

The Oner Ultra Trail Run – My Story

The Oner, a brutal event which takes you 80 miles across the Jurassic Coastline is labelled as one of the hardest ultra-marathons in this country. You only have to look at the impressive line-up of runners with years of experience behind them to realise this is a big deal. A triple marathon, which must be completed within 24 hours doesn't sound impossible right? Add in an elevation of around 4500 meters, steep climbs, slippery tracks and the promise of some good old British weather, and it starts to sound a little more daunting.



Brutal Events - The Oner - 26-27.4.2014
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My pre-race preparations didn't go well; while picking up my back pack after fastening my race number to the back of it, something quickly became evident – there was a hole in my hydration bladder! Of course I didn't have the forethought to pack a spare one! It's not often I swear but a few choice expletives were expressed! The answer

to all things broken - black nasty tape, however this didn't work and no one seemed to have a spare, luckily another entrant overheard this and kindly leant me a simple water carrier. This would have to do, and with the promise of a new one waiting for me at checkpoint 4 from my partner I began to relax a little.

As I stood on the start line of what was to be my biggest challenge yet, a million thoughts were running through my head: had I ran enough miles; was I wearing the right gear; why is it so cold and windy; what happens if I get lost? A 10 second countdown signified the start of the race, I always find ultra-marathon starts a little bit of an anti-climax, as there is no fast start, and this one was certainly no different. It was 12 midday, if I was to complete this race, I would need to be at the end point at exactly 24 hours or less.



I started the race well, I felt strong and quickly started to set a relatively fast (for me), comfortable pace. After about 2 miles I met up with someone who I had run with in a previous race, Nigel, a Oner veteran and someone who had placed 3rd the year before. He sounded like he knew what he was talking about so I wanted to stick with him! We immediately started to strike up conversation and the miles were ticking by. It wasn't all plain sailing at

this point though, there was a very strong easterly wind (meaning in our face), it was so strong that if there was a brief respite it would lead us to nearly fall over. It was like running through water, surely this won't continue?

The end of first marathon, signified by checkpoint 4, went by pretty quick, but the pain was beginning to start. It was cold, the front of my legs were starting to burn a little from all the downhill sections, and the heavens were starting to open up. This checkpoint was at the base in Weymouth, a place where we could store some spare clothes, food and whatever else would help us in our quest. This was also checkpoint 6, but first a little jog round Portland Island. Before leaving we gained an extra running partner; Mick, a member of her Majesty's Army and a Oner Veteran – I was in good company. Running onto Portland Island, alongside Chesil Beach seemed a gargantuan task, the weather was becoming atrocious; the rain was incessant and the headwind seemed impossible to run into. Conversation started to dry up a little, we were not even half way into the run and the severity of the task ahead was evident in the expressions on our faces. I just kept my head down and kept going.



Portland Island seemed miserable and desolate, I'm sure it's a lovely place on a summer's day with an ice cream in hand, but it was a very different story at this stage and far from the beauty it potentially possessed. Even so we made it with little fuss to the checkpoint at the end of the Island, which was next to the impressive lighthouse, housing two old boys who gave us an uplifting wave. I remember from the pre-race briefing that the second half of the island

had a few tricky navigational issues and I was glad we caught up with someone who knew the area and race route extremely well. We put our faith in him, and it paid off, we came off the island having suffered no extra miles.

We were now back at checkpoint 4 (which was now checkpoint 6) and at the half way point. This was the time to put on some warmer clothes, get some hot food and deal with some other housekeeping issues. I can't say I felt great, things were starting to spin in my head, I was starting to shiver, even after putting on more warm clothes, and it hurt to walk, let alone run. On the plus side we were leaving the half-way point with some light left and I was still moving forward!

