

Memories of the TOR
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I was anxious about my pace during those first few minutes, running through the streets of Courmayeur. A woman whom I had met the previous year at Ultra Tour Monte Rosa paced away but I wanted to stay with her. I knew that this would be a solitary race and the comfort of a familiar face and English speaker was appealing. As we meandered our way through the carbon poles an experienced, weathered-looking Italian man said something about a “maratona” in a deliberately loud voice. I hung back and let Barbara tank on. I reminded myself of her tactics: she powers ahead with incredible speed and when an aid station arrives she makes full use of it, eating several meals and sleeping for several hours. That sounded much more fun than my tactics: I prefer what I call a ‘diesel engine’ approach - like my Dad’s International tractor in low ratio. I try to hang back and spend as little time as possible at the aid stations. As bodies fly by me, I relinquish every gram of my pride and competitiveness, my ego chirping “you’re fitter than them”. Remember what they taught you in Rishikesh to “renounce the ego”. I have four, five or even six days out in these beautiful mountains - competitiveness will get me nowhere.

8th April 2022: I receive an email "Lea, congratulations - you have been selected to take part in Tor des Geants 2022."

In a way, it was an email I was hoping I wouldn't receive. I knew if I was selected I would have no choice but to accept my fate and travel to Aosta in the summer. Tor des Geants - the Tour of Giants - is a 350 km run that loops around the highest mountains in the Alps in Val D'aosta, Italy. The terrain is brutal, covering some 25 mountain passes, the total elevation gain is around 28000 metres - almost three and a half Mount Everests. The race is non-stop and once the clock starts you have 150 hours to return to Courmayeur. There are specific places to sleep en route but most people don't have time for much of that. With hunger and sleep deprivation wearing you down it becomes a mental game.

The day spirals on and with the heat increasing, so does my over-thinking. Have I trained enough? Are your lungs tight? Remember you had covid only two and a half weeks ago. The trail is steep and unforgiving. The views down Aosta are forgiving.

I quickly come up behind an Italian man in his 60's. An unpleasant smell of unwashed running clothes fills my nostrils. Maybe I will renounce renouncing the ego for one minute. I step off the trail and overtake him. I see the next competitor: Mark Thompson. I initiate a conversation attempting to extinguish my anxious ruminations. The conversation quickly turns to training. I feel confident telling him about my 60 mile weeks. He tells me he has already raced two, 200's this year, the last only three weeks ago. Renounce the ego.

Coll Tarp: 1 of 25. I feel as if I have been at the coll for several miles when I eventually reach it. The stereotypical Italian enthusiasm in the ubiquitous “Allez Allez Allez” rings between the cow bells over the pastures. I had read in a blog prior to starting that it feels like “the whole valley is part of the race”. Coll Arp underpinned that. I think I'm going to like this.

As hours passed, my confidence crept up. Things were going ok: my knees had slight pain and my stomach was cramping but that was probably just nerves. La Thuile is the first big

aid station and I quickly refuel and power on. On the long descent to Promoud I met a Turkish man and his wife. They said they lived in Holland and the only training for hills they had was a 14 metre set of stairs in a nearby forest. Maybe I am prepared for this race.

Valgrisenche came as night began to fall: the first lifebase (the main aid stations placed every 50 km or so). The faint tones of familiar Scottish murmurs spring me to life. My support crew! Iain and Robin were there by the dyke. I was only five minutes behind schedule. They familiarised me with the life base and told me I was doing well. I had never had a support crew before. I was so incredibly grateful they were here for me but I was also nervous. What if I have to give up (also more commonly referred to as 'DNFd')?

I met Barbara inside. We sat and I tried to eat as much as I could. She told me to watch out for the next section before she went for a sleep. I arranged my bag for the night, a quick high five with Iain and Robin and off I went into the night. "I'll see you guys in the morning", I said.

Running through the night is tough but it can be so peaceful. I felt strong. I started overtaking people. I looked down from Col Fenêtre; the immaculate zig zags of head torches looked beautiful under the full moon but rather ominously reminded of the race ascent profile. I have a love-hate relationship with the night in an ultramarathon. What I love most is that people show compassion and look out for one another. We're all in it together: one symbiotic mass of eccentric weirdos masquerading as warriors moving forward. Times are hard so let's help each other. But it is hard. You are constantly waiting for that sun to rise. Suddenly, a woman sharply stops in her tracks in front of me and projectile vomits on the trail and falls down. The man in front stops to help her. Realising that there is a crowd, I press on. What shocked me most about that first night was the number of people asleep by the side of the trail. "Dropping like flies", I thought, considering whether to jab them with my pole to check if they are still alive. Treat others like you would like... Maybe not.

