



the Holy Trail

12 LEGENDARY TRAILS
YOU SHOULD RUN

Rik Merchie

 | LANNOO

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Italy & Switzerland
**ULTRA TOUR
MONTE ROSA**

170KM | 105MI • D+ 11,300M | 37,073FT

ULTRA & 4-STAGE RACE

100KM | 62MI • D+ 6,100M | 20,013FT

“While I was running these trails around Monte Rosa, my training ground for the UTMB®, I thought this is the race I would really like to run. It didn’t exist so I’ve created it for you to enjoy.”

Lizzy Hawker





MY PUB

'If dogs run free,
then why not we?'

Bob Dylan

It's daybreak when my train worms out of the station of the Swiss town of St. Niklaus. I dive sleepy-eyed into the hood of my sweater. The past days have been a combination of kilometres, denivelations and hundreds of little orange flags. I'd not come to the Ultra Tour Monte Rosa (UTMR) to race, I'm not top runner enough for that, but rather to mark the route and help as a volunteer in an aid station. But with a mission: I wanted to listen to as many trailers as possible, to let drop the basic idea of my book and see if it took root in the international trail running community. And ask myself out loud what criteria I would use in selecting the trails for my book. Such editorial issues are better solved in the shadow of the Matterhorn than at a desk.

My publisher sent me off with the message that, for him, twelve races were more than enough. I nodded, but I had no idea of the standards that I would apply. Yes, to disregard the geographical boundaries of my home country - *ce plat pays* Flanders - seemed to me obvious even before I left. It's more fun to write about exotic trail races than about competitions in your own backyard.

Nor did I want to limit myself to existing competition series like the Migu Run Skyrunner World Series and the Ultra-Trail World Tour. And to discuss only the classic summer races in the Alps also seemed to me a too narrowly Western European framework. It was also clear to me that I wanted to cover as many distances and disciplines of trail running as possible - after all, ultra isn't the only thing that shines.

The blare of the train horn on entering a dark tunnel splits my head open. I blink and stare out crumpled. The reflection of my sunburned face in the window is interrupted only by the flickering fluorescent lamps hanging on the tunnel wall.

I'm thinking. In conversations with UTMR racers, I was challenged by the fact that in existing books about trail running it's often professional athletes who do all the talking. Inspiring, but I find stories of ordinary mortals more interesting. The stories of butchers, bakers and bankers who, in their spare time, retreat into nature to grind out running kilometres on unpaved paths. A human interest approach, with focus on the belly and tail of the race.

"Deal," my publisher said, "fits perfectly with the literary character of your personal texts for the book. And in this way the reader has some variety, with something else besides your own running adventures."

"OK, but I've written twenty texts. And you want twelve portraits of trail races in that book. How are we going to mix them? Do you want me to drop eight texts?"

"No, because I don't want to cut your story. We'll keep those twelve races and alternate with full-page photos of other races that are mentioned in the interviews or your texts. It's all about experience, isn't it?"

"That's pretty much it. OK, I'll buy it."

"And one more thing..."

"Yes?"

"You're writing not just for the world's diehards. Choose some competitions that normal mortals can handle after a year's training."

"Of course."

In my head I delete the words classification and ranking. The International Trail Running Association (ITRA) website lists hundreds of races. I've absolutely no intention of writing *The Holy Trail Bible ...*

How in God's name do I decide which will be the first one? By distance or denivelation? With the organization and atmosphere as extra parameters?

No, I'd rather make an anthology of what is going on in this sport. What interests me is the poetry, not the rankings. More a pot pourri with different tastes and smells than a straight ranking.

Just like how a bartender tackles it.

A collection of 12 Grand Crus you can fall in love with. Without claiming there's no love outside the list, because every list is incomplete, and here and there with some extras as snacks.

Sorry, don't get you?

You expect a good bartender to have a number of classic cocktails on his menu. A margarita, a mojito and a Bloody Mary. You also hope he can recommend a tasty Saint-Emilion. A strong stout maybe? Or an exclusive whiskey from an obscure island with an unpronounceable name? Possibly a nip of the liqueur he homebrews from orange peelings? And concluding with an unknown artisan beer?

Welcome to *The Holy Trail*, my bar.

No compulsory purchasing from brewing multinationals. No promo deals. Just stuff that has attracted my attention in recent years, which I've gathered in my cellar as being good value and which I'd like to serve you.