I was now completely wet through, having just changed into my warm night clothes I felt a little aggrieved, especially as we hadn't even covered a mile since checkpoint 6 yet! Even so the pace was going well, if a little slower now, and the break from the hills was a welcome relief. It was a very surreal experience running through Weymouth centre, the streets, bars and restaurants were littered with locals and holidaymakers alike, enjoying their Saturday night on the town. Our story was a very different one, still having the whole night to run through, in what was turning out to be appalling conditions. As we were running along Weymouth promenade I was thinking I could run like this forever. We had been joined by a 4th person, Mark, who had run many 100+ mile races and, although quiet, was another good comrade. It was fast approaching our time to turn off the promenade and into what I was told was going to be "complete darkness and hell" – good times!

They were not wrong, it started with a steep incline, more rain and navigational issues! Although we were following the South Coast Path, it was not always abundantly clear which was the right way to go. We pressed on regardless, making what seemed like the right decisions; we figured if we could hear the sea on our right, we were on the right track! My body was starting to dread the downhill sections now; each step was taken with great trepidation, not wanting to fall over, which would inevitably involve lots of tumbling and possibly a few broken bones! I was losing the other team members on these sections but managed to catch up on the uphill, these always being my 'favourite'.

Perhaps the most popular and iconic landmarks along this section of the coast are Durdle Door which is closely followed by Lulworth Cove, both of which would be missed by the cover of darkness. I had heard about the steps coming into Lulworth and how much they were going to hurt - this wasn't misinformation! The pain was becoming excruciating and our pace was becoming increasingly slow, I was really struggling to keep up with the other members of our group. The aid station at Lulworth Cove was a welcome relief, the promise of some more food and a little bit of warmth in the back of a mini-bus seemed like heaven; how wrong could I be! As soon as I stopped running my body was shaking uncontrollably, I clambered into the bus, clumsy with confusion and I immediately knew I had to leave so I wasn't sick over everyone - I don't think I would have been flavour of the month! I couldn't eat or take on anymore fluids at this stage - I knew I would pay for this later but my body was rejecting everything I was putting into it.

Leaving the checkpoint we were still altogether as a group, although conversation was limited it felt good to be with others who were clearly feeling as bad as I was. I remember Mick turning to me and saying "it has stopped being fun now", he was right, but the roars of laughter that erupted bought some light relief to the pain inside. We continued with the rain beating down on us, my inability to think clearly was now clouding my navigational judgement. I wasn't the only one as we soon become aware of a wrong turning. I can't begin to describe how upsetting this is, it seems obligatory to do this during ultra-marathon races for some reason, but I was hoping this one would in some way be different. Our route out of this mistake couldn't have been worse, the hill we had to climb seemed to go on forever, the pain being perpetuated by the top being swallowed in the darkness of the night. It seemed to go on forever and my lungs were busting at this point - not a good sign on a long run. Just when we needed this coastline to forgive a little, it reminded us of the brutality that it possesses.

The further we went on the more my memory of events escapes me. I have the occasional flashbacks even now, but most of it is just a haze. I remember seeing other runners at checkpoints uncontrollably shaking, their faces showing the signs of defeat, knowing they can no longer continue. I remember someone else joining us for a while, confused as to where he had gone, I turned to Mick to ask him - his reply - "he wasn't in a good way, he couldn't carry on another step". The downhill segments were still causing me immense discomfort and I was losing touch with the group each time these appeared. I eventually told them to carry on without me, knowing that I was slowing them down slightly. I would catch them up periodically but I was essentially running on my own now. It was about 3am in the morning when I knew that for the rest of this race I would be alone. Progress was now extremely slow and I was constantly recalculating my ETA in my head. I still

had plenty of time to finish as long as I just keep moving forward. This was now being repeated in my head over and over again – keep moving forward.

