

Cotswold Way 102 mile Ultramarathon September 21st/22nd 2013

This was the inaugural staging of this event, part of a series of events held by Cotswold Running, an organisation ran by Kurt Dusterhoff.

The route was basically the entire length of the Cotswold Way, which we were informed at the pre race brief was 102.7 miles long. This year the course ran north to south. From Chipping Campden to Bath.

It was to be my first attempt at starting 100 mile plus distance after having to DNS my original entry to the Winter 100 last year due to injury.

Training didn't go perfectly for this one, with a knee injury meaning no running at all in weeks -4 and -3, but when do we ever get the perfect training in?

I had planned to travel down on the morning before the event to allow for the chance to relax on the evening before. Unfortunately an emergency at work followed by a traffic jam I hit on the 8 hour drive to Bath soon put paid to that. Nevertheless I managed to get a relatively good night's sleep.

We were collected by a coach from a park and ride in Bath at 9.15am to be taken to the start at the village hall in Chipping Campden. When the coach broke down en route I was beginning to think that this race just wasn't to be!

A replacement coach came and the start was delayed half an hour, to allow time for the for registration, the pre race brief and collection of a smart technical tee, and a gel.

The sun was out and it was the perfect day to start a run, 68 of us set off running out of Chipping Campden, and up onto the trails, taking in some beautiful villages such as Broadway and also some amazing views from the top of the hills. There were to be checkpoints approximately every 13 miles so I put to the back of my mind how far there was to go and only focused on reaching the next checkpoint.

Despite the smallish field of 68 the first quarter of the race was spent in good company, and the miles rolled by. The checkpoints were basic but definitely had all the essentials. The second checkpoint staff warned us of a wasp nest that we were to pass in the next couple of miles, and were asked to inform the staff if we were allergic to wasp stings. This was put to the back of our minds until when walking up a steep ascent a couple of lads ahead started sprinting out of no where. I'd never seen such a huge swarm of angry wasps! One of the runners described them as being about a foot long but I think that was a slight exaggeration! As there was no alternative route on the narrow trail I held my breath and sprinted through, luckily I made it through unscathed. I was one of the lucky few to not get stung.

From that point on we made slow progress, darkness fell and I was feeling low on energy the ascents seemed to be never ending. I had buddied up with a lad called Jason from the Scottish Borders, the trouble was we were both not the best at reading a map!

Having got lost 3 times, once in a field with menacing looking bulls, seemingly intrigued by our head torches, we had lost some serious time. We were lucky enough to bump into a local girl who knew the route, she informed us we were on the correct route but we were following the markers in the wrong direction! Although we were both mainly walking by now we put in an effort and kept up with her so we could reach the next checkpoint. We stayed with her until mile 63 and she turned out to be a fantastic tour guide.

The sleepy Cotswolds country side has a surprising amount of nighttime activity, one of the

group was stopped by police for acting suspiciously 'oh it's ok you can carry on' they said after seeing his race number. (next time I rob a bank I'll be sure to wear my race number!) I was stopped at 3am by a young mother in tears with her kids in the back of her car wanting to borrow my phone, and there is a large dogging community who didn't seem mind sharing their car parks with our checkpoints for their outdoor pursuits. I suppose you could add a strange group of runners running through the dark woods to that list!

By the time the 63 mile checkpoint came the daylight was back although it was quite foggy, and we were still making very slow progress. To reach the 87 mile cut off I worked out that we needed to complete the next 24 miles in 5 and a bit hours, which considering how little running I had in my legs just didn't feel possible , my soles of my feet were covered in blisters and the 2 weeks of missing training were really starting to tell. Along with several others I made the painful decision to DNF . My first ever DNF so far. The time we had spent getting lost had proved crucial.

After catching a lift back to the post race HQ at the Hilton in Bath I just had time to see a few finishers coming up to the finish at Bath Abbey, weaving in and out if the crowds of shoppers and tourists who seemed a little confused as to what was going on.

Overall I worked out there was a 57% drop out rate, caused mainly by the tight cut offs.

It was a generally well organised event and one that I definitely plan to come back for next year, I don't like to be beaten!

Andy Bristow