

Saintelyon

Sunday 6 December 2009

Race Tale by John Kynaston

Friday 4 December

I was up just after 5am, excited and ready to head off to the airport to join John McLaughlin and Chris McGlennon in our trip to France. This was my fifth ultra of my 2009 Challenge and I have been really looking forward to it since the Hardmoors race. I had two weeks off after that race and then five weeks of good solid training followed by 3 easy weeks before the race. So I felt as ready as I could be setting off.

Katrina drove me to the airport where I met Chris and John. The easyJet flight to Stanstead was on time and straight forward. We then had about a 4hr wait at Stanstead before we caught our flight to Lyon. We spent the time chatting, eating, reading, blogging, chatting some more, eating some more until we made our way to board. Once again it was another good flight. John & I spent the time chatting while Chris read my novel!! He said he enjoyed it.

When we arrived at Lyon airport Chris rang Seb who told us he was waiting at the car park at Terminal 2. John & I duly followed Chris who got us lost! Another phone call and we found Seb who took us to his house. From the moment he picked us up Seb and his family couldn't have been more helpful and friendly.

We spent a hour or so in the house, had some tea and toast and then went to Decathlon, which is a massive sports shop, where we bought some gells for the race and some running tops. The three of us all bought a bright green running top so we'll be wearing those on a Monday night at Kilbarchan.



In the evening Dominic, Patrick and Thierry joined us for a meal at Seb & Sabina's house. Dominic and Patrick ran the 2 man relay. Thierry was planning to run in another relay team with another Dominic but he fell off his bike and broke his collar bone. He was really disappointed not to be running but decided to support us through the race and take lots of photos.

Sabina cooked a lovely meal which we all enjoyed. Everyone spoke excellent English though John did make efforts to remember his school boy French. As the meal went on Chris became more and more quiet which is very unusual for him. Plus he didn't seem to be eating much. At 9.30pm he made his apologies and headed to bed! John and I didn't last too much longer and by 10.30pm we were tucked up in our bunk beds and ready for sleep.

Saturday 5th December

At 3.30am I woke with a full bladder! I could hear John was sleeping peacefully but I had to go and tried to be as quiet as I could but there was a wind clime in the middle of the room which I hit and then I couldn't find the door so no doubt I did disturb him.

By 7.30am we were both awake and ready for the day. Chris was already up and feeling a lot better. He was soon giving John McL some stick so was definitely better. Seb went off and bought some excellent French bread so we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast.

One of the things about a night run is how to use the day before the race starts. It can feel as though you are hanging around all day. So we decided to go for an easy walk for 30mins or so. Seb had things to do so he dropped us off by a lake and gave us instructions as to how to get back. John & I assumed since Chris has stayed with Seb a few times and been running in the area he could follow the directions. Big mistake. For the second time in 12hrs he got us lost again.

We had an easy walk. I videoed our thoughts as we approached the race and then Chris rang Seb who came and found us.

We sorted out our gear for the race and then it was time for lunch. Another superb pasta meal set us up nicely. John and I retired to our bunk bed and tried to get a couple of hours kip. John gave up before I did. I don't think I actually fell asleep but it was good to be able to lie down and rest before the race.

We then used my netbook and Seb's wireless connection to follow the Football results. John supports Man Utd so he was happy with their 4-0 win at West Ham.



We changed into our running gear and sorted out which bag what was going in as we wouldn't be coming back to the house after the race. Thierry, Dominic and Patrick arrived just before 7pm and after a few photos we headed into Lyon for a final pasta meal and then from there we would drive the 50mins to St Etienne for the start.

It was a great atmosphere as we all chatted about the race and how we felt. John leaned over to me and said, 'Have you seen the medical certificates?' Seb had sorted these out for us and so I asked Seb. As soon as I did his face went white and his hand banged his forehead. 'I've left them in the house.' Without these we wouldn't be allowed to run the race. The thought of going all that way and not being allowed to run didn't bear thinking about. So Seb ate half his meal and drove back to the house to get

them. So well done to John McL for asking at just the right time and thanks to Seb for going back to get them!!

