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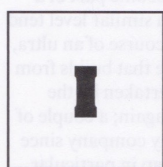
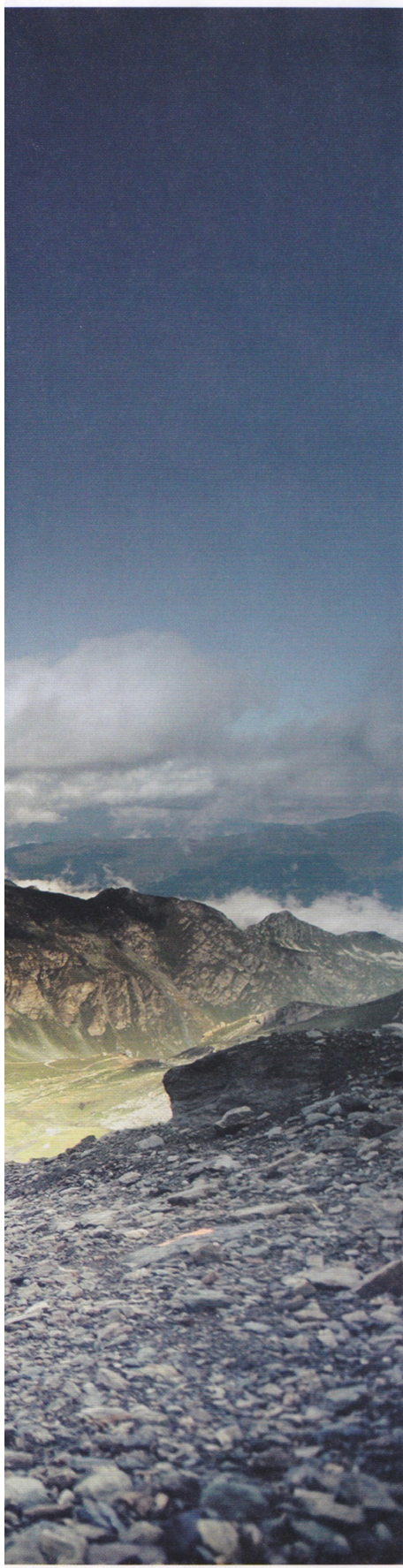
PLUS CARBS, SNOWBOARDING, EMMA POOLEY

LA COURSE DES GEANTS

MAXWELL ROCHE EXPERIENCES GALLIC
CULTURE, CHARM, CAMEMBERT AND COURAGE
AND A FRENCHMAN CALLED CLAUDE... AS HE
TACKLES THE 64-KILOMETRE LA 6000D.

Words Maxwell Roche
Pictures Olivier Allamand





I'm 30 kilometres into the awesome alpine ultra race La 6000D and I've just arrived at one of the many aid stations on route. Looking like some sort of desperate animal

readying itself for hibernation I cram my cheeks full of deliciously whiffy Camembert and cured meats. Once that's far enough in so as to guarantee not losing it I lunge for the flapjacks and then in the direction of the dried fruits. Realising I'm not going to be able to swallow since my mouth is so dry from exertion I then decide to wash everything down with the help of some hot noodle soup which a kindly looking old lady hands to me with a smile as she mutters the ever encouraging Gallic expression "Bon Courage!" I take a few big gulps and break back into a gentle jog. Before I know it though my windpipe's blocked and I stumble to the side of the path bent double, eyes bulging. Whilst stumbling I spill the rest of the soup down my front and then proceed to spit the entire contents of my mouth across the legs of a passing runner. Ashamed I hold up a hand of signified apology and bare my teeth in a nervous smile. Damn, what a waist of good Camembert.

I pull myself together and continue on my journey, hungry, heartbroken and covered in soup. Ultra running I have decided, especially in France, is just an eating competition without the guilt. With such fabulous fare on offer at the aid stations it's amazing anyone manages to drag themselves away and get any running done.

For 26 years the resort of La Plagne has played host to La 6000D, a 64-kilometre foot race and UTMB qualifier that begins in the quintessential alpine village of Aime and traverses up through apple orchards to the icy wind-blasted heights of the Bellecote glacier at 3,047 metres. Over the course of the race 4,000 metres of altitude are gained and lost which guarantees the knobby knees of even

the most seasoned ultra racers are tested.

It's 6:00am, the sun has yet to show its golden shoulder and nearly all the racers are now gathered behind the starting gate. Although I've been up since 4:00am stretching and grazing I've somehow managed to arrive only moments ahead of the starting gun. One of the lovely La Plagne PR ladies persuades me to quickly pose for a photograph before the off. Relishing the opportunity to upset a few Frenchies I jog out in front of the start line and pretend to be doing some last minute groin stretches. The race commentator who I'd met the previous evening over a grande bière mutters into his microphone "Roast beef, get out of the way, we're starting." Satisfied that I've made a big enough fool of myself I give him, and the other racers, a cheeky bow and trot around the masses to join the very back of the pack. In hindsight, given the severity of the traffic for the first 20 or so kilometres, I really should've just jumped over the ribbon and snuggled in with the front runners.

