

## THE WANDERING THOUGHTS OF A LONG DISTANCE RUNNER

-Utsav Bali

### PRELUDE TO THE RACE



It's been 11 years, 7 months and 28 days since the last time...

The months on the calendar have, of late, whizzed past and there is, as of yet, no noticeable trace of evidence vindicating this particular undertaking in my mind. In fact, quite the opposite – events, of late, are actually working in defiance of my new goal, which lies in danger of being swallowed alive by the unpredictable whims of my procrastinating habit.

Time has crept up quite stealthily during the last few years while I was busy completing my 'transmogrification' into a professional and responsible near middle-aged adult. Of course, it hadn't escaped my notice that my weekend warrior lifestyle was unable to curb the relentless growth of my waistline and my acquired smarts were not serving as a suitable substitute at the local watering holes, much to my

chagrin. 'It was high time to take a stand' - I thought to myself.

So when the words of a well-suited Wall Street troll at work informed me that I would soon be, ahem - stumbling upon an excess of spare time on account of "maximizing shareholder returns" or some other such malarkey, all I saw was a perfect opportunity. An opening that would finally allow me to reign in my excessive lifestyle and find that discipline that would help me to reconnect with all that I once held near and dear to my heart.

Top of my list was to reconnect with my ultra running roots. For the benefit of those new to this sporting argot, ultra running constitutes, by definition, a continuous run/jog that exceeds the standard 26.2 miles marathon distance. But anybody with the slightest interest in further exploring this topic would soon find that the definitions are multitudinous and often revolve around the general theme of daze and confusion expressed at the insanity and selfishness of those participating in such events, despite its increasing prevalence and popularity in today's society.

Of course, that was nearly 3 months ago and, perhaps somewhat predictably, my goal of getting back in shape has slowly but surely started its decline down the slippery slope of my 'to-do' list, yet again. There are many things to do, a wedding to organize, a few academic goals to accomplish, and of course, that most glorious of all lofty goals, to continue to be the center of focus for the coveted affections of my beloved betrothed. Needless to say, justifications for my sloth were amounting aplenty. After all, it would be downright loathsome; nay, negligent to be wafting off on my self-indulgent long runs at the expense of those precious daylight hours and energy, especially when spent pursuing an activity as banal as running long distance. This time could be well utilized in pursuit of more rewarding goals that promised tractable and quantifiable returns towards my future. But it is too late to back out now and I don't wish to be further burdened with that unshakable thought that unless I run another ultra, I should be forced to resign myself to a 'has-been' status and flinch at the thought of calling myself a runner. One might argue, perhaps quite reasonably so, that I am being way too hard on myself. But in my mind, all reality is relative and my modest distance goal of 60 miles on the forest trails in New Forest, Hampshire, UK is hardly worth a cursory glance when compared to the superlative achievements of the likes of Yiannis Kouros, Ann Trayson or Scott Jurek who were eating up 100 to 200 mile runs without much thought to public acceptance or rational arguments.

I first started running as a 14 year old to find solace in the loneliness that accompanies all distance runners. Somehow, the ongoing tempest in my mind and the general escape from my social awkwardness served to suitably replace any boredom that one might have experienced during a long distance run. I was a runner and my weekly mileage used to reflect the lifestyle. But whatever I thought I knew about running dissolved away when I discovered ultra running. It was like first discovering girls at puberty – new, exciting, confusing and mostly addictive☺. I was

addicted to the sense of accomplishment that comes from completing an ultra distance overcoming seemingly insurmountable pain. And yet, the human body has a tendency to forget easily and quickly all past suffering. You could be forgiven for thinking that doing something so repetitive and mundane as running over and over again would make one very good at it eventually, but still I've always felt like a beginner in the sport. The fascinating thing, of course, about ultra-running is that despite its inherently mundane nature, it has an uncanny ability to be extremely meditative and cathartic in character –

You start out a long run by getting bored and thinking about things such as pacing strategy, negative splits; walking the uphill, keeping your eyes on the ball; ignoring the pain, fantasizing about post race glory; you think about your work, you brainstorm, you plan out your experiments for the week, you pat yourself on the back for remembering to bring that digital voice recorder with you to capture the pearls of wisdom spewing out of your mouth at the pace of thought...and then you try and stop the thoughts from coming in altogether; you count your steps, you turn off your ipod, you think, did I remember to wipe off that white fluff off the side of lips as I passed that photographer – you curse yourself for burdening yourself with those extra 5 ounces of the digital voice recorder...and then finally you just stop trying altogether, the thoughts come and go as they please but they don't seem to stick, a sort of cognitive dissonance...it becomes liberating, a state of trance with no distractions, you feel like you're free soloing something wicked (to borrow a phrase from rock-climbing parlance) – and damn it, if only it didn't always take six hours on the trail to get to this stage.