The other Dominic with his wife, who had also planned to run the relay but couldn't due to an injured calf, met us at the restaurant. They were going to give us a lift to St Etienne so we could leave Seb's car at the finish. We sorted out what was going where and then drive to the start in two cars. I went with Dominic, Patrick and Thierry. I really enjoyed being part of their team and it made the whole weekend so much better.

We arrived at the start at St Etienne about 9.45pm and went into the hall to register. I'd seen photos of last year's race and I was looking forward to seeing and feeling the atmosphere and it didn't disappoint. There were thousands of people everywhere. Some sleeping, others looking around the stalls, others in groups chatting.

We went to our line and registered. Chris had said it can take up to an hour but we went straight to the desk and it was sorted in a couple of minutes. We were given a bright green cap, the same colour as the tops we bought the night before.

We then had to get our chips activated which took a few minutes. Chris had brought a Saltire and Seb put it on a bamboo cane so we could find each other in the vast crowd. It really helped and meant we stood out!

We had a quick look around the stalls. I bought a Saintelyon t-shirt for the winner of my 'Guess my time' competition and took some photos and a video of the scene.

At 10.30pm we headed back to the cars to put on our shoes and gear for the race. I was really looking forward to getting going now. I felt good and was trusting that I was good enough shape to run as well as I could. I had the sub 7hr target in mind but it was a bit unknown as I didn't know what the underfoot conditions would be like.

The weather was perfect. No rain or wind and a very mild evening. I wore my base layer top and my red running top, skins and shorts and carried my rucksack and bum bag. No need for gloves.



At 11pm we made our way back into the hall where we had our photos taken in front of the race banner. We were also interviewed for French TV. The flag attracted the press. At one point John and I were standing with the flag and an English guy who works in France came over and we chatted. It was funny because John is from Belfast and I'm from Liverpool and here we were with a Scottish flag.

At 11.35pm we made our way over to the start and I then realised how big this race was. There were over 4,000 runners plus over 2,000 who walk the route lined up right down the street. The race actually started as a walk over 50 years ago.

The cycling clubs of Lyon and St Etienne used to start from their City and meet in the middle. Then they alternated walking the full distance. Then some started running and the race developed over the years. So there is still the originally idea of it being a walk going on.

We took a final photo, wished each other a good run and then John & I tried to get as far down as we could. I reckon we were about half way down so there must have been at least 3,000 in front of us. It was exciting being part of such a big ultra even if we couldn't understand a word of what was being said on the tannoy.

Just before midnight the countdown started and we were off

Sunday 6th December

Leg 1: Lyon to St Christo Jarez (9.63miles)

Seb had kindly given us a rough breakdown of the route with some splits to work on based on his training run. We also had a profile of the course so even though we hadn't been on the route we had a fair idea of what was coming.

It took John & I a couple of minutes to walk to the start and then once we were off and running we steadily made our way through the runners. The first 5miles was on wide roads so there was plenty of room to overtake and run at our pace. There were a lot of people on the streets cheering the runners on. This is a big event and well supported.

After about 3miles John said, 'There's Chris and Seb.' Somehow they had made their way further down at the start and been in front of us. They went through the start after about 1min 30mins to our 1min 55secs. Chris took great delight in being in front of us and seeing the look on our faces. Seb said, 'You'll need to get a move on as we go onto a narrowed path soon.' At this John was off and I was chasing after him.

A couple of miles later we started to head out of St Etienne and for the next 4 miles we climbed steadily up a smaller winding road and then off road tracks. We were overtaking people the whole way and looking ahead we could see lots and lots of runners.

Once we got on to the muddy tracks it became harder to overtake but not impossible so we continued to go past people. John & I had agreed to try and run together for as long as we could. I had never done this before on an ultra and I wondered how it would work out but because in our training runs we had been so close I thought it would help both of us.

On the first muddy downhill I was a 100 yards ahead of John and then on the track he could up again. He explained that without his glasses he was having trouble in the dark seeing the ground and the stones. We agreed that I would run at my pace on the way down and he would try and catch up when he could.