RIK MERCHIE

SEPTEMBER 2017,

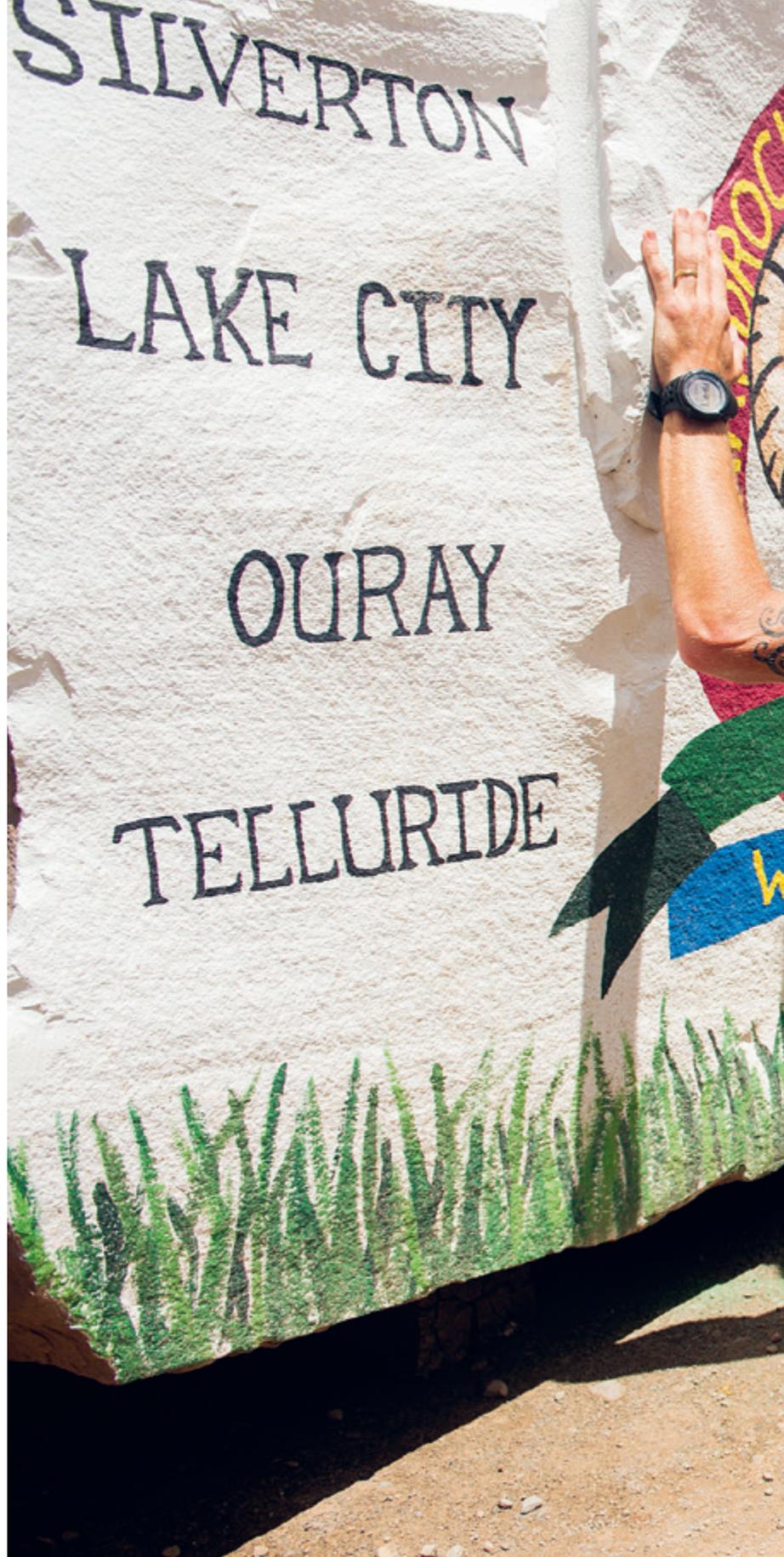
CHAMONIX-MONT BLANC, FR ▲▲▲

USA
HARDROCK
HUNDRED MILE
ENDURANCE RUN

161.7km | 100mi • D+ 10,000m | 32,808ft

“You really have to embrace the unknown. You can try all you want to script it - how you see the day going and have these plans. But the mountains don't care. They're indifferent to whatever plans, whatever hopes you have...”

Timothy Olson





3 , 2 , 1 ... GO !

OR almost... 12 legendary trail races you should run?

