

The North Face Ultra Trail Tour du Mont Blanc 2007 (UTMB)

(5th Edition)

The Ultra Trail Tour Du Mont Blanc is an Ultra distance trail race that is now placed among the toughest, most challenging, and greatest long-distance races in the world. This year saw the 5th running of the event which is held each year in the mountainous area surrounding Mont Blanc, Europe's highest peak. The UTMB is an off-road athletic race covering a distance of 163kilometers, incorporating an altitude increase of 8,500metres, while visiting three countries; France, Italy, and Switzerland.

The race starts in the town centre of Chamonix in France, it travels in an anticlockwise direction over the border into Courmayour in Italy, continues on into Champex Lac in Switzerland, and finally returns to finish in the town centre of Chamonix.



This year the race started at 6.30pm on Friday 24th August and competitors had 46 hours in which to complete the circuit. A second race which starts at Courmayour and finishes at Chamonix covering a distance of 86Kilometers with an altitude increase of 4,500metres is also run on the same weekend.

In total, the 2 races (UTMB® and CCC®) accounted for 3,928 starters. There were 2,319 entrants in the 163 km race and 1,609 entrants in the 86 km race. The numbers making up the 3,928 participants included 44 nationalities coming from 5 continents. 13 Irish runners were registered for the races including 3 members of An Garda Siochana. A race of this magnitude requires top class organisation and a large number of volunteers, 1,200 of them in total.



To describe the Ultra Trail as a mountain marathon would be to describe an ordinary City Marathon as a gentle fun run. As the attached profile indicates, the course travels over several severe climbs and descents as it follows the trail around the Mont Blanc Massif, a tour that normally is undertaken in a ten day package by most hill walkers and outdoor types.

A novel technological experiment in following the runners marked this 5th edition, GPS beacons (85g.) transmitting a signal every 5 minutes were added to the bags of the first 10 men and the first 3 women at la Fouly (Swi), 56 km before the finish and using the Google Earth Visualisation by satellites, the head of the race could be followed for the final 50 kilometres. A giant screen in the triangle de L'Amitié Square in Chamonix broadcast the final kilometres live.

59 year old Marco Olmo from Italy won the fifth edition of the event and in doing so Olmo has become the only person to have won this gruelling event twice. Starting on Friday night, Olmo won the race in 21 hours, 31 minutes and 58 seconds, 52 minutes ahead of Jens Lukas and 59 ahead of Nicolas Mermoud. Olmo's victory is striking not only because of his age, but also because of his strict vegetarian diet. Undoubtedly though this age factor demonstrates how the mental aspect, human desire and experience can be determining factors in such a taxing stamina race.

Nikki Kimball won the women's event in 25:23:45, almost 2 hours ahead of Monica Aguilera from Spain and 4 hours ahead of third placed Karine Herry from France.

Entrants for the race are selected on the basis of their running curriculum and must show successful participation in similar type events over the last year when enrolling.

The 59-year-old Marco Olmo is a three-time winner of the Marathon des Sables, winner of 4 editions of Desert Cape, 6-time winner of the

Cromagnons (out of 6 participations) and a 4-time winner of the Desert Marathon of Libya.

Adrian Tucker, a Garda PSVI based in Dublin and a member of Rathfarnham WSAF athletic club, completed the 86Km race in 2006, and returned in 2007 to partake in the 163Km race. He completed the 163Km event in a time of 38 hours 57 mins, finishing in 668th place overall, and 294th in the over 40 category.

John McDonnell, a Detective Garda stationed in Bray and member of the Bray Runners, completed the 86K race this year in a time of 18 hours 41mins, finishing in 591st place overall and 187th in the over 40 category.

Kevin Grogan a Sergeant stationed in Ballyfermot also took part in the 163Km race but was forced to retire at approximately half way due to illness.

Keeping Adrian Tucker company for some of the 163Km event were notable ultra distance runners; Vincent Delebarre, the winner in the 2004 edition of the Ultra Trail, who was forced to give up this year while in 5th position due to catching cold. And the American favourites Scott Jurek – 7 times winner of the Western States 1000 miles – and Karl Melzer – voted best 2006 ultrarunner in the United States – both retired prematurely.

Of the 2,319 participants who started the 163Km race, 1,437 finished in the time allowed. This equates to a retirement rate of approximately 40%, an improvement on last years 50% retirement rate, and most likely brought about by the improvement in weather conditions this year. Clear skys and temperatures in the mid to late 20's brought about hydration and overheating problems as opposed to the cold and wet conditions experienced during some of the course last year.

The 2007 Edition benefited from weather conditions never before seen or dreamed of by the 2,319 participants. The night of Saturday to Sunday under a full moon will remain forever in the memory of many of them, with exceptional clear views available from around Europe's highest peaks available to those who had time to pause and take it in.

Possibly the greatest challenge facing any participant from Ireland partaking in this event is the sheer height and steepness of the mountains to be scaled during this gruelling event. There are no similar mountains in Ireland, our highest being Carrauntoohil at a height of 1,039 metres,

therefore any training here can never replicate the extremes that are to be experienced during the Ultra Trail Tour Du Mont Blanc.



Checkpoint at 'Grand Col Ferret', altitude 2,500metres

Preparation for this event gets under way in January when registration opens on a predetermined date. This year due to unprecedented demand all places for both races were filled within 8 hours of opening, and registration had to close leaving many hopeful entrants very disappointed not having gained entry.

Training demands for any form of athletics is time consuming and needs to be scheduled. The training regime for the Ultra Trail places even greater demands on any schedule. Time on your feet is one element that must be built up from the date of registration to the date of the event. Time on the hills is also crucial, and not just in fair weather conditions, as clothing and essential safety equipment must be tried and tested well before the actual event. All eventualities and weather conditions must be considered. This aspect was borne true this year with a lot of retirements coming about due to heat related illnesses as opposed to last year, which saw cold and wet conditions, reduce the field considerably.

The event starts in the evening time, and therefore, unless you're one of the super-human athletes who will finish in the top 100, the most of the participants will spend two nights out on the mountains. Climbing mountains in the darkness is not a normal or particularly easy practice, but again it is something that must be practiced before attempting the event. Some of the climbs in the event are quite technical and become even more so when undertaken in total darkness with only the aid of a

head-torch to assist you. Two head torches and spare batteries form a part of the compulsory equipment that must be carried throughout the event.

The event is extremely well organised with checkpoints, medical centres, food and drink stations placed approximately every 15Km along the route. The small villages passed through on the course are all fully supportive of the event, and the local people are out in force helping out with the refreshments and cheering on the weary runners throughout the full duration of the event.



Adrian Tucker finishing the Ultra Trail Tour Du Mont Blanc

After all those gruelling and demanding hours on the move, the centre Ville of Chamonix is a welcome sight, while any thought of tiredness or pain disappears momentarily when friends and onlookers cheer loudly to welcome the runners of the mountains in to the finish line.

Fund raising is always one of the main motivational factors for a vast number of the participants in this event, and the Irish lads are no different in this respect with their running exploits. Any donations to the following charities would be much appreciated; Cancer Research at The Haughton Institute St James Hospital, Friends of St Lukes Hospital, Chernobyl Children's Project, and the Irish Guide Dogs.

Results The North Face Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc

Men

- 1 Marco OLMO (ITA) 21:31:58
- 2 Jens LUKAS (GER) 22:23:55
- 3 Nicolas MERMOUD (FRA) 22:30:51

Women

- 1 Nikki KIMBALL (USA) 23:23:45
- 2 Monica AGUIERA (ESP) 27:18:17
- 3 Karine HERRY (FRA) 29:06:03