocus. The achievement of Lizzy and Jez should not be seen as any less for those unplanned events – they ran the race that was on offer and beat everyone who showed up. As for the trio of Spyke, Stephen Watts and Digby Harris in the Petit Trotte de Leon – their race was never suspended and they commented that the weather was "just a typical wet day in the UK"!

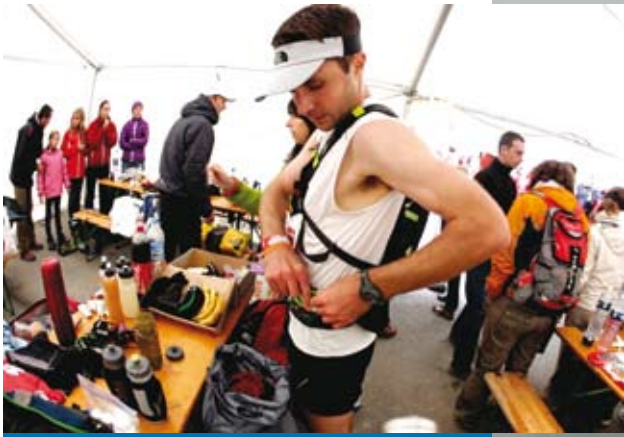
So, how was it for them?



Lizzy Hawker

Yes, the 2010 UTMB was a bit of a tough one this year. But in a different way to how we usually experience it, or prepare ourselves for! For me – I was 'gutted' to be stopped in full flow on the Friday evening. But sometimes we have to accept that the mountains are what they are, and sometimes they throw us a challenge to remind us that it is a privilege to be in them! To think it was all over – and then to have the chance to 'restart' all be it on a shorter course (on no sleep, little food and still wet trainers) – well it was doubly special to me to be able to make at least part of the journey, and to run back into Chamonix once again. That meant a lot.

Find out more about Lizzie on her website: www.lizzyhawker.com or read a full race report and video interview on 'I Run Far' – www.irunfar.com



Jez Bragg

The revised course was 88km – effectively the same as CCC – from Cormayeur to Chamonix. It provided a great opportunity for frustration to be properly (and safely!) channelled into something productive.

For me this year's UTMB was my one and only race of the year so it meant a lot and I was really up for it. I spent most of the first half of the year recovering from a rather nasty stress fracture to my calcaneus (heel bone). That was frustrating in itself, but cross training got me through, and I came out the other side running strongly, and knocking out regular PBs in my training runs. That was undoubtedly due to the proper rest I took, something I've never really done before in six years of running ultras. For a lot of non-UK runners I'm sure there were raised eyebrows and a degree of surprise in my victory but I knew deep down it had all come together well in training and I was about as well prepared as I could have been. That meant being well rested, feeling strong as a whole and with lots of summer climbing in the legs. My training combined plenty of fast, flat, mid-weeks runs along with big days out in the hills at the weekends – climbing, climbing, climbing... Anyway, it worked perfectly and I'll be looking to repeat the build up for next year's race when I'll be a marked man!



...and the trio of Stephen, Spyke and Digby? Well their race was a little longer and their story is a little longer!

The first edition of the La Petite Trotte à Léon in 2008 had been a fantastic and unforgettable experience, but without doubt a once in a lifetime challenge that should never be repeated. So at 10pm on Tuesday the 24th August 2010, what was I doing with Stephen Pyke and Digby Harris making my way briskly towards the start line in the centre of Chamonix?

La Petite Trotte à Léon was first introduced to the North Face Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc – UTMB – series of races as a non-competitive event for teams of three. The route, which varies from year to year, is around 240km with 18,000m of ascent and descent, generally on little used paths that circumvent Mont Blanc. The route traverses much steeper and more rugged terrain than the traditional UTMB route, with a considerable part above 2,500m and occasionally over 3,000m. The fixed course has no official check points but each team's progress is monitored by a GPS tracking device.

To those who know us, it will come as no surprise to learn that *Flipper's Gang* was late for the start. By the time we arrived at the start line the route ahead was completely blocked by supporters who had closed in behind the departing teams. Eventually, someone saw us trying to push our way through and started to applaud. Almost immediately, the crowd parted, to cheers of 'bon courage', to reveal a clear route leading out of Chamonix. The atmosphere was electric and uniquely French. Onwards we jogged towards Les Houches and the first climb over Col de Voza.

As I discovered in 2008, you eat your way round the PTL, so the first stop at Refuge Tre-la-Tete was eagerly awaited. Unfortunately, disappointment soon set in when we realised that only soup and coffee were available. After a short stop, we continued passing La Balme before climbing over the Col d'Enclave in the breaking dawn and descending the grassy meadows to the Refuge Les Mottets. A breakfast of dry bread and jam and hot chocolate drove us on over Col de l'Ouilleon, into Italy and towards the Col de Petit St Bernard where we knew we would find our next meal. Onward we continued into the afternoon heat as we traversed the rocky ridge of Mont Valezan. With 66km covered, a number of supporters informed us that we were now "la Première Equipé".

The next destination and possibility of food and rest was the Refuge Defeyes. We arrived there just before dusk, about 22 hours from the start but with only 81km of the route covered. After more soup and pasta we decided on a few hours' sleep. Just after midnight, and another breakfast of dry bread and jam, we set off on the climb through the dark to the Pass de Panaval at 3,010m. A permanent snow field on the east side had been partially protected

Spyke, Stephen Watts and Digby Harris - La Petite Trotte à Léon



(l-r) Digby Harris, Stephen Watts and Spyke

with the aid of a fixed 150m rope but the hard packed snow continued for a further 600 metres from the end of the rope, on a steep descent. The descent was interesting, but we survived without a fall and the inevitable long slide down to the rocks below. During the long trackless descent that followed we made a slight navigational error (mistakenly trusting the GPS rather than the map), and were caught by the two French teams who we would see regularly from there on.

