

Grand Trail Est Alsace by UTMB 50km

That's a bit of a mouthful for a race name, I know. As many of you also do, I enjoy running off road a long way much more than on the road. I spent the winter training and then running Manchester Marathon, and halfway through I got asked if I wanted to head to France in May to run a new 50km race with a few mates. I signed up before realising it was only 5 weeks post marathon. I'd only run off road in the fells twice since the previous September, both were 5 miles long. Hardly ideal prep. I crammed a couple of long runs in and got up High Pike twice after having a full week without running after Manchester.

The race is in Alsace, a region in the northeast of France, a couple of hours North of Basel and close to the German border and was based in a town called Obernai, complete with race village, music stage and battle reenactments. The area is littered with old castle and chateau ruins in the hills above vineyards and small historic towns. The race was in its first year and was part of the UTMB series of races that give entry criteria to be able to enter the ballot to run at UTMB proper in Chamonix.



Heading out to run was myself, my Cousin Richard and the godfather of Vaga caps John. We also had Dan, who wasn't running, but wanted a weekend away from his partner and kid. He was going to help get us sorted at aid stations. I mentioned it was last minute, well, we booked the air bnb a week before flying and 24 hours before flying, Richard realised his passport would be 4 days into the final 3 months the day we would be flying home. Several calls to The British embassy in Switzerland later and we were down to three.

My aims for this race were to have fun and enjoy it. I felt good on my two off road long runs and was quite fit after the marathon. The only doubt was whether I would cramp or not. It's been an ongoing issue for a couple of years. Anything with a bit of intensity up and down hills makes me cramp in the same place after a couple of hours. I'm now sure its mechanical rather than electrolyte or strength based (there's a hint for how things turn out...). All being well 4.5 hours seemed a fair target.

The race started in a small town called Barr down the road from the finish line in Obernai, as with a lot of European ultra marathons there was a great atmosphere with music, locals dancing and even a fella breathing fire. The race was set off in waves, based on a ranking score you acquire from running other UTMB affiliated races. Have a look on ITRA (International Trail Running Association) website and search for your name, you've probably got one if you've run an ultra before (not the Lakeland 50 though). Anyways, as the field wasn't chock-a-block with fast guys and gals I was grouped in the top

20/30 and given an elite entry. All this meant was I had to stand at the front, unable to avoid the camera, and was asked to give an interview to a bloke from Bolton... mental.



The race is all uphill for the first 5 miles as it climbs out of the town into the forest. I was feeling good and running well uphill, there was a sizeable bunch that took off up the road, including a few professional trail runners, I was happy doing my own thing. I stopped after half an hour to remove a stone out of my shoe and the lead women came by, and as they were live streaming the race, a man on a mountain bike with a camera strapped to his head. I stayed in a group through the first check point but that soon broke up as the markings weren't brilliant and there were people rejoining the course from all directions. It was all a bit whacky races, especially with a mountain bike riding along side me when running down a steep rocky section. I decided to ease back a touch and let the chaos move ahead slightly. I was instantly happier.



Onto the second climb and I was still running well, but the day was starting to warm up, it was 25 degrees in the afternoon, and we'd not had a day over 15 at home. The climb was a lot more exposed to the sun and I started to get a bit hot. It was nearing the top of the steepest section of the course that I got a faint hint of cramp, barely anything in my right adductor. I knew, based on experience, that I was toast. I did the usual rallying talk in my head "it'll be fine, once you hit the flat you'll improve" "drink more" "eat more" "get the electrolytes down". Just as I was running again as

the hill levelled of before the downhill, I went to hop over a fallen tree, kicked a root a metre before it and fell onto and over said tree. My highly strung adductors did not appreciate such treatment and duly gave me a short twinge as a warning. I dusted myself off and walked a little before taking the very easy down to the second CP where I'd see Dan. He wasn't in the mood for sympathy or empathy and merely told me to "stay in the game, you're in a big pack of 15 all close together, the front 5 are way ahead" I was adamant I was much further back. I got some extra liquid in (sparkling water and coke) as I was a bit dehydrated at this stage.



I run walked out of the CP, I was trying to start walking before my legs would begin to tighten up and cramp. It was probably 1 min on 1 min off most of the way up the final climb and I felt like I was doing ok again. This was met with the realisation that I wasn't as soon as I started running downhill. I needed a couple of stops to let the cramps ease before trying again. I came off the last descent and there was still 9 miles of fairly flat running to go. This was where I'd hoped marathon training would have helped, but that was out the window. I was in full on survival mode. Having done a lot of ultra races that inevitably don't go to plan or throw curve balls your way I've started to get quite good at giving my best, regardless of what that might be. I was still able to run, only slowly and with a bit of a shuffle. Not quite a just put one foot in front of the other situation just yet.

At the first sign of things going South I'll give myself a target, as a mental distraction. I decided for whatever reason finishing under 5 hours would be it. I had 9 miles and an hour and 15 minutes to get there. Another thing I'll ask myself is "can you do anymore?" the answer was yes so, I tried to run a bit faster. I felt much better for a while and passed a few people and morale was improving, maybe I'd gotten away with it. There was a tiny hill with a steepish incline before the town containing the final CP 5km from the finish. I stupidly tried to run up it, it was only 50m long. I got halfway up and a cramp from the Devil himself got me and I was turning the air blue. I walked a little and jogged into town. A couple of cokes and watermelon later I was heading for home. There was one climb, only 100m or so up and over into Obernai. It took me 14 minutes to cover a mile. A large part of that was spent stood in a patch of nettles unable to stand straight due to my legs seizing. I got going again and didn't get much bother in the last two miles, almost like my body knew it was almost done. A steep road downhill on tarmac made me realise several toes were now blistered before I hit the old part of town and onto the half mile finish chute. I was 4 minutes over 5 hours.



If you'd like to have a go at racing in Europe an event like this is perfect. Relatively easy to get to, Flight from Manchester and a 90 minute train from Basel. Big enough to have a good atmosphere but small enough to not be totally overwhelmed by an event that has multiple races and thousands of people in each race.

Some of my coping strategies for adapting to difficulties during ultra races include:

- Alter expectations early, don't put pressure on yourself.
- Stay in the moment. You can't affect what's to come. Focus on what you can do now, this means eating, drinking and moving forward as well as possible.
- Find enjoyment in the suffering. You paid money to test yourself. This is what you signed up for. Ultras are a way of testing our ability to cope with physical and mental fatigue, in a mostly safe environment.
- Coping with difficulty is a skill that can be practiced. Get out there and find some darkness!