

A life in the day of an ultra-runner

Ultimate Trails 110Km

This is your hour—creep upon it!
Summon your power, leap upon it!
Grasp it, clasp it, hold it tight!
Strike it, spike it, with full might!
If you take too long to ponder,
Opportunity may wander.
Yesterday's a bag of sorrow;
No man ever finds Tomorrow.
Hesitation is a mire—
Climb out, climb up, climb on higher!
Fumble, stumble, risk a tumble,
Make a start, however humble!
Do your best and do it now!
Pluck and grit will find out how.
Persevere, although you tire—
While a spark is left, there's fire.
Distrust doubt; doubt is a liar.
Even if all mankind jeer you,
You can force the world to cheer you.

'This is your hour' by Herbert Kaufman

It's early on a beautiful Saturday morning, on a day I've been obsessing over for the last six months. Sections have been run in reconnaissance, maps endlessly pored over, and equipment meticulously packed. Every long run, every ridiculously early start, every anxious weight check has led towards this event.

And all is not well.

The world is spinning, waves of nausea surge through me and I sit down before gravity beats me to it. With my forehead resting on a granite boulder I can see the two runners I'm chasing up the Grisedale valley disappear into the distance. This is what I do for relaxation, recreation and fun. It seems I'm not as good at pacing as I thought and perhaps right now, at 49, I'm metaphorically, rather than literally 'over the hill'.

A pre-race calm:

Race briefing completed, there's a beautiful calm throughout the campsite and a blanket of cloud wraps the tents, creating a surreal atmosphere. With final preparations complete, a tangible and wonderful sense of contentment spreads as runners gain rest and perhaps a few minutes sleep before alarms, excited voices and movement indicate it's time to get to the start area. Then it's time to wish fellow runners good luck before disappearing into a bubble of thought and preparation for what lies ahead.



Visualisation

How is it possible to run an ultra distance? Whether it's 100+ kilometres or miles, with a massive amount of climbing, how do you maintain focus and always keep moving forwards? When entire weather systems can pass through the race, when it's not clear if you will finish in daylight or at night, how do you pace the race? My favourite way – borrowed from others - is to compare a race with a long life. If we're lucky we could live to be over 100. So each kilometre can be thought of as a year and we can break the race into life phases:

The first 20 kilometres / years – we're rushing about, a bit naively.

20 – 40 years / kilometres – we've settled down and it's a question of performing as well as we can. Race / life events can crop up, and we need to deal with them as they arise.

40 – 70 years – we're starting to feel a few aches and pains. And getting a little more weary.

70 years + it's the home straight now. But we need to forgive ourselves if we slow down a bit and feel a bit of joint pain. The question is, how will we conduct ourselves in this phase? How will we keep going? And will we be a blessing to others, or someone so miserable that no one wants to be around us?

Irresponsible youth



It's 12:15 am and we're off. In line with race strategy, I'm one of the last people over the start line and then, floating on excitement and lifted by the applause of well wishers we're a pack of headtorches bobbing effortlessly through the streets of Ambleside. Backpack feels weightless, shoes are made of helium and the body of runners moves forward effortlessly. I'm picking up a few places as we go, but not too worried as there's plenty of time. The ground's a bit rough through Skelghyll

woods, but this section is in the final part of other ultras and the strange thing is this is the first time I've been here without hallucinating. A dip down into Troutbeck then it's up the Garburn road and down the technical descent into Kentmere. Have made a conscious decision to limit time in checkpoints, so it's in and out in under a minute.

The trip up to Nan Bield Pass goes smoothly. In the darkness, poles really help to provide stability and create a pacing rhythm that's difficult to achieve on a rocky ascent. There's encouraging notes left by the checkpoint team (it's a hill, get over it) and a fantastic cow-bell and flag reception at the top. Another technical descent down into Mardale head and a sneaky glance at the check point tally sheet shows I'm in 60th place, so happy with that for now. That's the first 22 km covered – youth is over so it's time to head out into the dark again and move onto the next phase.

Settling down

Dawn is breaking surprisingly quickly as we run alongside Haweswater and the gathering light lifts our spirits. We've made it out of the darkness and so, emotionally lifted, we chat to each other about previous races and how we're finding the course. The fantastic undulating singletrack gives way to tarmac road and a fast jog to Bampton. There's no time to sit down and eat, so I take a pot of noodles and munch into them as I go. We're settling nicely into the pace of the course now. Small groups are forming and splitting and it's great to find out about other people's experience and what has brought them to this point. We're moving to the middle of the race now. The marathon mark is passed after about 5 ½ hours and the first twinges of weariness are felt on the steep ascent up to Boarddale Hause. Then it's a fast descent into Patterdale (who stole the signs?). It feels like mid afternoon, but it's still early enough for the roads to be completely empty as we run towards the first proper rest stop at the halfway point.

It's turning into a warm day, so I change to a lighter top and hat, don the sunglasses and move out to start the ascent up to Grisedale tarn. Can't help feeling the guys jettisoning headtorches into their drop bags are missing the point somewhat.

Midlife crisis

Sometimes we get hit from the side and we never see it coming. From a good pace to stationary in about 10 paces as dizziness and nausea hit and I'm off my feet and sitting down. Just as life can sometimes throw us some curved balls, so we also experience them in races. And isn't this uncertainty part of the attraction anyway? Perhaps rushing through the aid stations wasn't such a good idea after all. I break out some of the food I've been carrying and make Ruthwaite Lodge an unofficial check point. Nausea thankfully subsides almost as quickly as it started, dizziness goes soon after. The course has spread out now, so I don't see anyone else as I get going again, and as I descend slowly down another technical descent to Dunmail Raise I'm surprised to be catching the runner in front. We run in to the check point together in 35 and 36th place.

Late middle-age

In race kilometres I'm 70 years old now, but thankfully enjoying a healthy start to my 'third age'. Bumping into groups of teenagers on their D of E expeditions provides a welcome distraction from the weariness of the hill climb, as do the fantastic views north during the gently descending traverse to Watendlath. It's a real struggle in the late morning sun to climb up the track on the other side, before dropping down again to a welcome sock change and re-fuel at the cheerily staffed Rosthwaite checkpoint.

On the home straight

The path alongside Stonethwaite Beck is flat, smooth and nicely runnable – or at least it would be if legs, tired from countless previous steps, would cooperate. Instead it's an uncomfortable shuffle as befits someone in their mid-eighties. There are not many people around now, but one person I catch up with is a female runner who's now walking following a demoralising detour after taking a wrong turn. She



must have been moving incredibly fast to be so far along the course despite the extra kilometres. The zigzags over Stake pass are a monstrous task at this stage in the race, at least the ascent is non-technical and using poles helps build a rhythm. It's great to actually overtake a few people on this last big climb of the event.

Last orders

There's a fantastic welcome at the New Dungeon Ghyll, although sadly it's too early for tea and chips to be ready, so I grab a cold drink and head straight out again – legs instantly rejuvenated by the applause from all the event supporters outside. This last section is very familiar and I can relax into it, knowing exactly what's coming and when. Briefly consider stopping for an ice cream at Elterwater, however an impromptu ovation from families outside the pub makes me reconsider and continue on towards Ambleside. It's definitely a struggle to keep momentum now and I fall back to walking and running in alternate 100-metre intervals. There are no other runners visible in front or behind and with a mounting sense of happiness I traverse the stone bridge into Rothay park and cross the line after 15 hours and 32 minutes on the go.

It's a contented afternoon spent watching and cheering the other runners, followed by an easy spiral down into a peaceful and deep unconsciousness.



“Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint”

Isaiah 40:30