For me there's no 'need to' about it, but yes, you've got up out of your armchair. Otherwise you would not have read this. Maybe you bought this book online or in a bookstore. Or you were given it as a present - maybe when you were sitting in your armchair, but the wrapping paper had to go into the waste bin. So yes, you had to get out of that armchair. * Well done!

* You regularly participate in trail races? Just finished a long distance run with hundred of metres of ascent and descent? Then stay the rest of the day in your armchair....

Now put on your running shoes and drag yourself outside. Again: well done! That was the hardest obstacle. You're halfway there already. Walk around a block. Stretch out on the way. Breathe deeply, in and out. Start jogging. The choice is yours: 5 minutes, 10 minutes... Then walk for a few minutes and repeat the previous step. And again. Return home after half an hour. Repeat the above the day after tomorrow. And again a few days later, but with up and down stairs. Or in a park with hills. A forest

in a nature reserve? Even better! A mountain path? Absolutely! Congratulations, you're a trail runner... Now choose a race from the twelve legendary trail races in this book!

Excuse me?

Hold your horses!

Dreams are licit and necessary, but the races in this book are no walk in the park. All require solid training. Some trail races also demand specific technical knowledge and equipment. A well built-up running condition is an absolute pre-condition, even to consider taking part in these trail races. Without a good physical basis, you are likely to hurt yourself pretty fast. Or you will be disqualified from the race for being too slow. Or, from the first minutes you will be busy surviving rather than enjoying. Each of these scenarios has a great likelihood of legendary failure. And that's not what this book is about. But (re)start trail running. From 5 kilometres on to 10 kilometres. From 10 kilometres on to 20 kilometres. From 20 kilometres on to...*

* Are you having trouble counting in (kilo)metres? Have a look at page 209 for a conversion table.

Find the paths and play.
So you're already a road runner and are now moving to trail running?

Again, hold your horses!

You may already have sturdy running legs, but trails place different stresses on your body than asphalt does. On the road, your foot always lands in the same way, but not on an uneven trail. The constant search for balance on technical trails contorts your upper body into curves it's not accustomed to. In short: jump in, but for the first times, limit the number of kilometres to 50-75% of your usual distance.

Sign up for trail races that match your current physical condition. Who said that a 10 km race cannot be legendary? Check these calendars for a race in your neighbourhood:

WWW.BETRAIL.RUN

WWW.MUDSWEATTRAILS.NL

WWW.I-TRA.ORG

Afterwards, crawl back into your armchair with your acidic legs. Then take this book and fantasize which trail will disappear under your feet. Thousands of trail runners did so before you. Why couldn't you be one of them?

These ten pieces of advice should definitely help you on your way:

I. WALKING IS OK

Every trail runner is confronted with it sooner or later: a steep climb, where you simply have to walk. In fact, a practised trail runner will often prefer to walk rather than run uphill. This way he saves his strength, because usually there is more than one climb. Your heart rate and breathing, not

the average speed on your sports watch, tell you whether your pace is right. Message to road runners: walking on trails is normal and nothing to be ashamed of.

2. KM, D+ & D-

The technical term in trail running is the letter D. This tells something about the level of difficulty of the race. In full, D stands for denivelation, which is the difference in height between two geographical points. This designation exists in two variants: a positive (D+) and a negative (D-). An example: A 30 km race with D+ 1,300 and D- 800 means that you will have to climb



“It’s just running.
You know how to run.
No, really, you do.
Left right.”

Anton Krupicka

1,300 metres - in one or more separate climbs - over 30 kilometres and drop down - again in one or more descents - 800 metres. A useful tip for assessing a race: for every 100 D+ you can count a flat kilometre extra. Another example? If you were to take a rolling pin to the same 30 km race with 1300 D+ and roll it out flat, you would end up with the equivalent of a flat race of around 43 kilometres.

3. GEAR JUNKIES

Do you have to spend hundreds of euros in a sports store before getting started? No, because you can already go a long way with normal running shoes. However, if you want really to immerse yourself in this sport, some extra equipment is a good idea. It certainly pays to invest in a pair of trail running shoes. The deeper grooves offer more grip on slippery surfaces. In comparison with traditional running shoes they often have a lower drop. In this way you stand a little lower on the ground, which reduces the risk of a twisted ankle. It's also important that your running shoes fit tightly around your heel and that your toes at the front have enough room to expand during running. Ideally, your trail running shoes have a protective edge that prevents your toes from bruising after a few kilometres. An extra boon is a *rock plate*. This is a plastic fabric that ensures that sharp rocks and tree roots do not pierce the rubber of the outsole into your foot. Whether you opt for a lot of or little cushioning depends on your running style, body weight, terrain and the duration of your training or competition. Of course it's nice to have shoes that are as light as possible, but lightweight is not always long-lasting. Waterproof shoes with, for example, a Gore-Tex membrane look

interesting at first sight, but if water runs into them from the top, it will stay. To cut a long story short: give serious thought to your trail running footwear, and be sure to visit a specialized dealer. Try different models, ask for advice and read reviews on the internet. *Barefoot* and *minimal trail running shoes*? Fun toys, but in the initial phase building up sensibly and alternating with your classic trail running shoes is the message.