We ran into the first check point at St Christo Jarez together. I was very impressed with the checkpoints. No spectators are allowed in the area so there is plenty of room. Tables are laid out with all you need, water, fruit, biscuits, cakes, sweets, tea, coffee, coke etc. I took a banana and some jelly sweets and went straight through. That was my pattern for the whole race. Just enough time to take what I needed and keep moving.

Time: 9.63miles 1hr 31mins 49secs (9.33pace)

Leg 2: St Christo Jarez to Moreau (3.78miles)

John & I continued to run together, chatting a bit but I found I really had to concentrate on the ground lit up by my head torch. My aim on running ultras is to try and get as far as I can as easily as possible. With over 90mins run I was still feeling very comfortable and wanted to try and keep this pace going as long as I could. It helped that we were continually passing people who looked and sounded as though they were finding it harder than I was.

On the next long uphill I led the way and then there was a long downhill all off road and quick muddy and slippery. I realised that John wasn't behind me but decided to stick with a couple of runners who were just ahead of me and assume John would catch up soon enough. I didn't realise that it would be another 3hrs 45mins and about 22miles before he did!

So I settled into being on my own. I continued to make my way through groups of runners. I wondered whether I would find a place where I just held my position but it didn't happen. I continued to catch people right up to the end of the race. Some runners went past me but looking at my position afterwards I went from 1,348th at the first checkpoint at St Christo to 285th at the end so I passed over a 1,000 runners.

The 3.78 miles to the next checkpoint was mainly uphill but I ran as much as I could. I walked a few times but mainly because there were people in front that I couldn't get past on the narrow path. But I'm not sure if I would have ran as I used that time to eat something and drink.

I came into the 2nd checkpoint at Moreau feeling good, 19mins ahead of my sub 7hr schedule.

Leg Time: 3.78miles in 39mins 00secs (10.19pace)

Overall: 13.41miles in 2hrs 10mins 49secs

Leg 3: Moreau to St Catherine (3.47miles)

I refilled my water bottle, took another banana and sweets and was off again up the hill out of the checkpoint. I reckon I must have overtaken between 50-100 people at each checkpoint as I definitely stopped a lot less than others around me.

The next section was mainly downhill and I ran most of it. There were some lovely forest trails and I would love to come back and run some of them in the daylight so I could see what I was missing.

It was quite steep running the last mile into St Catherine but I was pleased that I held my position and even went past a few runners. Some though went past me at quite a speed. I remember thinking Neal would enjoy this bit!

As I arrived at the checkpoint I saw Dominic who was waiting to take over from Patrick on the 2 man relay. The relay starts 1hr after the individual runners. I had asked John earlier what time did he think the first runner would pass us. John reckoned 3hrs 15mins where as I said 2hrs 45mins. In the end the first one went past me at 2hrs 57mins so I just won that competition!

Time: 3.47miles in 32mins 39secs (9.25pace)

Overall: 16.88miles in 2hrs 43mins 28secs

Leg 4: St Catherine to St Genoux (5.59miles)

I enjoyed having quite short sections compared to the whw. It was easier mentally knowing that the next checkpoint was only an hour or so away.

This section started with quite a steep climb off road and then another longish section downhill. I was really into my rhythm by now and looking back on the splits and positions this way my best section. I ran it 5mins faster than John and 7mins faster than Chris & Seb.

I went past 945 runners in the 57mins 56secs it took me to run the 5.59miles so that works out at 1 every 34secs!!

I'm finding it hard to remember each of these middle sections as they felt quite similar. The checkpoint at St Genoux was half way up the hill and was in a barn. I looked in and it was really busy so as I didn't really need anything I just carried on.

Time: 5.59miles in 57mins 56secs (10.21pace)

Overall: 22.47miles in 3hrs 41mins 24secs

Leg 5: St Genoux to Soucieu en Jarrest (5.44miles)

Another similar length section mainly downhill so I was hoping to try and keep to my schedule. I was now 4mins up on my sub 7hr plan and once more realised it was going to be tight.

I saw a sign saying 30k to go and I looked at my watch which showed almost 4hrs running. I spent the next few minutes thinking about what I needed to do. 30k in 3hrs. So that's like running three 10k's in an hour each. That's possible especially as there are more down hills to go than up hills.

