

Self Transcendence 24 Hour Track Race – London, September 2012

Midday on a sunny Saturday morning in September. 45 runners converge at Tooting Bec Track to challenge impossibility and run hundreds of loops of the track.

The challenge they embrace: keeping awake and moving for 24 Hours, circling the 400 meters track at a good pace, or a slowing pace, or a shuffle as the hours accumulate.

Most are experienced Ultra distance runners. But Ultra running comes in all lengths and distances – covering any race over Marathon distance – so having a 100K or Thames Meander 50 Miles under the belt doesn't fully prepare the body and mind for 24 Hours running. Ultra running is as much about overcoming the obstacles of the mind as the body, and there's nowhere that's truer than when you're circling a track endlessly. The body has to find a rhythm and the mind to quieten, and then the magic happens. The strength comes from somewhere deeper and as the trackside refreshment helpers clap and encourage, and the lap counters call out and cheer, a powerful atmosphere builds in a small area on Tooting Bec common.

As night draws on, some runners hit a wall too immense to overcome and bow out gracefully, others struggle for a while before finding a new rhythm and strength sending them powering round the track in the wee hours. Whilst others have the spirit of a marvel comic strip hero; the cold and the dark do nothing to dampen their speed.

The medics are kept busy with irritated tendons, blisters, upset knees, and stomach problems – the real bane of ultra running. Hot drinks are dispensed, jelly babies consumed, and then the joy of porridge for runners and helpers alike at 6am, not just the warm carbs but the promise of daylight.

Dawn means the race is nearing the last stage, and as Londoners rub their eyes and start to think of coffee, the remaining 33 runners dig deep, locate their steely core and face down the last 4 hours, light rain is falling but they barely notice. Some are hobbling, others are sprinting, all are shining.

Sunday Midday. Experience has won over youth, Kevin Doyle is our winner: 544 laps, 135Miles. Promising 25 year old, Robbie Britton, comes in second with 518 laps and 129Miles. Helen James, who so impressed with her strength and consistency has reached 487 laps, 121 Miles and places 6th overall. We have a new World Age Best record from Ann Bath, Vet 60, who covers 109 Miles, improving on the old record by 4 miles, and our own Bhauliya Moss records 109Miles in her first 24 Hour race. The top 9 finishers all record PBs – if they've raced this length before – and 19 runners have passed the golden 100 Mile mark.

The torrential rain has been considerate, blessing us as we dismantle the race but only once the runners are safely inside.

The trophies are given and slowly, stiffly, the runners wend their way homewards. Another 24 Hour race is over.

As race director, there's much to prepare, many things to do. Concentration cannot be lost for a minute, or a runner may suffer or a goal edge a fraction away. The 50 volunteer helpers have given up warm beds, and family weekends, to sit in the cold and shout 'Well done, you're doing fab, 325 laps' to people they've never met, but they're happy, inspired to be there, knowing they're helping someone achieve something remarkable.

After the race, I remember the organization, the final distances and the injuries, the laughter and the pre-dawn chill. But most of all, I remember the light in the faces of the runners and the special, magical feeling round a track in South London. It's my favourite 24 hours of the year.