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RUNNING FREE

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LA 6000D – LA COURSE DE GEANTS

Welcome to the Alps

Maxwell Roche took on the 6000D, a 60k/37.2 mile off-road ultra. Here he recalls the highs – and the lows!

Ca va bien monsieur?" asks the concerned looking Frenchman as he thrusts toward me a steaming bowl of noodle soup. I accept the soup with a smile and sway metrically back and forth. "Oui merci, je suis de Londres," I reply between slurps of the warm savoury liquid. A look of understanding appears upon the man's face as, with a sinister smile, he retorts "Welcome to the Alps!" Meeting his smile with raised eyebrows I stumble clumsily onwards. It doesn't hit home until I'm 10 strides higher up that the man was dressed as a giant rabbit.

"At 7am, four and a half hours prior to this curious encounter, I stood upon the start line amid a sea of excited faces and jovial chatter in the handsome Alpine town of Aime. With a very unfamiliar atmosphere, free of nervous puffing and anxious shaking of limbs characteristic of a typical UK marathon, this epic 60k (37.2mile) off-road ultra begins with a light hearted hum and easy manner such as would precede a morning stroll. The countdown commences, and then we're off.

Reach for the sky

"For me, a reasonably experienced runner of road races, never further than

the typical 26.2mile distance, this was set to be an entirely new experience. Back in May this year I posted a new personal best at the Edinburgh Marathon of 3.09 and have been feeling fit ever since. Problem is, this race, the infamous 6000D in La Plagne France clocks 4,748m of vertical ascent/descent, reaches altitudes of 3,047m, and traverses mud, rock, snow and ice! Edinburgh, in contrast, barely breaches sea level and is steadily downhill throughout. I had my work cut out, but nevertheless I set off steady and full of confidence. After all, with an 11 hour time limit, how hard could it be?

"The initial 3k proves frustrating and I start to regret being submissive on the start line, gawking at the back of the pack instead of elbowing my way forward. The wide and flat road soon becomes a 40 degree single track through dense woodland slowing everyone to a walk. Not surprisingly, the jovial chatter is promptly replaced by a chorus of heavy breathing. Trapped and striding slowly upward, I tell myself 'This isn't a sprint, it's 60k, the longest race of your life,' and in so doing, stem my growing frustrations.

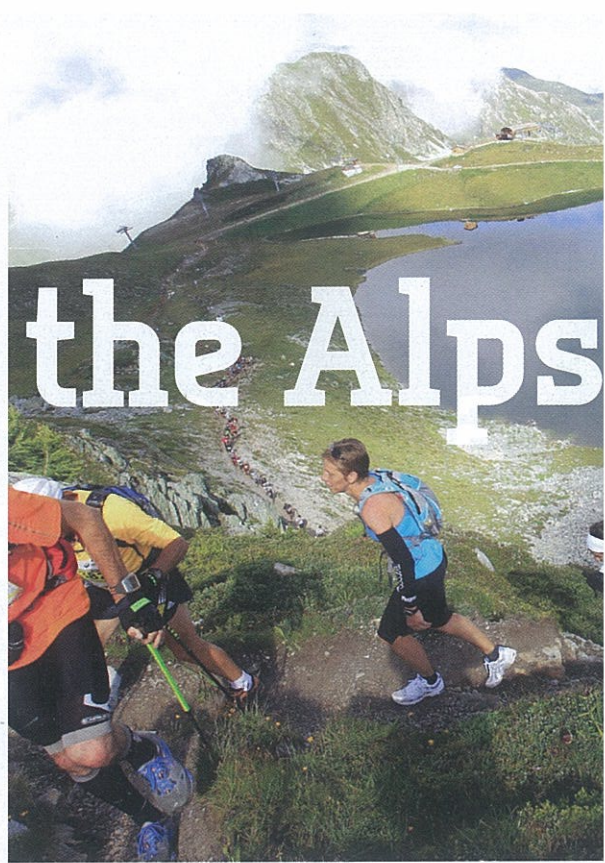
"After two hours spent in much the

same manner we finally break the treeline gaze up toward a white and blue sky framed by jagged pines. The path at this point, around 15k into the race, suddenly widens and the claustrophobic progression through the forest ends abruptly as the runners spray out on to the sandy pathway.