Trois, deux, un, the klaxon sounds and we're on our way. It's all elbows as we jog through the streets of Aime. The distinct smell of Deep Heat rub washes over me amid the deafening slosh of fully loaded hydration packs. After about two-kilometres of fidgety jostling we're directed off the wide streets and onto the start of the narrow trail. As we hit the bottleneck our steady jog is reduced to a frustrating walk. The trail from this point narrows and steepens until we're standing only two abreast, breathing heavily.

Thunderstorms the night before have left the pine forest damp and fragrant. The first rays of the ascending sun are streaking through the canopy, burning away at the dampness and creating an ever increasing humidity. After about an hour of this close and claustrophobic progress our feet, which we've been staring at all the while due to the severity of the trail, light up. Much squinting and craning of necks ensues as we explode from the forest and into the subdued light of a

Five hours after escaping the dark humidity of the forest I'm nearing the glacial summit. The high mountains of La Plagne surround me like yawning jaws dissecting the midday cloud.

summer's early morning.

Twenty kilometres in and the pace is noticeably quickening. The trail has widened and competitors frustrated by slow progress in the forest are now attempting to make up for lost time. Unfortunately for such eager souls the trail soon begins to narrow and funnel into yet another pace-draining bottleneck. Thumping music up ahead grabs the attention of many runners and I know this to mean only one thing, we've reached the infamous bobsleigh track; 1.5 kilometres of tubular concrete snaking its way up 408 feet of hillside. As we draw closer and the music rings louder I can't help a rye smile. The song they're playing is the comically apt *Highway to Hell* by ACDC.

After I've been ejected from the top of the bobsleigh track like water from a muted hosepipe, I squint upward to get a better look at the mountain tops. I can see the beautiful Bellecote Glacier engraved on the morning haze and it still looks a very long way off. A feeling of déjà vu comes over me and I think back four years to when I'd run the race aged 26. I'd been in the shape of my life back then and extremely prepared. This time at 30 confirmation of my place had only come six weeks prior to the event leaving little room for proper prep. Still, I'd heard on the grapevine that experience and strength of character is the ultra runner's ultimate weapon. Time to test that theory.

Five hours after escaping the dark humidity of the forest I'm nearing the glacial summit. The high mountains of La Plagne surround me like yawning jaws dissecting the midday cloud. Taking great gulps of the thinning air I use my running poles to hoist my way up the 45-degree scree slope towards the top. Even the most jovial and extroverted of competitors are now silent, looking within themselves, eyes locked firmly downward upon the tricky and troublesome scree, minds set hard on the summit. An ever-strengthening wind buffets my legs and the sudden whip of cold makes my battered quads burn with a new menace, the rise of lactic acid. My knees are also now throbbing so I decide to take a cheeky Ibuprofen to quell the ache (the ultra runner's best friend).

I'm on the summit and it feels like the finish line, 31 kilometres in, 33 kilometres remain, and it's all downhill. Unfortunately, therein lies the problem, it's all downhill; another 33 kilometres of unrelenting, high impact, knee, hip and ankle busting running. Fortunately the views from the summit prevent my mind

from straying too dangerously toward despair. I take a moment, inhale long and deep, roll onto the balls of my feet, and let gravity guide me downward.

The satisfying sound of rubber soles scuffing down the dusty trail, and of the wind rushing through dry burnt-smelling grass keeps me company for the next three hours of steady descent across scorched alpine mountainside. Distant peaks now shimmer in the heat haze and the midday sun, at its commanding zenith, is reflected by mirrored lakes scattered below. Although exhausted I feel fit and well. With enough water remaining in my hydration pack, and plenty of snacks stuffed into my pockets, I enjoy kilometre 40 just as I enjoyed the first. By this point in the race I've become part of a distinct group. Runners of a similar level tend to gather in packs over the course of an ultra, and I enjoy the camaraderie that builds from skipping past and being overtaken by the same racers time and time again; a couple of which have been keeping my company since the very beginning. One chap in particular looks about my age and in a massively stereotypical fashion, and on account of his unmistakably continental demeanour, floppy hair and aquiline features, I decide to name him Claude. He'd grunted at me merrily a few times earlier on in the race, and muttered in deep resonant French what I hoped to be encouragement, so I deemed that sufficient grounds for the naming. Not long before we stagger down into the grand resort of Plagne Bellecote I pass Claude for the umpteenth time that day and give him a little over the shoulder smirk and wave. I'm starting to annoy him I can tell. I decide then and there that I'm not going to let him beat me.