So here I was again, ready to part with my cash and subject myself to the ridicule and pessimism of friends and family that they might once again judge my insanity and lack of focus in life. I can only say that I have a supportive family as they all seemed to unanimously agree upon my goal for reducing my pear shape bulge to that resembling that of Ryan Reynolds midriff...at least, that's what I promised my fiancé Simi and who would say no to that, whatever the route taken to get there.

And so the training for the next race was underway in a rather unremarkable fashion, inspired by my vain and narcissistic goal to resemble a Hollywood star. Dragging my body out of bed on the weekends for my long run was just as tedious as I remembered. It's Sunday evening and I've wasted the whole day "base building" by running my first 19 miles of 2012 today. The objective of the day was to run 26 miles in full gear preparedness at a slow 10 to 12 minute/mile pace. The morning began with an agitated start with some pressure from family to get job-hunting soon. It made me think that perhaps being a runner means being on your feet when you should be working on your cover letter or spending quality time on the phone or in person with your loved ones. It means finding focus for the task at hand...a familiar sentiment, isn't it? Anyway, the key aspect of this kind of training, however, is patience...it's important to resist every urge to run fast at early stages in favor of negative splits towards the end of the run. But in spite of all those wise words, here I am running well behind schedule and I fear that the upcoming race would become a race of attrition on my psyche. I want to cross the finish line and stay up for a pow-wow with fellow runners after the event. I'm on mile 15 now and on my second dose of Ibuprofen and having finished an orange, an apple and a half liter bottle of water I've had to stop and walk for the last mile on account of my poor conditioning. I think having electrolytes has sustained my calves this time or else I would've been keeled over by the roadside at this stage. But an apple and orange are insufficient for replenishing energy...I need to invest in some slow release carbohydrates and drinks. This will certainly not do; perhaps, I should not have ordered that take away pizza last night. I am sure I could call upon your sympathetic ear at the thought of a tempting pizza when it's so easy to justify the excess calories burned off in the weekly mileage. But instead of carbo loading, the decision to eat a spicy pizza has proven costly and I've ended up with nausea and upset stomach at this stage in the run and I'm stuck somewhere on the A40 looking for the next gas station. Upset stomach is the curse of most runners...bodes well if you can wake up in the morning of a big run with clean plumbing – pizzas are definitely a no-no.

It's a funny thing though, discomfort during running is hard to define – it can be well definable like a sore shin or joint or a pulled connective tissue but it also behaves like a wave approaching and almost predictably disappearing on cue. Honestly, my favorite academic topic to contemplate at times like this is "pain gating," it's never really about 'hitting a wall', but rather an oddly morbid fascination with cataloging the chronology and diversity of my body's protests which my brain refuses to take seriously. Some I'm very familiar with...my true companions on whom I can rely on eternally, ah yes, dodgy knee – you say you're having a bad day – tell me about it, no wait, on second thought, you better not! But then there are others that only emerge nearly 4 to 6 hours

into a run such as bursitis, plantar fasciitis – loads of itis’ on my list of friends, none of whom need encouragement to compete for my attention. Eat a banana and block those voltage gated Potassium channels – that’ll sort you out for a while! And that swollen ankle, turned cankle is even beginning to look like a rite of passage for membership in my exclusive club now. Just think of all the fringe benefits, I tell myself – the pain was so distracting that I hardly noticed the first 3 hours just pass by; pain loses rank as a standalone emissary of self-preservation, it would seem that title is now firmly in the hands of the prefrontal cortex which doesn’t seem to take its job very seriously, damn the consequences. But long distance running does have its advantages, for instance, visiting new cities is really a cinch when you’re running fit...I could run the length of Rome in under an hour and have plenty of room to spare. If I ever find myself lost in the civilized jungle that is Europe, this would prove to be a good survival skill I tell myself – besides, chicks dig it!! Anyway, somehow I managed to continue on with my training run despite the pain and as I approached towards the head of Summertown, I knew that I had a measly 4 miles before reaching home. I ended up completing this particular weekend run at 19 miles injury free and feeling good with my body’s resilience and figured I still had enough left me in to walk for another 2 hours, as a worst case scenario, which I reckon would have given me nearly 30 miles by day’s end. All in all, not bad considering I have only a few weeks to get fighting fit before the actual event.