The longer and the higher you go, the more equipment there is to recommend. Running backpacks and race vests with water bags, drinking bottles and other small bottles. Energy gels, powders and muesli bars. A running watch that indicates your route on GPS. Telescopic or folding running sticks to hoist yourself over that mountain crest. A lightweight jacket against wind squalls along the way, sunscreen and sunglasses with a high UV index, and a headlamp compared with which car headlights are fairy lights. A survival blanket and whistle for emergency situations. A trail running shop is a paradise for *gear junkies*, but not for your credit card. Thinking carefully about what you do and do not buy is healthy, saving on safety in inhospitable terrain is not.

4. BEER AND SAUSAGES

A trail race is not about dieting. Sumo wrestling aside, there is no other sport where you have to eat and drink as much. In road races, the offerings in the aid stations are often limited, but with (longer) trail races, aid stations are often bacchanals. Tea, broth, cola, sports drink and water. Slices of cake, sausage and cheese, orange segments, nuts, crisps and dry salt biscuits. On extremely long runs soup and pasta also at times. Eat and drink well also outside the aid stations.

Practice this during your training sessions, because during your race you don't want to be learning what works and what doesn't work for your stomach. Beer and sausages are best kept for after the race. Or avoided totally.

5. WHAT GOES UP, MUST GO DOWN

If the path is not too steep, dribble with short, quick steps uphill. Should you switch to walking? *Fair enough:* Hands on the thighs and push! On simple descents you can use wider steps. Use gravity and let the slope do the work. Don't forget to breathe, because some runners have the reflex of holding their breath on descents. On technical and steep descents it's advisable to take shorter steps and stretch your torso as long as possible, as if running down a staircase. Try to move lightly. That way you are quick, but also agile so as to respond accurately to swishing branches and loose pebbles. It can be very tempting (and fun) to turn onto *full power* downhill, but you can also trip quickly - especially as a beginner. So let your speed grow with your experience.

6. SCAN THE PATH AHEAD

A motorcyclist doesn't stare at his front wheel, but looks far ahead to be able to anticipate what will happen. In the same way, trail runners are best advised not to look at their feet while running. Always look four or five steps ahead so that you know what's coming at you. Take care not to bend too much, because then not enough air gets to your lungs.

7. CORE STABILITY

To be able to respond quickly and agilely with your feet, you need a strong core. Logical, because all those G-forces on that winding and unstable path don't stop at your navel. A solid house has a foundation of steel and concrete. Invest in *core stability*. Planking, and more planking. Simple.

8. FEET & ARMS

Tripping and falling is part of trail running, but raise your feet sufficiently while running and you've come a long way. Your arms help give you balance. Good use of the arms is therefore extra important in trail running. On technical terrain you will find more balance by holding your elbows wider apart. On descents, keep your arms level with your chest with your hands slightly outwards. On slopes with lots of obstacles, lower your arms a little.

9. TRAIN YOUR SKILLS

Just as interval training boosts your speed for road races, repetitions on a technically challenging trail boost your technique. Focus on your posture and, like in skiing, find the right line and flow for you. Complete your running training with strength and balance exercises.

10. CHILLAX

Altitude and distance are your enemy, not your fellow runners. Trail races can be just as competitive as road races, but the atmosphere is more friendly and relaxed. And we'd like to keep it that way. Learn to share the path with other users, help colleagues in need, keep your waste with you and thank the volunteers. 

Italy TOR DES GÉANTS®

356.3km | 221.5mi • D+ 27,390m | 89,862ft

“Tor des Géants® is made of pain and smiles, hugs and glances. It is made of faces and landscapes encountered along one's own path. It is a challenge to your emotions, it is the deep desire to leave without being sure to arrive.”

TOR DES GÉANTS 2017
OFFICIAL VIDEO REPORT





BACKPACK

My train's leaving in an hour's time. I've been packing for three days now, but my apartment floor still looks like an outdoor sports store in which a bomb has exploded.

