

## Ultra-Trail de Mont Blanc (UTMB)

### CCC 2019 – Gary Bradley

5 years ago, in August 2014, I was in Chamonix to support Mick Plummer & Tom Hollins as they set out to complete the UTMB, which is the 171km, +10,000m complete circuit around the Mont Blanc massif. The atmosphere in the town the whole week was excellent as there are 6 other races during the week & I decided then I wanted to have a crack at a European mountain race.

I accumulated ITRA qualifying points over the next couple of years by completing the Hardmoors 55, Lakes in a Day & the Hardmoors 60. I didn't get enough points for the UTMB but did have enough for the CCC (101k, +6100m, Courmayeur, Champex-Lac, Chamonix) so, in Dec 2017, I entered for the 2018 race, but missed out in the ballot. I entered again the next year, gaining double chance in the draw, and in January I received the email confirming the offer of a place.

Now to complete the rest of the entry process – Pay the remaining balance of the entry fee, upload a medical certificate from the Doctor (£25, thank you very much.....), sign the runners affidavit, select your registration day / time & reserve a seat on the transfer coach to Courmayeur..... then get the training done.

### Registration day – Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> August

The registration & kit check was like a production line, once inside the sports hall you provide your ID, receive a print out with your name, race & the obligatory kit with random items highlighted, proceed to the screening area with the highlighted items out of your race pack & in a tray, kit accepted & form stamped / signed go to collect your race pack with race number, timing chip, other bits & pieces, then proceed to tagging where the timing chip is attached to your race pack & a race identifying wrist band is attached to you. Finally, collect your runners T-shirt & your done.....



The registration hall was buzzing with the energy & anticipation of the runners & at each stage every one of the organising team wishes you “Good Luck” or “Good Race” or “Bon Chance”.

## Race day – Friday 30<sup>th</sup> August

A 5 AM alarm call to get up, grab some breakfast, complete last-minute ablutions, apply copious amounts of anti-chafe cream, collect my kit then head out for the coach to Courmayeur.

A steady stream of runners were being shepherded towards the line of waiting buses, straight on to one & once it was full we were off through the Mont Blanc tunnel & into Italy.

Off the coach & a 10-minute walk to the start area in the centre of Courmayeur where the 2000 runners would set off in three waves, 15 mins apart. I was in the second wave so our start time would be 09:15.

By 08:30 the start pens were filling for the race build up where the emotive music & stirring speeches increased the anticipation & excitement of what was to come. The start line was still in shade & temperature in single figures, but it was time to get the insulating layer off & stashed in my race pack.



Julie was at the start with the Plummer gang so we had what would be a last chat for a few hours, they'd be left watching the tracker to check my progress.

Based on other events I'd done & how the year had been going I had under 20 hrs as a target, whether that would be achievable was another thing.....

The 09:00 start wave was being counted down & then they were gone. It would be our turn in 15 mins. Quick check that my gear is stowed properly in my pack & that it's sitting comfortably on my back. "Don't set off too quick", "don't set off too quick" was on repeat in my head. The starter was going through his final speeches, the music was playing then the countdown was starting – cinque, quattro, tre, due, uno, GO & it was our turn to head off downhill through town, turn left back through the other side of town with the streets lined with cheering locals & supporters.....

As we headed out of town the road started to climb up the valley through the trees with a stream on the right. "Don't set off too quick", "walk the steeper inclines", "save your legs for the last third of the race" were all mantras circulating through my head as we trotted along. After a couple of miles of steady running the track turned right, crossed the stream & changed to single track. Then the first real climb hit us..... we were nose to tail up the steep incline so the pace was very steady which was good. A few attempted to make quicker progress but didn't make much ground before they were back in the winding snake of people climbing the steep trail....

Now leaving the cover of the trees the morning sun hit us for the first time & the temperature increase was instant. The climbing continued through numerous switchbacks until at last, there was a sense that we were approaching Col de Sapin at 2436m, a left turn here & a shortish but steeper climb brought us up to the Tete de la Tronche, altitude 2584m, where the checkpoint marshals scanned our race numbers. From here we had a 4k, 600m descent to Refuge Bertone & the first chance to refill water bottles & refuel on a selection of cheese, salami, fruit & other snacks.



My plan at aid stations is always get in, do what you have to do, then get moving again. It's so easy to faff about for 15-20 mins or more which, multiplied by 9 aid stations, adds over 2 hrs to your overall finish time.

