

Courmayeur – Champex – Chamonix (CCC) 93 kms and 5,100 metres 26/27 August 2011

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This race has got something against me. Last year, the race was abandoned when I reached the 82 km mark at Vallorcine after 19 hours and 30 minutes of hard graft in some of the worst weather I have ever experienced anywhere in summer time. Checking the weather in the days before leaving for Chamonix, the weather had been excellent for several weeks, round about the 30 degree mark. But it was clear that some time on Friday (race day) the weather would break, with a big storm and significant cold front. That's no major concern in Ilkley but with plenty of time in this race spent above 2,000 metres, life becomes considerably more complex.

It was therefore not unexpected when all our phones beeped about 30 minutes before the start with details of significant route changes. I say "details". In truth, all we knew was that we wouldn't be facing 3 of the later climbs on the designated race route up to the 2,000 metre level, but would instead be visiting other places, some of which I could generally place in terms of location, but where I (and I suspect almost every other member of the 1,800 metre field) had no real clue what lay in store for us.

However, I'm an adaptable sort of chap, and didn't worry too much about the changes, resolving to take things as they came. This was an ultra race after all, north of 50 miles, where pretty much anything can happen while you are racing. The text confirmed revised course stats of 93 kms and 5,100 metres as against the intended 98 kms and 5,500 metres. So, little change in truth.

The weather for the first 10 or so hours was reasonable enough; a little warm for an Anglo-Saxon, but certainly bearable. My 2010 experience meant my plan was to spend much less time in the aid stations if possible. My task was made easier by the fact that the organisers planned a staggered start, because the original course moved in a couple of miles onto a narrow, steep track. Despite an immediate change to the first climb, the stagger was left in place. Thus, there were 3 waves leaving the start at 10.00 am, 10.10 am and 10.20 am. Having forecasted a finish time of 22 hours, I started in the 10.10 am wave, and got towards the front of that part of the peloton to try and ensure no delays up the first 1,000 metre climb.

This worked pretty well and I soon found myself moving along at a good clip, clearing the cut offs by as much as 4 hours. I found the aid stations relatively quiet on each arrival and moved through quite quickly with a re-fill of the Source bladder and, where necessary, food. My other strategy was to carry reasonable food supplies, thus meaning the early stops were fluid only, ensuring a smoother, more rapid passage.

Although Alison was with me in Chamonix, we had agreed she would not travel round the course to meet me. Whilst this means no contact with family or loved ones, it does ensure no hideous emotional dips as a result of missed rendezvous. This approach feels to me more in keeping with the autonomous nature of the UTMB series of races. External concerns can detract from the relevant levels of concentration on self that these races require. If I ever do the full circuit of 166 kms though, I may reassess this strategy!

On arrival at Champex after around 50 kms, everything was going remarkably smoothly. No blisters, just sore big toes, good hydration levels, not too hot (or cold) and food going down well. It was here that I made my first mistake of the race. Moving into the "new" section of the race, I failed to check when the next aid station was. The revised course, much to the surprise of many, then descended to the outskirts of the large Swiss town of Martigny, a huge descent arriving at the giddy heights of 500 metres. Like many I assumed the next aid would be in the bottom of this valley. It wasn't. Never assume, always check! The route then climbed and descended, seemingly endlessly, the gorge of the River Dranse and darkness fell. Across the gorge were seductive lights, bearing false promise of the next food and water. Not knowing where the hell we were, combined with the darkness of the Alpine night with it, brought vague feelings of panic as I realised I had no idea when or where the next sustenance would come.

Fortunately, I had the wit to sort the problem before it got out of control. Leaping off the trail onto a boulder, I produced my last goat's cheese and avocado mini-wrap and bolted that and 4 chocolate brazil nuts. That gave me the confidence to forge on, more in hope than expectation, and another several kms brought us to a windy aid station in the valley bottom. As the heat levels had dropped, the

fact that this temporary check only had water and Coke didn't faze me much. Maybe if I had known what was to come, I might have been less sanguine!

What followed was a 1,200 metre climb up to the Col de la Forclaz, along roads and some trails. The promised storm had also now arrived and it began to rain heavily, with ominous rumbles of thunder to add to the atmosphere. The climb was numbing, physically and especially mentally, because again I had no idea where I was or when it might end. But end it did, and I was greeted on arrival at the Col by a huge deluge and strong wind, such that I hopped around putting on over-trousers to stop the wind chill taking hold.

The next hours were notable for vicious weather as the storm strengthened, more new sections of course with too much tarmac for my liking, and fantastic amounts of thunder and lightning. By the time I arrived at Vallorcine, I was definitely hypothermic and spent a few minutes adding wet layers under the waterproof outer. Not a great strategy, but better to be warm and wet than cold and wet. Hat on, waterproof mitts over the soaking gloves (how many people bitched about having to carry waterproof gloves who would later eat their words!) and back out into the storm.

Things went pretty well into Argentiere, and suddenly I was headed for home and it was still the wee small hours. The route along the valley turned out to be way more challenging than I felt it should be; too many awkward rocky sections to negotiate in the darkness and a couple of 3/400 feet climbs just to remind me I was racing in the Alps. Soon enough I was descending to Chamonix and there was Alison along with Ken Jacquery to see me home over the last few hundred yards. It was just after 5.00 am and still quite dark, so no strains of Vangelis for me on arrival.

I arrived back in 724 th place in 19 hours exactly. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I could finish the CCC in sub-20. But it seems I absorbed a number of lessons from 2010 and worked my way around some specific problems pretty well on the day. And of course I ran quite a bit faster than 2010 which helps!

As always, the local people really made the races, cheering us on in all sorts of obvious and bizarre places at sensible and odd times of the day. And my abiding memory is of the 4 or 5 families who came out of their homes in the dark night and pouring rain on the climb to Col de la Forclaz to feed and water the runners. This climb was one of the revised sections so they had little notice of our passing. Their simple kindness and understanding of what is taking place in and around their towns and villages is moving and inspiring. I can't wait to return.