Morgex in Vallee d'Aoste (108 km) was the next target and here we were reunited with our drop bags and able to take a shower and eat some more pasta.

The early morning Italian heat was now intense as we climbed the 1,600m to Col Fetita and on to Col de Citrin before the long grassy descent to what we hoped would be another meal at Saint Oyen. We were again to be disappointed. The small bar marked on the route description was not serving meals and indeed seemed totally unaware of the PTL. We tried our best pleading puppy dog looks and the owner rustled up some bread, cheese and coffee for three together with a bill for 40 Euros.

Four hours later we had crossed the Col de Barasson and arrived at the hospice Grand Saint Bernard. I am sure the fussing monk meant well as he rearranged our plates and cutlery countless times as we tried to eat plates of dry pasta and a giant block of hard Swiss cheese, but irritation can creep in after 48 hours without much sleep. We were tired, so the plan was hatched that we would get a few hours' sleep and then make a final dash for the finish line which was now only 100km away.

At 2am we were traversing the ridge of the

Pointe de Drone at 2,950m. Think Crib Goch with wire ropes, metal hand rails and staples. The situation was simply awesome, in no way comparable on the UTMB. Unfortunately, we weren't alone. The two French teams had set off just before us and we deliberately let them pull ahead; it was far too soon to start racing. We pressed on through the night dropping down to Bourg St-Pierre for a second breakfast of pasta and sauce and a brief re-uniting with our drop bags.

It was quite evident by now that the weather was closing in; the cloud level had suddenly dropped to about 2,000m and almost as soon as we started our next climb of some 1400m to Col de Lane at 3,000m, it started to rain. One of the two French teams, *Les Chameaux Volants* was now about 40 minutes ahead whilst the other team seemed to race us out of Bourg St-Pierre. We now pressed on knowing that we could ascend faster than almost every other team and quickly left behind the French team, who were worrying about the weather and snow which they anticipated above 2,500m. There was no snow but plenty of rain. Stopping a few hundred metres below the Col de Lane, we put on all our remaining clothes whilst a sudden flash of lightning struck the ridge just ahead. We were used to the rain and carried on regardless. After a few hours the skies started to clear to warm sunshine as we scrambled along the rocky ridge of Mont Rougoux before the 2,300m descent to La Douay which is in the valley below Champex. On the descent we unexpectedly came across teams we had not seen for almost two days and soon we learned that teams were being diverted to a bad weather route.

We were now on the home straight, albeit



(l-r) Digby Harris, Spyke and Stephen Watts

with 50 kilometres to go. First we had to tackle the 1800m climb to the Fenetre d'Arpette. The route took us to the centre of Champex where we were able to stop at the runners' aid station for the UTMB and the CCC for food and paracetamol. The CCC was now in full flow, but as we entered the marquee the heavens opened. According to the organisers, there were now only two teams that had not taken the bad weather alternative routes.

We made good steady progress up through the boulder field towards the Fenetre that was just visible in the gloom and intermittent rain. Torches came out for the fourth night just before we reached the Col. The descent was brisk as we chatted to the *two Flying Camels*, perhaps too brisk as it later proved. Before crossing the river at Chalet du Glacier we stopped briefly to eat and wished the Camels 'Bon Courage' as they continued ahead. *Les Chameaux Volants* was clearly a very strong team and we felt slightly deflated as they trotted off into the dark, but nothing was said.

We battled through the rain eventually reaching the Col de Balme. Digby was now clearly tired and had a complete sense-of-humour failure as we zig-zagged back and

forth in what can only be described as ever decreasing circles. We were however bang on course and eventually started to descend to Tre le Champ and the start of the final climb. However, as we started to descend Digby started to complain that his quad was agony. Spyke and I were sure that it was only a spasm but it turned out that he had torn the quad muscle. Eventually during the slow descent, he decided he couldn't face another 1,200m descent and so Digby was ready to retire at the road crossing. Fortunately, retiring at 2am was logistically difficult and with only slight persuasion he decided to "give it a go". Steady progress was made up through a variety of Via Ferrata, not difficult but the three of us were definitely swaying around, simply through tiredness. Caffeinated gels were having no effect.

At la Tete aux Vents we again met the stream of CCC runners. The going was certainly wet and the rivers were in spate but we made steady progress towards Flegere, stopping only briefly to inspect Digby's shoe and foot when he felt the sole of his shoe split in half. Watching him remove his shoe and sock, Spyke reassuringly pointed out that it was OK, it was

only his foot that had split open. In Digby's words the final descent into Chamonix was "horrendous", but at 6.20am we crossed the finish line, to the applause of a small number of supporters. A total of 80 hours 20 minutes.

It is a truly awesome event with superb views every step of the way although no photographs exist after Digby's phone became waterlogged. The route constantly varies but it is always remote and rugged. The event unfortunately is somewhat over shadowed by the main UTMB event, but if run individually would clearly be a French classic. I cannot think of a better way to spend three and a half days of intense activity in the superb company of two friends. But would I do it again? Well not yet anyway.

POSTSCRIPT

The next day we learnt that we had been the first team to complete the full course of the PTL 2010. *The Flying Camels* had been overwhelmed by the weather at Col de Balme and arrived some two hours after us. Digby was the proud owner of a new pair of crutches and heavily bandaged feet whilst Spike couldn't resist the opportunity for a run!