

Confessions of an Ultra-Virgin...by Debbie Barton

Let's do an Ultra, my brother suggested one night over a curry and a few too many glasses of wine. It didn't take me long to agree... he was riding high on his London Marathon performance and I was feeling a bit smug that I'd managed to survive my first marathon with no preparation whatsoever, having only ever run a half before... don't ask!

Anyway, here we were. The decision was easy - we chose the Isle of Wight Ultra Challenge - advertised as 106km of varying terrain (actually almost 110km and described as "tough" we found out later!). It was our childhood holiday location of choice for almost ten years and the event was in memory of our mum and dad, so it was a no-brainer really...

We signed up in the January and so it began... the months slipped by and very little training took place. Challenges from the new job took their toll and, other than a 20 miler with my lovely coach, Mrs O, I didn't do nearly enough, but I wasn't phased.

Travelling over to the Island the day before the event I think the reality (or should I say, the enormity) of it all set in. I looked like an extra for a low budget Titanic film as I hung over the edge of the ferry wondering what the hell I was doing, what mum and dad would have thought, and if I was even going to live to tell the tale! I didn't sleep at all that night...

Saturday morning arrived much faster than planned and, as I sat eating my porridge, I contemplated the day ahead and tried to prepare a plan of attack in my mind that never came.

Arriving at the Start line, my brother was there, thankfully looking as apprehensive as I felt (I think I might have punched him if he'd been upbeat and raring to go). Setting off was quite an understated event, it was a staggered start due to the different distances/durations for other participants, but there it was ... we were off!

The event was split into eighths (four full serviced stops and four small ones with just drinks and snacks) so we soon got into a pattern and were quite jovial as we trotted off into the "unknown". Each stop brought its own challenges, but we managed to overcome them all. Waiting for a foot-ferry to cross from Cowes to East Cowes was very surreal as we stood there with a handful of other participants, panicking because we thought we would need some cash to pay the ferryman and none of us had any!!

The event was broken up with so many highs and lows I lost count, but these were the memorable ones:

Highlights:

- Mr B being at every single stop to cheer us on and change our kit as we needed it (lifesaver and official hero).
- Mr & Mrs O walking down the promenade in Cowes having travelled all the way down to support (I think i cried at that point!)

Lows:

- More styles and steps than you could shake a stick at... getting my leg over (a style!) was almost impossible by the end...
- My brother collapsing from low sugar at 83km, my survival instinct kicked in (yes, who knew I had one of those?!). We sat high on a hillside in the pitch black (I never realised the night could be so dark...). In the distance we could see Portsmouth and the Emirates Spinnaker Tower lit up in all its glory. I force fed him shot blocks, got him back on his feet and on to the next checkpoint. It was decision time - do we quit? do we have a break (we were well within our cut off time) or do we put our big boy/girl pants on and crack on.. needless to say, we went for option C.

The last 26km were so tough I never thought it would end, but it did. It was at that point I realised that it wasn't my body I should be worried about, but my mind.

The last mile was torture, we could see the finish line but had to weave away to get back to it. As we crossed the line and got our fizz and our medal, I had a strange sense of fulfilment. It wasn't the fastest time by any stretch of the imagination - it took us just over 24 hours and I'd planned for under 20. However, we came mid-way in a pack of around 480 competitors (over 70 didn't even finish!), so I was happy, and I'm sure mum and dad were watching as their youngest daughter and youngest son crossed the line together doing something that they never dreamed they would achieve.

Would I do it again? Never!! (but don't we all say that?.....)

Debbie Barton, May 2020