I was still feeling strong and running freely so let's keep it going. I started to wonder where John was. I know he could be more than a few minutes behind and fully expected to see him again. I decided I couldn't do much about him and hoped he was enjoying the run.

On the last couple of sections I started to see a few runners again and again. I would go past them and then if I slowed they go past me. Or I might overtake at the checkpoint and then I'd see them again. One runner was a very petit runner who reminded me of Sharon. Her number was 1080 and I must have passed her 3 or 4 times. I looked on the official results and her name is Catherine Noulette and she came 4th women in 6hrs 54mins 08secs so she must have pushed on over the last 15miles or so.

The checkpoint at Soucieu en Jarrest was the final relay changeover and once again the organisation was excellent. The individual runners went one way while the relay runners went another.

As I grabbed some more fruit and water I looked at my plan. The next section was over 7miles and then two shorter 3.7 miles sections to finish. I knew I would have to hang it there for this next one to give myself any chance of breaking 7hrs.

I was thinking about the time but it wasn't the be all and end all. I was happy to be still running fairly strongly and holding my own in the field.

Time: 5.44 miles in 52mins 19secs (9.37pace)

Overall time: 27miles in 4hrs 33mins 43secs

Leg 6: Soucieu to Beaunant (7.20miles)

I walked for a few minutes out of the checkpoint and decided I wasn't going to look at my watch for the next 30mins or so. I had to concentrate on running as well as I could.

Earlier I'd thought my aim was to get as far as I could as easily as possible. I would say that for the next hour it wasn't easy! I resorted to my mantras, 'Slow and Steady ... make it last' and 'Go, John, go, go John go' as well as counting my breathes and anything else to take my mind off how tired my legs were.

The relay runners were going past me from now on a fairly regular intervals. Each runner wore a bib with their number on. The black numbers were the individual runners from 1-1,999 and then 5,000 onwards. The red numbers were 2 person relay numbered 2,001-2,999, the 3 person relay numbers 3,001-3,999 and the 4 person relay numbers 4,001-4,999.

So when I sensed a runner catching me I hoped it was a red number as I could think they're only running part of the route but when I black number caught me I tried to hang on to them. I felt I was shuffling a bit and not running very smoothly when one such black number caught me. He looked about my age so I decided to try and latch on to him and stay with him for as long as I could.

It was a road section and I was able to stay with him for the next couple of miles. Then we were off road again and going up hill. He seemed to struggle a bit so I went in front and led the way. I didn't see him again but he really helped me to get going again.

I went past the 15k sign to go and noted that the last 15k had taken me 1hr 30mins right on target so I had another 15k to go and 1hr 30mins to do it. Oh it was going to be close! I sensed that it may be beyond me but I was determined to give it my best effort.

It was mainly downhill over the section and the miles ticked away until I arrived at the checkpoint at Beaunant.

Time: 7.20miles in 1hr 14mins 12secs (10.18pace)

Overall Time: 35.11miles in 5hrs 47mins 55secs

Leg 7: Beaunant to Lyon Bellecour (3.85miles)

I remember Seb saying that when you cross over the road and past the stone viaducts there is the last big hill to climb.

On my plan it had 3.70 miles to Lyon Bellecour and then another 3.70 miles to the finish so I decided to work as hard as I could concentrating on each section. Just after the bridge I saw Thierry and Patrick with the saltire ready to take some photos. They gave me a cheer and sent me on my way with a 'You're doing great Keep going.' It was great to have their support and encouragement.

It was a long hill and I walked as fast as I could. Some relay runners ran past but all of the individual runners were walking. As I was almost at the top I heard a shout of 'Hi John' and John McL had finally caught me!

He explained that he found the off road terrain really hard but was running well on the roads now. He asked me whether I wanted him to stay with me and he could help me but I was happy on my own. I was working as hard as I could and felt it would be better to be able to concentrate on running as much as I could.