But, truth be told, my training in the weeks leading up to the event is barely sufficient, and I’m managing a measly 20 – 25 mile weekly mileage by current reckoning. Ideally, I’d like to bump that up to 40 mile weeks, with, at least one 20 miler thrown in for good measure. Still a long way away from resembling Mr. Reynolds though! By now, pre race anxiety was also mounting and I was beginning to feel a bit apprehensive about my lack of race preparedness. With only 4-weeks to go before the race and in the interest of some pre-race reconnaissance, I decided to plan a trip with Simi, up to New Forest to actually ride the course on mountain bikes.



It proved to be a great weekend but alas, that weekend away quickly transformed itself into a romantic getaway rather than a training session, but not without allowing us to develop a good mental picture of the trails that were in store for us. To compensate, Simi and I decided to do a long 30-mile walk alongside the Thames path from Oxford to Goring in full gear preparedness, which also served as a great proof of concept for our imminent adventure. This coupled with a quad busting mountain biking session under the guise of a Stag Do near Afan Forest, Wales, was the extent of my training and

with barely a fortnight to go before the big day, I imposed a strict moratorium on all athletic endeavors in the interest of tapering those aching muscles and waited anxiously for time to pass...

## THE HI-TEC ULTRA TRAIL SERIES – [PONY EXPRESS ULTRA](#)

May 5<sup>th</sup> 08h00 till May 6<sup>th</sup> 18h00

New Forest, Hampshire

About an hour and a half's drive south west of Oxford lies the purpose built New Forest National Park, built to fulfill the morbid hunting delights of the 12<sup>th</sup> century English royalty. This was soon to be the staging ground for the second ultra event of my life. This event was organized by the Extreme Energy Events Team (XNRG) and hosted by Neil Thubron, all of whom are now card-carrying good Samaritans in my book. The challenge was designed to take in 60 miles of the entirety of New Forest woodlands over the course of a two-day 30-mile stage race. Having never before competed in a stage race or in an event of this magnitude in the United Kingdom, all aspects of this event represented *terra incognita* to me. The run was designed to take in dense oak, pine and birch forests whilst running over open bracken and sandy rolling landscapes that, only occasionally, intersected local roadways. Amongst the local fauna to be sampled, we encountered herds of free roaming and galloping ponies and wild deer roaming the countryside, which seemed only mildly annoyed at our unexpected intrusion (perhaps they were unthreatened and bemused by our slow running pace). Throughout the run, especially, on the second day, it was not unusual to hear the occasional hoot of owls or the incessant pecking of woodpeckers to keep us company through those woods. I couldn't have picked a better venue to sample in the southern countryside.

Our journey began in the town of Lyndhurst whereupon after having spent a wonderful evening sampling in the local pub's greasy cuisine under the guise of carbohydrate loading, we drove about 3 or so miles on early race day, the following morning, to the town of Brockenhurst where I, along with Simi and our friend Lindsay, picked up our race numbers and prepared for our two days ahead. The morning was cold (temps in the low teens) and damp with heavy rain overnight tapering to a light drizzle by the time of race start. It would appear that the powers that be had decided in their infinite wisdom to give us a much welcome reprieve from the near incessant deluge that the entire country had been experiencing since the month of April – as if the Gods were trying to make up for an entire years' worth of drought in just one month!