I met a German farmer on a coll before Eaux Rosse and chatted climate science, vaccines and capitalism. The hardest part of the night is always between 1 am and dawn and I was thankful for conversation with him. Surrounding skies emanated a faint glow. Dawn was coming as we came to the aid station at Eaux Rossee. I then met an American man called Eli, who was struggling with stomach issues. I tried my best to galvanise his resolve and tell him it would be ok but he had already raced this race before and I didn't even know I was going to be ok. The 1700 metre climb lurking in front of us, like some kind of giant bouncer, was probably on his mind. He DNFd not long after.

I left the aid station alone, leaving my German companion to sleep. I was glad to be alone on the long climb up to Col du Loson as I stopped several times at the side of the trail. My stomach was not in a good way. But, I was excited for the sun to touch my skin, which was beginning to beam down on the upper scree slopes of the coll. I love climbing but this climb was monstrous. At 3257 metres this was the race's highest point. On the long descent to Cogne, I met a vivacious American woman. She seemed to be excited by my British flag and told me it was not long until the next life base.

Iain and Robin met me in Cogne village. Seeing familiar faces was a reminder that a world exists outside this race. I had a 15 minute power nap, a shower, a few boiled eggs and off I went into the dappled mountain sunlight, my merino top now crispy with salt. A few kilometres along the trail I met a German man called Philip. We both felt jaded by the

previous night's climbs and bonded immediately. We chatted as we passed over glaciated terrain that reminded me of Scotland. He told me of his Cape Wrath trail run this year. I told him that I solo ran the route last year but my body still hadn't recovered.

My right hamstring was irritating me at this point and I stopped several times to stretch it out. I enjoyed Philip's company but as the day wore on, so did my frustration at the length of time we were spending at aid stations. I left Philip somewhere on the trail, feeling annoyed that I was behind my schedule and at the growing pain in my right hamstring. Traversing the forest trail high above the village of Hone to an almost submarine altitude of 300 metres, I plodded along the ancient roman road into Donnas to see Iain and Robin patiently waiting on picnic chairs.

At Donnas I really felt the bite of tiredness and the relentless descents. We had travelled 150 kilometres. I complained of my hamstring tightness. I was struggling to run properly now. I was either too stubborn or too scared to visit the physio, so I ignored it like the knocking sound in your car engine which doesn't go away. I met my coach, Nicky Spinks, at Donnas. She was running the formidable 450 km Tor des Glaciers. It was an interesting dynamic, meeting my coach for the first time, both of us several days into a race. It was almost like meeting a childhood teacher whom you really looked up to but at 4 am in the Blue Lagoon chip shop in Glasgow. Both weary eyed and tired. Both needing food; both unable to communicate properly.

It was now the early hours of Tuesday 13th September and I had just had my first big sleep of the route (one hour) since getting up Sunday morning. After leaving Donnas I put my phone data on and caught up with some messages of support from family and friends. Amongst messages from family and friends was a text from my friend Uisdean. He has spent most of his 20s suffering on alpine routes, whether that be on the Patagonian ice cap or new routing in the Himalayas, so he knows exactly what to say. We chatted on the phone for a bit which really gave me a boost. After a long climb I reached Rifugio Coda at 9:30am which marked the halfway point. There was a beautiful cloud inversion, tricking the eye that we were surrounded by sea. Calculating basic maths in my head, I worked out it might be possible to complete the race in four days. Wow. This would be my dream. Feeling bubbles of excitement and confidence I power on, trying to ignore my nagging hamstrings. What I didn't know then was that my race was about to start crashing down.

The descents were difficult. I made a few miscalculations with distance, and I soon found myself behind my scheduled time. Why is everything taking so long? I later found out this was the most difficult section of the route. With frustrations roaring, I felt alone and phoned my girlfriend. I was descending Colle della Veccia when I told her things were ok but not going entirely to plan. My hamstrings hurt, I was behind schedule and I was having minor hallucinations. Quite literally as I was saying this I would experience the most surreal moment of my race.

"What a voice, what a voice, what a voice I hear, It is like the voice of my Willy dear..." The unmistakable voice of Lizzie Higgins - from one of my favourite artists Martyn Bennett and his track 'Blackbird' - was in my head. But I could actually hear the raspiness of her voice.

"I'm hallucinating Catriona."

She tells me to breathe.