I realised it was going to be very difficult to get under 7hrs but I knew that John could do it as he is such a strong road runner and it was all road for the last 5miles. John explained his watch had stopped somehow so he no idea of his time. I told him he could break 7hrs if he went for it. He said try and run behind me but within a few seconds I knew he was stronger than me so I told him to keep going and go for it.

Within a minute or so he was away down the hill and I really hoped he'd make it. I still thought I had an outside chance but deep down I thought it would be just a bit too far. The only real chance I had was if the measurements Seb had given me weren't accurate. As it turned out the 3.70miles to Lyon Bellecour was actually 3.85 and the 3.70miles to the finish was 3.24 so it overall it was only 0.11 shorter.

There were a few up hills in the next couple of miles but some steep down hills especially on cobbled streets which John told me later really hurt his knees.

I didn't catch too many on the final mile into the checkpoint but didn't get past by many either so maybe we were all finding this bit hard.

Time: 3.85miles in 44mins 35secs (11.34pace)

Overall Time: 6hrs 32mins 30secs

Leg 8: Lyon Bellecour to Palais des Sports (3.24miles)

I had 27mins 30secs to run the last what I thought was 3.70miles. This works out at 7.26pace so I knew it wasn't on. I decided I would work as hard as I could and see how close I could get.

I was determined to run the whole way. I wasn't going to walk so I needed to find a pace I could keep going for another 30mins or so. There was a runner not too far ahead so I targeted him and then another until eventually I was on my own and just kept it going.

We ran along a river for ages and then turned off the river and made our way along a path to the Palais des Sports. My watch turned to 7hrs within sight of the Stadium. I was going to be close but not close enough. I didn't feel sad as I'd felt I'd given it everything I had and I was really pleased to be running strongly right to the end.



As I came into the stadium I saw Thierry with his camera and gave them a wave and smile. The finish is actually inside the stadium and there was John waiting for me. Ever since John knew I was going to finish my 5th ultra of my 2009 challenge in France he really wanted to run it with me and be there at the finish. I really appreciated that and it was special for me that John was there at the finish even though it hadn't quite worked to plan in running together.

We gave each other a manly hug and I asked him his time. He didn't know as his watch had stopped. We worked it out that and realised it was just 14secs over the 7hrs. I was really sorry he'd missed it by so little and then he told me he'd stopped when he saw Patrick and Thierry just before the finish for a chat and photo!!!! I didn't feel as sorry for him then. I couldn't believe he would stop just 20 yards from the finish!!!! But being such a nice

guy he said he wanted to thank them for their support!

Time: 3.24miles in 28mins 54secs (8.56pace)

Overall Time: 42.20miles in 7hrs 01min 24secs (overall pace – 10.00)

Official (gun) time: 7hrs 03mins 19secs

Overall position: 285th

Category vet 2: 15th

John & I went off to find the car key and go for a shower. It took 15mins or so to locate the key then the car and by the time we were getting our gear Chris arrived looking very good to say that he and Seb had finished in 7hrs 18mins well inside their sub 7hrs 30mins target. I couldn't believe how easily Chris was walking as my legs were seizing up.

We had a shower and then joined the thousands of runners for something to eat ... more pasta much to John's disgust! He'd had enough of pasta.

Dominic came in after another 20mins or so. He'd finished in 7hrs 18mins as the 2 man relay with Patrick.

To finish a superb weekend Chris gave me a signed copy of Ellen MacArthur's autobiography. Ellen had written, 'Happy 50th and congratulations on completing your 5th ultra in a year, a

remarkable achievement! Everyone signed it as well. Thanks Chris. It was signed before the Hardmoors so he was hoping I'd finish the last two as well.

A special thanks to Seb, Sabina and their three children for making us feel so welcome and looking after us. You made it such a great weekend.



It was great to met Seb's friends and feel part of their team. I hope that they can come over to Scotland and take part in one of our ultra races.

Finally a comment about Chris and John. There is so much more to come from both of them in ultras that any reign I had as the Kilbarchan ultra runner no1 is well and truly over. First Neal and now these two but it's been great to be part of encouraging other club runners to discover and enjoy ultra running.

As for me I've really enjoyed the challenge of this year and completing the 5 ultras I set myself at the beginning is very satisfying.