The pre-race briefing informed us that the course had been marked with tape streamers, as well as, orange arrows spray painted on all major intersections. This coupled with our OS maps and turn-by-turn directions in our route cards would, presumably, keep everybody on course. Neil informed us that in the previous years, they had issues with folks sabotaging trail markers, which contributed to many unwelcome miles on already race weary legs; a rather prescient prognostication, as many unfortunate souls were soon to discover. There was also some vague reference to Puff Adders along the forest floor but, for some reason, my pre-frontal cortex refused to register such implausible warnings. I found myself starting with the bulk of runners at 09h00 leaving the walkers and the elite runners to stagger an hour before and after us, respectively. It was humbling to see many runners starting off at, what appeared to be a 7min/mile pace. Being new to the game, I decided not to be too judgmental of these eager souls – who knew how fast these crazy runners are! I decided to stick to my humble goals of starting slow and then finishing slower. Having already seen Simi and Lindsay off on their walk nearly an hour ago, I had more than ample time to gather my thoughts and focus on my race strategy – unfortunately, that didn't keep me from tripping over the first traffic cone at the race start as I found myself fumbling with my ipod, much to the delight of my fellow runners who got a good chuckle out of my mishap.

One of the most obviously noticeable characteristics of an ultra event is the distinct lack of spectatorship that accompanies such event. With the exception of close family and support crew, very few people are present to cheer us on as we embark on our first steps. In fact, I've always wondered if there isn't some element of Schadenfreude involved in the eyes of the non-running spectators at marathon and other such events...smirking at their seemingly lunatic friends and relatives braving the elements at the starting line of a race, as they themselves lean on the sidelines lazing away their weekend mornings as nature intended. But, regardless of the relatively quiet and uneventful sendoff that is characteristic of most ultra running events, my mind and body were bursting with adrenaline and very much looking forward to taking on the challenges of the day. I was bounding full of energy and had to consciously make an effort to check my speed constantly lest I should find myself running with the 8 to 9 min miler groups. The terrain soon found itself diverting from the roadway onto an undulating wide gravel cycle track about 4 or so miles into the run. The trail was surrounded on either side by dense vegetation and

pine trees as we ran through this very family friendly part of the trail network but it wasn't long before we were to stumble upon the narrow single-track and really muddy and boggy sections of the trail which were to set the stage for nearly the entirety of the first day's running. Of course, with legs full of energy, I barely noticed that I was soon taking longer strides and placing unusual demands on my calf muscles by forcing them to catapult my bulging mass over large puddles and bogs, the kind that would swallow your shoe whole should you make the mistake of landing in one of them. My objective was to run a steady pace that would allow me to catch up with the girls within the first two hours of running but little did I realize that all that leaping and bounding was soon to have a rather unexpected and adverse consequence on my calf muscles. So as I started to slow my pace down significantly and fall behind my pacing pack of wonderful fellow runners, one of whom was a 70-year-old gazelle, I couldn't help but feel deeply anxious about my prospects for the rest of the day. This was totally uncalled for and I was feeling very disappointed in myself. My calf muscles on both legs were cramping quite sporadically and erratically at a point where my quadriceps and hamstrings were feeling restless at the sudden and unexpected reduction in pace. I had been drinking my electrolyte-supplemented water supply quite regularly and could not understand why my body was protesting so vehemently at such an early stage in the race. So as I continued to trudge along feeling very sorry for myself, I soon caught glimpse of the bobbing heads and that characteristically pink hard shell jacket sheltering my fiancé far out in the distance at around mile 13 and I knew that I had nearly caught up with the walkers. As I finally approached them, I received some much needed encouragement from Simi and I decided to carry on walking with the group at a rather fast pace of roughly 4 - 5 mi/hour, mainly because stopping at this stage would simply have seized me up irreversibly, so I hid my embarrassment from my fiancé and kept on plodding on. In my mind, my race was over and I had resigned myself to walking the rest of the way. As I walked on analyzing what had gone wrong during the first 13 miles, I came up with many excuses - it was not only the constant hopping and leaping that took its toll, but when combined with cold weather and the really tight seams on my running tights which seemed to be putting a choke hold on my calves, I didn't really stand a chance in hell to emerge unscathed out of that bog. Running with my relatively new tights was a last minute decision brought on by the sights of a damp wet morning and cold temperatures but it had proven to be a fatal decision and the second rest stop of the day couldn't have come any sooner at mile 16. I was determined to shake off the cramps and began to promptly cut off the calf seam on my tights with my pocketknife and as I did so, it felt wonderful, as though the blood supply had been restored. I loaded up on savories and some quick release sugars but mostly on those salty Dorito chips. These turned out to be a blessing in disguise as they provided me with that desperately needed salt that my body was craving. Within a matter of minutes, I could feel my body recovering and I even started to entertain the thought of running again. It was like magic and after a few minutes of walking with my fiancé, I dared to hasten into a gentle jog and soon found myself leaving the walkers and their best wishes behind me. Soon thereafter, my jog transformed into a gentle trot and I was running carefree once again. I owe those Doritos a huge debt of gratitude. I latched on to my third pacing group of the day who were to carry me nearly the rest of the distance on the course. I soon found myself around mile 20 on what I considered to be one of the few long uphill stretches of the race, but not before running through some rather long cycle paths that seemed to stretch on forever - I have always found long straight stretches to be quite demoralizing. This is not helped by the fact that the elite runner who seemed to be running as if being pursued by a rabid dog soon overtook me. As I trotted along eating his dust, the miles seemed to roll on forever and there was no sense of accomplishment to be had at this stretch. I was glad to be rid of this trail as I turned on towards the first really serious climb at around mile 20. This section of the trail was simply idyllic and sublimely quiet. The racing field had stretched thin by this point and I had switched on my strategy of walking the uphill and running downhill. This was a reluctant decision as I've always enjoyed running uphill at a good trot but with semi-destroyed calves and in the interest of saving myself for the following day's walking, I decided to be gentle on my legs. The third checkpoint at mile 23.5 marked the beginning of the end of the first day and with only 6.5 miles to the finish, I decided to not waste too much time resting and after having my water bottle refilled, carried on. At this point, it would be absolutely remiss on my part to not give due credit and acknowledgement to the simply marvelous support crew and volunteers who man these aid stations under all sorts of inclement conditions. Their cheery disposition, unquestioning attitude and over the top courteous demeanor proved extremely useful for me through the entire duration of this race and I owe my race to their friendly support. After crossing the A31 and veering right back into the last 3 miles