Come on, get on with it.

Basics first: tent-sleeping bag-roll mat. No attempt on the summit without a base camp. Gas stove, cooking set and pasta. Lots of pasta. Plus sugar waffles, granola bars, crisps and dates.

Running backpack with drinking bottles and water bladder with drinking tube. I tot it up in my head. One litre at the front and two litres at the back as maximum capacity for complete autonomy. Three litres is already three kilos extra weight. I'm no gram chaser, but man does not live on water alone. Four apple-flavoured energy gels with calcium and magnesium, five cola-flavoured energy gels with caffeine, three chocolate-flavoured power bars and a packet of salty cookies to get through the day. Pills with a concentrate of essential amino acids. Effervescent tablets to replenish the electrolytes. Valerian capsules for a good night's

sleep. An equal number of Traumeel® anti-inflammatory tablets. And, for the finale, an extremely strong coffee-tasting energy gel with a triple dose of caffeine. Not to forget: sports tape, tiger balm, massage cream, factor 50 sunscreen and lip balm.

A bottle of red wine for the soul and a jar of anti-friction cream for the scrotum.

I feel like I've just raided a pharmacy. I stuff everything in my trekking backpack. Meanwhile, a Rock Werchter version of *Feel Good Hit of the Summer* by *Queens of the Stone Age* thunders at volume 11 through my kitchen.

You need some porno music...

*Everybody knows you dance like you fuck,
you dance like you fuck, you dance like you fuck...*

O, yeah...

So, how do you fuck in Belgium?

That's what I wanna know!

O, come on, you must fuck better than that! How do you fuck in Belgium?

It's fucking good, that's what I know

Nicotine, valium, vicodin, marijuana, ecstasy and alcohol... Co-co-co-co-co-cocaine

Choice of tyres?

My minimal 4 millimetre drop lightweight competition shoes or my robust 10 millimetre drop training shoes? The first pair are better for clawing uphill, the second more comfortable in long descents. And what about my normal running shoes? Not that I expect lots of asphalt, but still. Useful for limbering up the day before the race.

Eventually I stuff three pairs of running shoes into my backpack.

- Short and long running pants.
- Rain jacket with hood.
- Two quick-drying T-shirts.
- Two pairs of running socks.
- Cap and gloves.
- MP3 player with earphones.
- Telescopic running poles.
- Headlamp.
- Sunglasses.
- Bandana.
- Folding drinking cup.

Check.

Medical certificate in English, whistle for distress signals and aluminium survival blanket.

Double check.

I'm travelling and take it all with me.

And, last but not least, because it was just my luck that my number came up in the lottery: a starting ticket for an exclusive ultra-marathon in the mountains. ▲▲

**“I’m no gram chaser,
but man does not live
on water alone.”**



Norway
TROMSØ
SKYRACE

Badass bromance between sea and sky

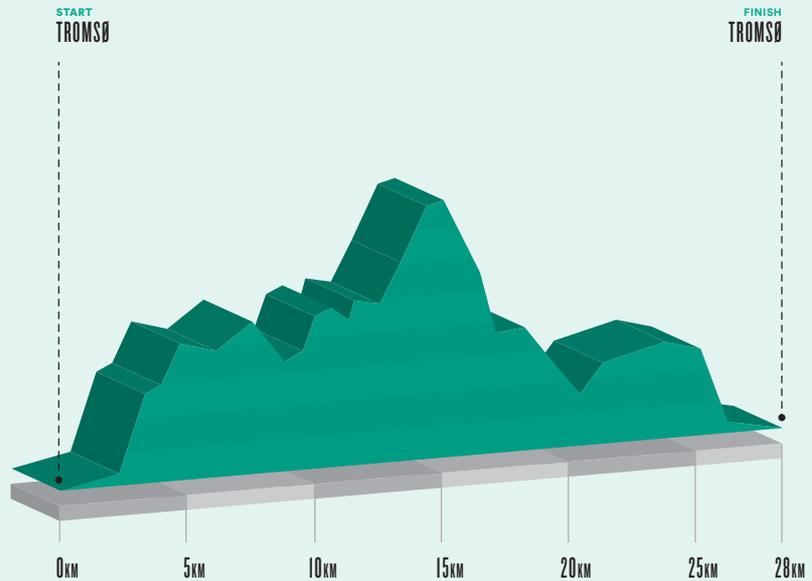


Tromsø

TROMSDALSTIND SKYRACE

28KM | 17.4MI • D+ 2,000M | 6,561FT

- + Trail legends Kilian Jornet and Emelie Forsberg as race directors
- + Small-scale and charming
- + Alpine terrain, but too low to give you altitude sickness



OTHER DISTANCES

HAMPEROKKEN SKYRACE

57KM | 35.4MI • D+ 4,800M | 15,748FT

BLAMANN VERTICAL

2.7KM | 1.7MI • D+ 1,044M | 3,425FT

BØNTUVA SKYRACE

15KM | 9.3MI • D+ 800M | 2,624FT



BRIAN LANG

Age 28 • Doctoral student
Baldwinsville, New York •
USA

Why did you choose this race?