Cowbells ring as we enter the amphitheatre-styled centre of Plagne Bellecote. High-rise ski accommodation towers on all sides magnifying the clapping, screaming and the relentless honking of vuvuzelas (remember those?) from the spirited spectators. This is the part of the race that sticks in my mind above all others. Before us stretches a refreshment table longer than any I've ever encountered. Manned by 20 or so kindly volunteers the table lays host to plate upon plate piled high of delectable delights. Many racers now lie sprawled beside the table as though they've landed from a great height, legs akimbo stretching or squinting into the sun with contorted and pained expressions, readying themselves for the final 18 kilometres. Miraculously, I'm still feeling

Just as I do so Claude trots into my periphery and off down the track ahead. "Right, he's getting it" I think to myself as I fly past the cheese table, grab a hefty handful and sprint off after him.







spritely and start to wonder whether or not it actually might be possible for me to beat my 2011 time of 10 hours and 20 minutes. With hope in my heart I come over all YOLO and decide to up the pace. Just as I do so Claude trots into my periphery and off down the track ahead. “Right, he’s getting it” I think to myself as I fly past the cheese table, grab a hefty handful and sprint off after him.

The last 18 kilometres between Montchavin and Sangot bears much similarity to the first 18. We leave the scorched and treeless heights of the mountainside and once again enter the shady sanctuary of the fragrant fir and spruce forest. Descending at a slower rate now the narrow needle covered trail undulates and zig-zags its way toward Aime. I’ve always felt stronger uphill so an undulating trail helps to breathe new life into my lethargic limbs. Running poles now stashed away in my pack, I fall in with another small group of runners who are moving at an ever quickening pace, the fastest of the race so far. Careering along the narrow rippling trail, hopping over logs and roots and diving round corners makes me feel like an animated character from the computer games of my youth.

Did I just hear someone say two kilometres to go? OMG I think I did. It’s kilometre 62 and despite my surprising sprightliness at kilometre 45 I’m now secretly praying for the finish. Things seem to have seized up a little since then, I’m on my last drop of water and completely out of snacks. When I finally break out of the forest onto the valley floor the last two kilometres of tantalising tarmac stretches out before me... and it’s all somewhat

He sees me notice him and smiles. I smile back and muster everything I’ve got putting my head down and breaking into massive strides. People seem to appreciate our mad dash for the finish and yell encouragement.

oddly flat. The corners of my mouth curl skyward and I well up slightly, revelling in the realisation.

Within minutes I can see the finish line and my grin is growing ever larger. As I wave like a newly crowned king to the crowds that line the roadside my mind wanders onto the applause. Such dreamlike imaginings are cut short however by the sound of a familiar footfall behind me. I glance over my shoulder and who’s there? None other than Claude himself, at full sprint, gaining on me with every step. He sees me notice him and smiles. I smile back and muster everything I’ve got putting my head down and breaking into massive strides. People seem to appreciate our mad dash for the finish and yell encouragement. Despite my best efforts however those oh, so familiar footsteps continue to gain on me until Claude and I are right alongside each other. With just ten or so metres to go to the line I’m ashamed to say my weary pins fail me and turn into a quivering and useless mush. Gallic Claude seems to have a few more beans still left in the tank and proceeds to beat me by the narrowest of margins. Still, I console myself in the knowledge that “it’s not a race”... oh no, wait it is, isn’t it? We shake hands with massive grins and much slapping of backs and collect

our medals together.

Taking my leave of Claude I then chug back a full litre of fluoro-blue Gatorade from the refreshment stand. Whilst gulping I stare satisfied at my time on the finishing board which reads 9 hours and 44 minutes, 36 minutes quicker than 2011 when I was in the “shape of my life” Well, I never... My satisfaction is however short-lived as I then notice that the race winner Sebastien Spehler finished in just 5 hours and 56 minutes. Holding back the tears that always seem to supersede an ultra, and pondering the impossibilities of Sebastien’s effort, I expend my last bar of battery life and crumple into a useless, dusty, sweaty but euphoric heap by the roadside.

If you’d like to follow in my weary footsteps and test your metal amid alpine scenery so fine it would make Claude Monet moan with delight simply visit, la6000d.com and register. Don’t worry about the price of entry either, it’s so reasonable (around €60) you’ll probably eat the equivalent value in exquisite French cheese. I know I did. And if you don’t feel up to the full 64 kilometres you can always opt for the slightly more manageable but no less spectacular 22-kilometre 6D De Lac or the lung busting five-kilometre 6D Verticale.