Leaving Refuge Bertone the trail contoured & undulated along the hillside with spectacular views of the major peaks that are part of the Mont Blanc / Monti Bianco massif. We continued running up the valley to the next water refill point at Refuge Bonatti where I quickly added more electrolyte to my soft flasks, topped up with water then got moving again. More contouring / undulating trail brought us to the descent to Arnouva. A snaking single-track blast down through the trees where we were met by a cheering crowd of supporters at the entry to the aid station. More electrolytes in the soft flasks, top up with water, grab some salami & a cup of chicken noodle soup (delicious) then on the move again.

Leaving Arnouva all you see is a wall of mountains circling the head of the valley. To exit the valley means the second major climb up which tops out at 2537m at Grand Col Ferret. The climb is in the full early afternoon sun, but it didn't feel too bad. The variation of the trail changing between short, steep sections to easier traversing gradients broke up any feeling of monotonous uphill slogging. A final blind crest reveals the col & then we're soon at the checkpoint being welcomed by the Mountain Rescue team who are manning it. I take a quick look back into Italy & the view towards Courmayeur with Monti Bianco & the Grandes Jorasses towering above the valley is fabulous.

Heading over the col we're now in Switzerland & have a long descent ahead, dropping from Grand Col Ferret down to 1600m at the next aid station in La Fouly. The trail is wide & easy going but I'm still taking it steady looking after my quads as half distance is still some way off..... A mid-point water station breaks up the descent from the mountain paths that then drop into the tree lined trails heading lower into the valley.

The supporters are out in force as we enter La Fouly & having your name on your race number means the cheers of Allez, Allez Gary makes it feel as though you have support around the whole route. Into the aid station aiming for another quick turnaround, electrolytes added to the soft flasks, top up with water, more noodle soup & salami then get going again.



The trail continues to follow the river down the valley towards Champex-Lac, passing by “Swiss chocolate box” picturesque farms & small settlements. We’re approaching half distance now & it’s getting towards late afternoon. The weather had been very good to us, sunny but with a gentle cooling breeze.

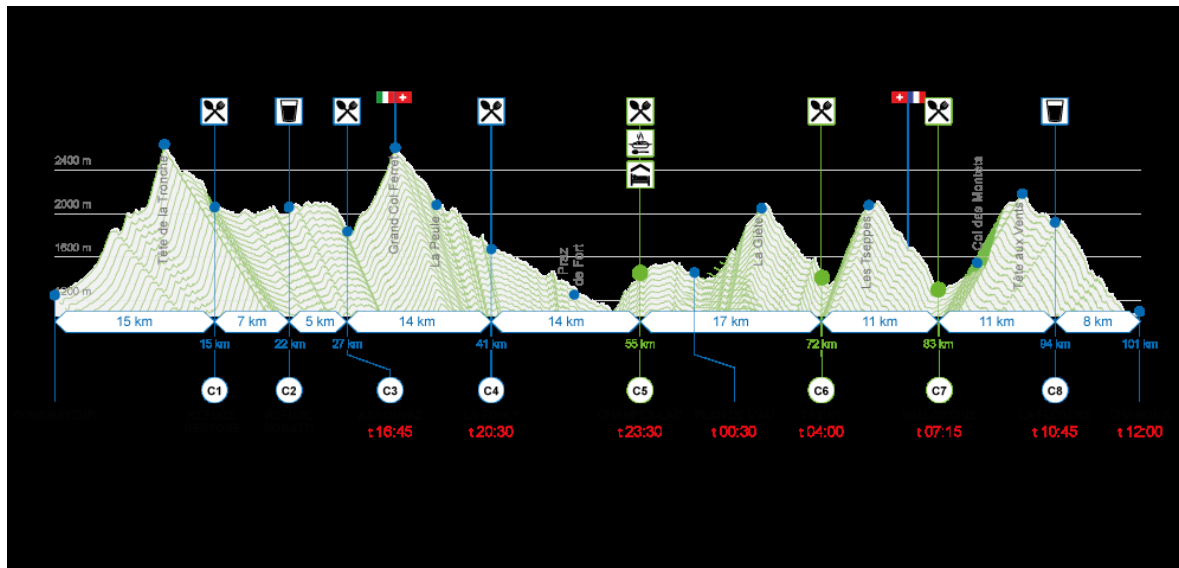
The next aid station at Champex-Lac isn’t far now but it has a nasty steep climb into the village, I’m feeling hungry & a bit low on energy. I dig in & get on with the climb, encouraged when I hear cheering voices getting closer. Allez, Allez Gary rings out in the air again as I enter the village & I’m glad to reach the aid station. This is the only one on the CCC that has hot food. My plan here was to take a bit more time to get some hot food inside me, which I was needing, change my socks & get my head torch handy for the darkness to come. My schedule suggested 9hr 50mins at Champex for a 20hr overall time & I had about 15mins in hand on that so things were looking promising, but there was still a long way to go with 3 significant climbs ahead.....