of the race, I happened to stumble upon a fellow runner who had kept me company as part of my first pacing group. I was surprised to find him there and he informed me that he had been lost for nearly 3-4 miles. It turns out that a lot of early runners had missed a couple of key navigation markers and unwittingly added an extra 3 to 4 miles to their journey. I welcomed his company and as we jogged along in unison, I discovered that in his heyday, he was a champion runner with podium finishes at various half-marathon distances. It surprised me to find out that he was in his mid sixties, although, he appeared to be barely out of his 40's and it was a pleasure to have him accompany me towards the finish at Moyles Court school near Ringwood. The flailing banners of the finish line were a sight for sore eyes and we crossed the finish line at 7hr11, placing 70<sup>th</sup> out of about 110 competitors and feeling none the worse for wear.

After a much appreciated tea and cake nourishment, I set on to establish our beddings for the night. The overnight accommodation was sparse and we were to sleep on our sleeping pads and bags in a padded floor of the school's basketball court. This being a new experience presented a challenge in itself. We were to be laid out like sardines in close proximity with fellow runners. A spirit of camaraderie pervaded the atmosphere and, in hindsight, I wouldn't have traded it in for a B&B. We had hot, albeit low pressure, showers and plenty of food and water to rehydrate our bodies. There were masseuses and paramedics to help the ailing. As a point of fact, I was quite surprised to find myself without any blisters or general skin niggles, a vote of confidence for the kit I was using. Upon refreshing, I waited for Simi and Lindsay to walk in at about 9h18 yelling and cheering in jubilation. There was a signature of joy and exhilaration in my fiancé's face and quite remarkable considering that this was her first ultra experience. I was beaming with pride and a sense of relief to see her well and intact at the end of day 1 – this proved to be short lived, as I was to find out soon enough. As I lay there unwinding from the day's event, I learnt quite a few interesting facts about my fellow runners, I realized that this year's field consisted of nearly 48% women, an impressive fact; I also learnt that the oldest competitor stood at 70 years of age and the youngest competitor at 19. The first finisher of the day finished at 04h14 and the slowest finish was 10h30. I learned that a dog wearing swimming goggles to protect his eyes from UV had run 20-miles the first day. I also found a woman competing in her Vibram Five Fingers, a point for the barefoot running community and kudos to her for doing so. After a hearty communal dinner where I was regaled with stories of superlative ultra running achievement of the Gods of community with their 1700 marathons, and graced with the company of lesser ultra runners who had only bagged a mere 100 to 200 marathons under their belt despite having started running rather late in their lives at 50 years of age or so. To win the approval of such a crowd demanded nothing but pure discipline and I felt sufficiently buoyed to tackle the next day in high spirits. Suitably nourished and aided by the free ear plugs provided by race management, I soon fell into deep slumber only to be woken up near 02h00 by my shivering fiancé trying to squeeze her freezing body into my, made for one person, sleeping bag. I felt terribly bad for her and cursed the fact that the hall had not been heated overnight especially when the outside temperature must have dropped to near 3 to 4 degC. I cocooned Simi into my bag and transferred some warmth from my body to her and we managed to squeeze in an extra few hours of sleep before we all had to wake up at half 5 in the morning.