“But I can hear Blackbird!? The tune?”

Breathe.

“It can’t be, but I can actually hear her voice. It’s Martyn Bennett. It must be real!” I said, cackling.

Suddenly, Iain and Robin spring out from behind a boulder with my speaker blaring out the tune I know so well. I erupt in laughter. There are tears rolling under my sunglasses, partly from joy and partly because I have gone from feeling so low to ecstatic in three seconds. I am delighted to hear that song. I am so pleased to see them. I’m so humbled they’ve run all this way to reach me. We spy the Monte Rosa Massif together. They then join me for an hour, lifting my spirits. When we part ways, I try to keep my spirits up. Can I actually complete this thing? My hamstrings nag me and downhill have become a slog. My right leg isn’t really bending anymore. But, I console myself in that I can still walk.

My arrival at Niel is wonderful. The Italian’s get so excited about running which is so special. Cow bells are ringing and people are so jubilant. I sit down for a moment. An English man and his wife who have a holiday home in the Valley chat to me. I tell him about my injuries, hoping he is a physio. He isn’t, but he tells me to speak to those guys, pointing to two burly paramedics. For fear of being told to stop I decide to self-medicate instead. I take off my knee supports to have a look at my injuries. “Shit. Oh no. My race is over,” I say to myself. My right knee has swollen up. There is a big lump where my IT band connects to my knee and both IT bands feel like over-tightened ratchet straps.

I wander off into the night, disappointed and angry. I phone Catriona as I’m ascending into the night. She is in Poland at a conference and I selfishly interrupt her meetings. I tell her my knees have swollen up. She seems to think that is ok. I tell her she doesn’t understand. My knees have golf balls on them. “I just don’t want to DNF,” my voice breaks midway through the sentence. Tears roll down my face. She tells me it will be ok and just keep going to the next life base where Iain and Robin can take a look. I reluctantly agree that is the best course of action.

I spot a head torch ahead. I recognise this woman: Patrizia. She is a hardy Italian lady, still running 200 milers at the ripe age of 61 (she then later goes onto win first in her category). I race up to her. I desperately want company. She sees me and senses I am upset. She gives me a drink of tea and a nostalgic flump sweetie. I feel a burst of energy. Next thing I know I have powered all the way to the next life base at Gressoney.

My support there, as reliable as an old Toyota. I had told Catriona not to tell them I was upset but I can tell that she has. I then, with a spark of bravery, decide to visit the physio. A man called Stefano assesses me. I immediately like him. He massages my ITB with incredible care and delicacy. I boldly ask him my chances of finishing the race. He can’t really speak English but his body language tells me I have 50/50 chance.

I then eat the tomato pasta, jump in the shower, strap an ice pack on and set my alarm for one hour's time. I don't want to wake up when the alarm goes off. My legs are stiff and my knees won't bend properly. At check out, I look around the lifebase and realise I have lost my long distance vision. Everything more than 15 metres in front of me is completely blurred. When I look at my watch, I realise I have spent three hours here. I am around five hours behind schedule. Fully aware I could slow further, I accept that I won't get my dream time and focus solely on completion.

As we stride into the night, the weather is beginning to change. It has been favourable so far but now the mist is swirling. High on the pastures, the air feels damp and the wind picks up. The course markings are few and far between. I wonder if this is where Nicky had told me the cows were eating the flags last time she had completed this. I keep on meeting Patrizia. Although we can communicate very little, her presence is immense. She has a calming disposition. Her presence tells me "everything is going to be ok. I know this. I have been through this many times before."

I have run 222 kilometres when I reach Champoluc. Maybe, just maybe, I might make it. I leave Champoluc, run through the play park and follow the flags by the river. I spot Patrizia sparked out by the side of the trail. I smile and move forward. I arrive in Valtournenche at 1 pm. Iain and Robin can feel a difference in me now. There is a spring in my step. I eat, foam roll and go for a nap for 15 minutes. I wake up feeling far too refreshed and ask why didn't they wake me? "It has only been 12 minutes", Robin tells me. We laugh and joke. Iain makes me some coffee and I stride into the day, new shoes, new confidence and my stomach has settled. My hamstrings now have eased slightly. The swelling on my ITB has become manageable.