After leaving one of the checkpoints – checkpoint 10 I think – I was given explicit instructions, by a lovely lady, how to carry on with the race on the right path. I clearly decided to ignore all that was said to me, as I heard Richard, one of the race organisers, telling me “don’t go that way, you will run off the cliff edge”! Smart move Mark! It was now getting really tough, my view for the last 6 hours had been about a metre in front of me, which was lit by my head torch. My slow run had pretty much turned into a laboured walk, with intermittent bouts of what could only be described as a fast John Wayne waddle. Bouts of clarity were now becoming few and far between, I was so cold, my legs were now so painful I could not take a step without wincing in agony, I was so hungry but couldn’t eat and the gibberish coming out of my mouth would have worried any psychiatrist. All I needed to do was keep walking forward, it would be OK as long as I could keep doing that, but this was becoming increasingly hard, especially up hills, where I would find myself doing all I can to stay upright. I remember thinking all would be better in 12 hours, I would be on my sofa with a take-away, eating chocolate at the same time and watching something rubbish on the TV. I don’t ever have to run a long way again, I could just do short runs, perhaps even use a treadmill in the gym, outside is no longer fun.

I had been willing the sun to come up for what seemed like an eternity, because obviously this will affect the time of daybreak. Finally it worked itself through and first light brought with it a renewed sense of vigour (if you can call it that). I could now visualise myself crossing the finish line, having a shower and eating some food, there was still a small problem of 9 miles but I was now down to single figures. There was a subtle change in the coastline, becoming more, dare I say it, urban; I must be entering Swanage. I was trying to convince myself that I had just started running and going out for a single 8 mile run; my body was telling me otherwise. Despite clutching my map and looking at it every 400 metres or so I managed to take a wrong turning, missing one of the checkpoints and I subsequently had to double back on myself, passing two of the others along the way. Heaven knows how I caught them up, but I wasn’t complaining. Arriving at the final checkpoint I scoffed three Mars Bars while I listened intently to the final instructions of how to get to the finish line, I think I made him repeat himself 4 times before I was happy I understood what was going on.

Leaving the checkpoint I felt pretty tired, I hadn’t yet had any caffeine at all, and being up for about 30 hours was taking its toll on me. Running along the promenade in Swanage I must have dozed off for a second because I banged into the railings and abruptly came to. It was time for some caffeine! I had forgotten the instructions already and found a passer-by who was coming in the opposite direction, I mumbled something incoherent and pointed at my map, she seemed to know what I meant and pointed in the direction I needed to go. This was accompanied by a strange look which said – ‘what the hell are you doing’ – I didn’t explain, just thanking her for her time. The final climb was now ahead of me and I could see it for all its glory. This can’t be right, or fair! I was on my hands and knees crawling up to the top, trying not to be sick, gasping for air and resisting the urge to sleep. I was making about a 10 metre gain at a time but still moving forward. Eventually I reached the summit, and I could see Studland in front of me, the final run along the beach was all I needed to do.

I felt amazing; I was now running again and even managing to acknowledge passers-by with more than a grunt. The end was in sight and my body somehow felt nearly normal again. The final half mile was made even more exuberant by my girlfriend meeting me and accompanying me to the finish line. The guys I had run with earlier had not long made it in themselves, it was great to see them again and we shared a painful embrace. I had done it, 82 miles (including the detours) over some of the harshest terrain in some of the most horrendous conditions in 21 hours. I felt brilliant, even more so when I found out I was 11th place out of a starting 70, with only 26 making it across the finish line. The support crew had been outstanding, always smiling, offering words of encouragement and any assistance possible. It can't have been that nice for them, in the wind and rain waiting for nonsensical runners to appear in the middle of the night. I tried to thank them all along the way and at the end, but if I didn't.... a massive THANK YOU to all involved.



My 'never wanting to run long distances again' soon changed, I already started planning my next race – a 100 mile run over the South Downs with a 30 hour time limit – in my head on the car journey home. Only 7 weeks to, I promised myself I would have a day off training the next day but then full steam ahead. I was looking forward to getting home though; eating and sleeping as much as possible, but I knew this wasn't the end. I was so happy and content, my first attempt at The Oner and not even a year and a half after I took up running as a hobby. Until next time....

I have tried to raise some money along the way for a wonderful charity – Footprints, a charity which supports children and their families who have been affected by Down syndrome. If you feel you could help this amazing cause, please visit my fundraising page at:

<http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/MarkMiller3>