Leaving Champex there is a nice gentle downhill trail through the forest, but that leads into what I found to be one of the tougher climbs..... daylight was fading into a beautiful evening with the mountainous skyline aglow with the setting sun but the steep climb seemed to go on for ever with little respite. Eventually the gradient eased just as full darkness fell & the headtorch was turned on. The lights in the valley twinkled as we contoured around the hillside just above the 2000m line. The temperature had fallen but the effort of the climb & then trotting along the trail meant there was no need of an additional layer over my vest. Onwards following the evenly spaced trail markers led us to the decent to Trient & the next aid station. Some nasty steep steps on the final drop into town reminded me of the Hardmoors 60, ever since that race I have a slight aversion to steps.....

It was back to the quick in & out strategy. I’d used all my electrolytes during the day so it was a top up with water, grab a drink of the noodle soup plus some coke then out & straight into the next 700m climb. Another steep one where I was telling myself to keep moving, don’t stop & you’ll soon top out..... Once the high point was reached I was happy that my legs could still carry me along at a reasonable trot along the trail, & my quads were holding up on the descents.....

Heading down now into France to the last valley aid station at Vallorcine, follow the plan of top up with water, noodle soup, salami (still tasting good) & another coke / caffeine infusion.

From Vallorcine the trail heads up alongside a river to the Col De Montets. The air by the river is noticeably colder as it's glacial water, it takes a good 20mins for me to fully warm up after the aid station stop. Climbing the easy gradient towards the col I could see the line of lights on the climb, but it was unclear if all were headtorches or if some were stars they seemed so high in the sky.....



After crossing the road at the col the final climb, up to Tete aux Vents at around 2200m, begins in earnest. I got a quick breather as my main watch decided it had done enough for the day & dropped of recording mode. I activated my second watch then set off up the climb. Despite how severe it had looked from the lights I made good progress & felt surprising strong climbing at a steady consistent pace.

There had been random chats & conversations throughout the day with different runners, as we made our way up this last climb there was a discussion on how far the next, & final, aid station at La Flegere was from the summit? Was 20hrs still a realistic target? Was the descent easy or technical?

Once we crested the last summit, I set off trotting along the trail & found out it was a mixture of good single track interspersed with rocky, more technical sections. In darkness & on tired legs I was keeping full concentration to make sure I didn't take a fall. The group split as we descended & I was catching up with the headtorches further down the trail. Then I spotted the lights of the La Flegere aid station & I knew from there we had 9k to go. Into the aid station, needed a bit of water in one soft flask plus another coke / caffeine infusion then out of the door & get to the finish.

It's a 1000m descent to Chamonix, initially on the gravel wide access road to La Flegere, but we were soon off into the trees again & running down steep single track round tight switchback turns. We were in a small group of 5, following the trail ever downwards skipping over rocks, roots & taking care not to have any last leg disasters so close to the finish.

The single tracked ended at La Floria café & from there a wider forest road took us down to the outskirts of town. There was one last drop to the road, then over the temporary scaffold bridge, through a car park & across the river bridge to the sports centre where we'd had registration & kit check.

The final run to the finish follows the river for a bit then a couple of turns bring you into the town centre, down the hill into the main square & round the final corner to see the finish line. I had enough in my legs to have a strong run into town, managed to pass a couple of other runners on the way &, although it was 5 AM, there were a few supporters along with the marshals cheering us in.

I could hear Julie cheering as I came up the finish straight, I had my arms out wide doing the aeroplane & crossing to the left side of the road & back to the right side.

Over the line, stop the watch and happy to see sub 20hrs was achieved..... Hugs from Julie, Becci & Mick, then a bottle of Leffe Blonde which went down so well I had a second one.....

It had been a brilliant day (& night)..... superb organisation with excellent support at the aid stations. Encouragement along all the route at the villages & hamlets we passed through. Spectacular scenery with great trails to run along & my pacing / strategy had worked out perfectly.....

Now time to plan the next one.....

