



BLANC CHECK

MR travels to the Alps to scope out this year's UTMB, a 103-mile ultramarathon around the imposing Mont-Blanc massif

Vangelis is blasting from the speakers, a spirited French announcer is asking the crowd for some more va-va-voom and thousands of rake-thin runners are looking upwards at the snow-capped Alps. It could only be the start of the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB).

Starting and finishing in the alpine Eden of Chamonix, the UTMB is like the World Cup Final of ultrarunning. The circular route takes in three countries, 103 miles and 9,600m of climbing – more than summiting Mount Everest from sea level.

Needless to say, it's preposterously difficult. Of the 2,300 runners assembled at the start line – all of whom have had to complete various qualifying races to be here – almost a third won't make it back to Chamonix within the 48-hour cut-off. That's on a good year. Of the 700 runners that took part in the inaugural UTMB in 2003, only 67 completed the route.

A challenge of this nature has attracted the great and the good of ultrarunning. Previous winners of the race include Spanish sensation Kilian Jornet (who became the race's youngest ever winner when he won the 2008 edition aged 20)

and Britain's Lizzy Hawker (who has won the ladies' race a staggering six times).

FLYING FRENCHMAN

This year, it's home favourite Xavier Thévenard who sets the pace. Such is the speed of the 27-year-old – who still looks young enough to be ID'd in Tesco's – that the press tour *MR* is on is struggling to keep up. By the time your correspondent has huffed and puffed to the top of Italy's snow-capped Grand col Ferret, some 2,490m above sea level, the flying Frenchman is already beginning his descent into Switzerland.

As the chasing pack emerges one by one, there's something astonishing about the look on their faces: most of them are smiling. Whether this is genuine joy or deep self-denial (last year's female winner, Rory Bosio, described this attitude as "fake it 'til you make it"), it seems to be working. On the flipside of this, runners who let

"NEEDLESS TO SAY, THIS RACE IS PREPOSTEROUSLY HARD"


Words Rick Pearson
Photography Pascal Tournaire,
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Main: stoney peaks of Mont-Blanc massif
Left: runners head off from Chamonix

negative thoughts take hold are doomed to DNF. Even the elites aren't guaranteed to finish. Sage Canaday, a 2:16 marathon runner, smashes his knee and has to drop out. *MR* columnist Robbie Britton, hampered by blisters and the blistering heat, pulls the plug after more than 19 hours of gruelling effort.

There's no stopping Thévenard, however, who returns to Chamonix in a tad over 21 hours. Behind him come Spain's ever-dependable Luis Alberto Hernando and the fast-finishing American David Laney. Yet, in many ways, UTMB is about the ordinary runners attempting the extraordinary. Colin Lee spent two years accumulating the requisite qualifying points for the UTMB while juggling work and family commitments. He completed the race in a hugely commendable 41hrs 52mins 33secs.

"I couldn't get out to the Alps to train," he says. "So I tried to replicate the mountains by running up and down Beacon Hill in Hampshire. Six weeks before the race, I invested in some trekking poles and tried to familiarise myself with them, as they can really help with the uphills. There were some tough moments, but my wife and kids had flown out to Chamonix for the race so I knew I had to finish for them. The last kilometre is worth its weight in gold and finishing the race was the highlight of my running career." 



Rise and shine: runners enjoy the sunrise



Bright light: David Laney heads into the night



Pump it up: Laney enjoys his third-placed finish

LESSONS FROM UTMB

■ **Embrace trekking poles:** almost every runner with serious intentions of finishing packs trekking poles. These fibreglass friends will help to power you up the numerous uphills. Hone your technique before heading to the Alps.

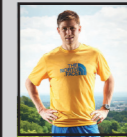
■ **Wear suitable footwear:** there's a time and a place for minimalist shoes; this is not it. Most of the quicker runners favoured shoes with some serious sole. Your feet will take a pounding so pack appropriately.

■ **Pace yourself:** this is no place to be haring off at a silly pace; if you do, you simply won't finish. Completing this race is an achievement in itself. Check yourself before you wreck yourself.



Top man: Xavier Thévenard (left) took the win

FROM 'PROJECT TRAIL' TO UTMB TRIUMPH



In 2014, Majell Backhausen took part in *MR*'s Project Trail initiative. A year on, he finished 23rd at UTMB.

He explains how he's taken his running to a whole new level.

■ **Did Project Trail encourage you to try more 100-milers?**

Yes, absolutely. It lit a fire that I now cannot put out!

■ **Describe your training for UTMB?** My training's main focus was consistency, rest and becoming efficient at hiking.

■ **How did you stay mentally strong during the low moments of the race?**

I made sure I fuelled up when a low moment came. Then I reflected on the training and all benefits that one more step forward would bring.

■ **What's your next running goal?**

To recover and be able to run one mile to the shops again!


Thanks to Compressport, Injinji, Hoka, Tailwind, VFuels and Robbie Britton

UTMB IN NUMBERS


 87% men  13% women

■ 150 first aid posts 

■ 30 doctors 

■ 1 rescue helicopter 

■ 2,300 runners 

■ 43 years old: the average age of runner 

■ 9,000 bananas 

■ 3,000kg of cheese 

■ 15,500 litres of cola 

www.ultraultrailmb.com