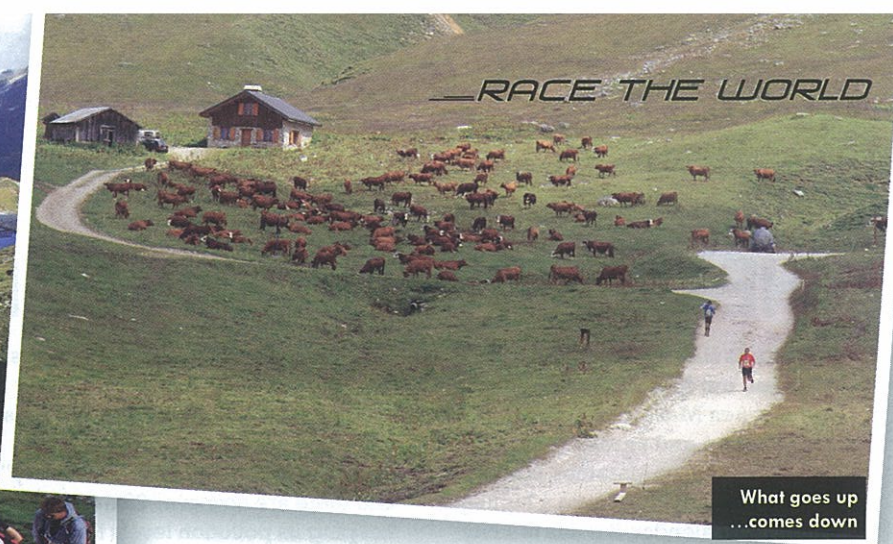
"An hour later we reach the first refreshment stop at 1,979m in Plagne Centre. The vista is now fully visible and the forest a distant memory. Smooth-edged summits dissect the lingering morning cloud and peer down upon the valley below. Closer at hand there is a view of equal magnificence; a 20ft table covered with piles of treats. Cheese, cold meats, nuts, dried fruit, cake and chocolate make up but a portion of the delicious fare on offer. I shove the first chunk of cheese homeward and check my watch; over three hours gone and little more than 20k in! Conscious that I would now be just nine minutes from the finish at Edinburgh, I begin to contemplate the enormity of the task. Luckily, the chocolate brownies prove to be an adequate distraction from such dangerous avenues of thought, and before I know it I'm fully engrossed. These Alpinians lay on a good spread!

Allez Maxwell!

"The satisfying sound of rubber scratching upon the dusty track and the ringing of the cow bells keeps me company for the next 10k between Plagne Centre and Roche de Mio. With the severity of the incline increasing I



Mountain High!
Maxwell on top
of the world



What goes up ...comes down



Single file please ...keep walking!

"In dense woodland jovial chatter is replaced with heavy breathing"

hydration pack, and with a smile to my nearby competitors, begin the descent.

Down but not out
"Unfortunately, my relief is only

momentary. Terrain which felt steep going up feels even steeper going down. Under pressure from runners behind I spring from rock to rock, using my poles for balance, fully aware that a misplaced foot could have disastrous consequences. Skating across patches of snow, sometimes up to 3ft deep, I manage to stay upright.

"Three hours have passed since the hairy heights of the glacier and I'm still on the move. It's 3pm and I've just hobbled into the grand resort of Plagne Bellecote. After eight hours of running at such dizzying heights exhaustion has taken a firm grasp upon me. Many competitors now lie sprawled by the refreshment station, some stretching and some gazing comatose into the ether, readying themselves for the remaining 19k. With no desire to sit down, despite my exhaustion, I cram handfuls of food into my mouth and drink some Coca-Cola; a naughty drink never to be found at a refreshment station in the UK. Regardless of its tooth melting capabilities, I gulp it down until it becomes a blissful waterfall of molten sugar across my withered taste buds.

"Three hours remain until the 11 hour race curfew, so I set off from Plagne Bellecote with purpose, determined and still confident that I will make it to the finish in time, yet annoyingly my pace slows yet further. At around 3.30pm the last of the high cloud is stripped from the sky and the sun beats down with a new authority. Luckily, shelter is close at hand and the

undulating trail cuts back among the pines. Hot and thick with resin stirred up by the afternoon sun the forest air smells like a newly varnished fence. I'm now frequently overtaken by runners making their final surge for the finish. "Bon Courage!" they cry before disappearing onwards up the track. Finally, after what feels like forever and a day, I break back into the sunshine and emerge upon the road. An eager looking chap with a white beard and a baseball cap kindly points me in the right direction and signals that I may drink the water from a hose he's rigged up to the corner of his house. This I do willingly and jog onwards with an over-the-shoulder grin, 3k to go and it's all delightfully flat.

"After 10 hours and 20 minutes I cross the finish line. Pathetic by French standards given that the winner finished in fewer than six, but not at all bad for a Londoner. The man on the PA system congratulates me by name, which is a nice surprise. Naturally, my weary feet lead me straight back toward the Coca-Cola table, where I toast my success and promptly collapse."

About the race

"Entry costs 65 euros. There are between 800 and 1,000 participants each year – register at www.6000D.com. The Alpine scenery and tremendous support create a really memorable challenge. Comfy trail shoes, running poles and a hydration pack are essential. For something shorter, the 11k 6 Decouverte or the 22k Trail des 2 Lacs are equally spectacular."

am forced to slow to a quick walk. Labouring slowly forward on my running poles, I notice a mass of runners joining the path ahead. Happy for company, I fall into conversation with one of them, a spritely long-haired man, possibly in his 60s, with small round spectacles and a headband. He tells me they are running a 11k race called the 6 Decouverte and asks my name. "Maxwell" I reply. Much to my surprise the man makes a sudden break for it, reaches full sprint and begins to scream far louder than is polite "Allez Maxwell, Allez Maxwell, Allez Allez!" Spurred forward by the unforeseen energy of this madman, whose name I never learned, I pick up the pace.

"Five hours in and I'm nearing the glacial summit. The leading runners fly past me on their way back down the mountain at senseless speeds. The terrain has become impossibly steep. Now at an altitude of over 3,000m, I begin to feel a slight nausea brought on by the steadily diluting air. Finally, I reach the summit ridge, whereon a peculiar thing happens – tears begin to well in the corners of my eyes and a sudden rush of euphoric relief comes over me. Although not an uncommon feeling during periods of intense endurance, this is something that I have only ever experienced at the very end of a race. It is clear physiologically that this moment marks a huge milestone for me – 30k complete, 30k to go, and it's all downhill! I promptly slurp down an energy gel, take a swig from my