BRIAN “Gosh, long story...

I’ve been living in Basel in Switzerland for a few years now for my doctoral research. Earlier as a student I used to do athletics. Besides track I’d also run some modest half-marathons, so running was already in my legs. Together with an American friend, I wanted an excuse to explore Switzerland. I saw pictures of the Sierre-Zinal trail race online and we were immediately sold. In the same year, 2015, we also ran the Jungfrau Marathon. Then I started sniffing around on the internet to see what trails there are outside Switzerland.

I’ve always been fascinated by these high fjords in Scandinavia and that’s how I came across Tromsø. A skyrace, from sea level up the cliffs. I was immediately sold! As I clicked further, I saw the competition had four events. A vertical kilometre and a 15 km race seemed a bit trivial to justify the long journey. The very technical Hamperokken Skyrace with 57 km and 4,800 metres vertical climb is the crown jewel, but I didn’t see myself as up to it. This left the Tromsødalstind Skyrace. One peak instead of two and only - yes, ‘only’ - 28 km and 2000 metres vertical climb. We registered the same day for the 2016 race (laughs).”

How did you prepare?

BRIAN “I may have done Sierre-Zinal and the Jungfrau Marathon, but the Tromsø Skyrace is a different kettle of fish. In places it’s more scrambling than running. If I wanted to pull it off, I’d have to train seriously. With eight months to go, I started training in December. Too ambitiously, it turns out, because after two weeks I started secretly skipping training sessions until I finally did nothing more. In February I got a grip on myself again and achieved weeks with over 50 km. In March and April it fell back to 30 km a week until in May we were back to where we started. June was a wake-up call in which I consciously did a lot of vertical climb. The last month before the race I was back with my family and friends in the US. With the many visits and parties I never once pulled on my running shoes. I assumed it would all work out. The cut-off time was 12 hours. But surely you can walk 28 km in 12 hours? With my substandard training it would not be a fast race, but rather a test of my endurance and grit.”

How did your race go?

BRIAN “Actually you run from sea level to the top of the Tromsdalstind. That’s a solid 1200 metres climb. With my poor preparation in the back of my mind, I restrained myself, but after the summit came a long technical descent in which I wanted to assert myself and live it up. I’d

Race secret

The water in the rivers on the trail is so pure you can drink it straight out. Ideal for rinsing the different wild berries* you’ll find along the course.

* Unless Emelie Forsberg has picked them all for her cakes.

never seen anything like this before: a big wasteland of boulders, sometimes with a half metre height difference from one step to another. After this there were just 10 kilometres to go. What did I have to lose? Back down at the bottom, I could hardly take another step. My thighs were exploding. Running was impossible. Jogging was still just about doable...”

Which moments will you never forget?

BRIAN “Most competitions serve dried fruit, candies, chocolate and muesli bars in aid stations. All sweet things, while I prefer salty flavours. That’s why I had a bag of sun-dried tomatoes in my race pack. I still see myself wolfing them down in that misty landscape, I was so burned out. I ate almost all my supply at once. Maybe a bit weird to bring sun-dried tomatoes. Because they don’t give a lot of energy, but it was the best snack of my life.”

A golden tip for future participants?

BRIAN “For the last kilometres I again wanted to run a bit faster, to stay ahead of my standard.

Maybe after all those sun-dried tomatoes gave me the energy I needed? I barged through the nth river and jumped up the bank, where a mud zone followed. The foot with which I landed immediately sank in deep. Before I knew it I was into slush to above my knee. I lost my balance and fell forwards. It took a while before I realized what had happened. A frozen break-dance débutant in a muddy pose, that’s what it must have looked like. Too bad there was no photographer in the area (laughs). So be extra careful when you see mud!”

“It was crazy, but it was awesome! Certainly one of the most difficult races in the world!”

Greg Vollet

SALOMON TEAM MANAGER