The second day was to be an early start. I had decided to walk the second day as I didn't fancy competing on my own without Simi for the whole race – this it turned out was a prudent decision. We had a frantic start with breakfast and hasty packing of the sleeping bags and kits and before we knew it, we were back out on the trails at 07h00 on the morning of May 6<sup>th</sup> braving the cool early morning chill. There was a sense of foreboding on the second day, especially since on the morning of day 2; Simi woke up with her right ankle missing in action. Her 'minor' sprain from day 1, which she obtained whilst trying to leap over an aforementioned puddle, had steadily swollen overnight, with complete disregard, upon being freed from the constraints of her walking shoes; and the medics were hesitant to strap up her ankle as they suspected a fracture. Needless to say, we had a few minor emotional and moral obstacles to overcome before Simi decided to brave the second day on a tentative whim of pure guts and mettle having had her ankle suitably strapped tight by the resident physiotherapist. We were informed that the first 10 miles prior to the first checkpoint were all uphill and that the first aid station would present the only opportunity for a rescue should the ankle fail. So on that note, we took off at a relaxed leisurely pace of 3 miles/hour up those initial hills which soon opened up into a spectacular moorland with great views of the surrounding countryside allowing us to take our minds off our ailing bodies. The sun even made a cameo appearance towards the latter half of this day. The trail on the second day was wider and after an initially boggy start, it opened up



into wide dirt tracks suitable for unruly mountain bikers always willing to heckle the runners as they swished on past us. I was surprised to find walking to be far more challenging than running on such a course. As a walker, one is subjected to the harshness of the climate for a longer duration, not to mention the demoralizing nature of the slow pace which can make the miles seem to stretch on forever. After a few hiccups in the beginning, we started to realize that we could maintain a rough 3 miles/hour slower pace compared to the 4 miles/hour pace for Simi and Lindsay the previous day and this was aided by a comparatively flatter and less obtrusive course on the second day. We crossed the first aid station rather uneventfully and much to the satisfaction of the resident medics and decided to carry on towards the next checkpoint roughly 6.7 miles ahead. Our legs were sore from the previous day's effort and this was beginning to show in my body at this point. I was thankful for my decision to walk the second day as I realized that, although, if pushed I could have squeezed something resembling a jog for the second day's effort but it would not really have been graceful or elegant by any measure. Walking with the girls was providing a wonderful opportunity to soak in the countryside and indulge in senseless gossip. People unfamiliar with long distance running are often quick to undermine the beneficial effects of walking breaks whilst competing in ultra long distance runs. In my personal experience as a runner who is missing an Anterior Cruciate Ligament from my left knee, I've always been mindful of the long term implications of my inexorable running habit. I've realized that maintaining a good cadence and running at a slower pace can go a long way towards alleviating the impact that my joints experience during a much faster 10k or half-marathon distance runs. Rather than joint pains, it is inflammation and swelling that becomes my overriding concern during runs of this distance and I believe that a slower strategy would allow me to continue on running well into my 80s which remains my ultimate goal.

As we approached the second checkpoint at mile 16.7, I was in the throws of extreme agony. My conversation had stopped and my pace was slipping...I found myself trailing the girls by about 30 meters and soon started to feel dizzy and cranky. In hindsight, I was experiencing the classic signs of dehydration and hypoglycaemia but these words were becoming too difficult to process at that stage. The girls, much to their credit, spurred me on towards the rest stop where I was greeted by concerned aid workers who were hastily accessing my suitability to continue on. Feeling already quite irritable at this stage, I decided, wisely, to stay quiet and let them intervene. I was fed some slow releasing carbohydrates and a lot of electrolytes which started to have their effect within 10-minutes of intake and I could feel the energy levels coming back on. It was my first truly real experience with 'bonking' and I shall never forget how close I came to dropping out of this race. We were the last walkers by this stage in the race and the management decided to have one of their staff members accompany us till the end of the course as he cleared the course of all race markings behind us. This proved to be a very opportune development as, by this point, my Garmin had run out of batteries taking with it the only source of mental solace that we had. Watching the miles pass on the GPS was a great mental boost as we prepared to tackle the day's miles one mile at a time. Paul's company for the rest of the event, followed by an extra influx of energy lifted my spirits significantly. The girls had shown amazing courage, resilience and patience with me and were it not for their support, I would have quit a long time ago. But we still had 15 miles to go and it was too soon to be celebrating. The next aid station was only 5 miles away and became our next landmark. By this point the terrain was also beginning to look slightly familiar as we were backtracking on some of the trails from the previous day's running. Still, this did not keep us from getting lost somewhere around mile 23 just past the third and the last checkpoint of the day. Having put ourselves entirely in Paul's capable hands, we managed to find our way back on the trail marked with those familiar tapes and orange arrows, just past Richard Branson's New Forest retreat. The hotel/retreat and its location harked of characteristic signature of the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright integrating itself seamlessly into the countryside. We emerged out the other side back on the trails, albeit not without pain. Simi who had been soldering on up until these last 23 or so miles was now in absolute agony and we had to take frequent stops to dose up on ibuprofen to allow her to carry on. Our gaits had been significantly altered and had I put on a Tuxedo at this stage, I would have been a dead ringer for a Penguin. It becomes hard to put into words the sort of mental supplication that occurs when one is fighting every instinct to stop walking. We begin to bargain with unknown deities and promised ourselves luxuries and rewards after the event whilst trying to stay focused. We were eagerly awaiting every landmark listed on the route card and searching for the next T junction that would finally mark the beginning of the end of the second day. I have found that it's easier to count down the hours and the minutes than the miles – go figure! But with Paul's navigation and

with each other's support, we were finally about a mile away from the finish and that was enough to send Lindsay and Simi raving lunatic with their singing. If I don't hear *Old McDonald had a farm* ever again...it would be too soon! We finished, hands held high, in 10h07 and not more than a half hour behind some of the faster walkers from the previous day. A fair outcome considering all the physical obstacles we had to overcome. In the end, Simi ended up walking nearly 45 miles on a badly sprained ankle and that's worth hats off to her in my book.



Running long runs is cathartic as it frees one from the trappings of modernity and society – there are no politics involved, all egos are irrelevant and the sport is a simple meritocracy that one can't cheat their way out of. Crossing the finish line rewards those who are disciplined and there is no one to be held responsible for one's successes or failures except oneself. Ultra runners are not really that superhuman as one might be beguiled into thinking...most ultra runners do condition themselves over time to take on a seemingly superhuman status, but in reality they all carry a unifying character trait of unyielding selfish stubbornness which serves to distinguish them from

their not too distant cousins, the ever pervasive recreational runners. This trait alone is a suitable pre-requisite for many novice runners contemplating such a challenge, for at the very base level; ultra running doesn't require grace or elegance...just sheer determination and anybody with an ounce of stubbornness can stand a chance to finish one such event.

One might take a cog railway to summit a small mountain or pay £30k to climb Everest, but as I freeze and shiver in my high tech skins after my 60-mile challenge, I appear to have stumbled upon a biomarker for achieving Nirvana. The body suffers while the mind persists – if only I had a similar discipline towards my work – I'd be a much better scientist today.

It's been 7 days, 20 hours and 25 minutes since my last ultra...and I am beginning to feel comfortable, yet again, at the thought of calling myself a runner... ☺