Ascending out of the valley the weather has warmed again. I reach Rifugio Barmasse at after an hour and a half. I feel great. A few of us start to bunch up, which I like. First a man called Tod comes by me. We are both feeling good so we stay together for a few miles. We then pass Stefano Ferarri - I recognised him from yesterday, near Colle della Vachia. Tod races ahead telling me he feels great and I bunch up with some Italians instead: Patrizia, Stefano, Maurizio and myself. We can't really communicate but I love their company. They call me "Leah" but I don't correct them. Their charismatic nattering makes me so happy. I feel at home amongst them. We then pass Tod sleeping under a boulder.

On the ascent to Fenetre d'Ersaz pass, I think I realise why I run, or at least part of the reason. I run with the Italians, all 20 to 30 years my senior, sharing this beautiful moment. We have been plucked out of our ordinary lives and been thrust into a spectacular endurance race. We have been on the go for 80 hours, all tired and hurting, but we are sharing the experience together. Any competitive edge has long since vanished. I stop and take a picture at that moment, because I know I will finish the race.

We descend to Rifugio Magia and an American lady called Suzanna I met on day one catches up. We chat about running, life and the Queen as the Italian's head towards the Rifugio. At the Rifugio the volunteer, whose support has been amazing so far, puts cheese on my pasta - I am usually lactose intolerant but I don't care anymore. After a quick refuel I feel amazing. I know I'm going to finish. I might even manage a good time. The TOR, however, was far from over.

The night is so peaceful as I ascend the moraine to Rifugio Cuney. I feel efficient at the aid station. I eat as much as possible, drink two glasses of coke and take a coffee for the road. When you feel good, it's hard to imagine a crash is coming. The pragmatist in me telling me that I am going to crash soon; the opportunist telling me to press on. I am tired: I have slept only 2 hours in 84 whilst covering 270 km and climbing some 22000 metres.

My comrades gradually dissipate and when I leave Bivacco Clermont, I am alone again. I feel irrationally annoyed at this situation. We had such a good team but now it's 11 pm and I'm alone. Heavy rain starts high on Col de Vessonaz. Full waterproofs come out. A crash is imminent.

The descent is steep and painful. The valley then opens out. I imagine what it looks like in daylight. I can see a headtorch, 1 km ahead. I try my best to power on but now I feel heavy. My mind slows down and I feel confused. I am beyond tired now and my body starts shutting down. I give up reaching the headtorch ahead. I've messed it up. What am I doing here? I momentarily forget where I am. The pragmatist tells me to sleep on the trail for 10 minutes; the opportunist has already fallen asleep. I lie against a rock. Alarming, my neck flops and legs collapse when I am still conscious. I've never experienced tiredness like this. I wake after 5 minutes, too scared I will sleep for hours. It is 3 am and I feel terrible. I receive a message from Catriona. I decide to call her. She is in a Kebab shop in Poland after clubbing all night. Our drunken ramblings make little sense but they somehow lift my spirits.

I stumble down the forest path and start ascending into a village. I am happy to see two head torches ahead. It is Patrizia and Maurizo! I reach Oyace aid station and career through the doors. There must be 40 runners here. Who are they all? I spot Stefano on a bed and he half smiles at me. He looks as if he hasn't slept in 4 days. I ask one of the volunteers to wake me in 15 minutes.

It is after 6 am when I arrive at the last life base - Olomont. It had taken longer than I had planned and I feel so annoyed at myself for keeping Iain and Robin up. I check in, take some jam and bread and head to the van. I want a longer sleep tonight and set my alarm for 7:40 am.

When I wake, we work out I have 50k and 4000 metres until the finish line. I can "smell the barn", an idiom Suzanna taught me the night before, the barn being the finish line. Iain makes me scrambled eggs and Lavazza coffee as we chat about possible finish times. I learn that I am around position 100.

I leave Ollomont at 8:40 am. I feel tired and my knees and hamstrings are nagging. I decide to push a bit harder and raise my heart rate to stop the tiredness. I feel good. An hour later, I still feel good. I have nothing to lose now because I won't get the time I wanted and it's unlikely I can get much more injured. I rush through the Rifugio and when I reach Col Brison I decide to try and forget about my injuries and run fast downhill, as if I am running down the 5 Sisters in Kintail with fresh legs. It works. I fly past Patrizia and Maurizo. They are both pleased to see me and concerned about my pace. As hours pass, my pace increases. I am feeling incredible. I pass more runners, each of them think I am mad. I can really smell the barn. Catriona sends me a message to tell me how fast I am going but to be careful of crashing. I listen to the opportunist for once.

I race into Bosses aid station, grab some crackers and cheese and spill a whole 2 litre bottle of coke on the floor. Everybody looks at me.

I press on. Every time I check in an aid station I get messages from friends and family telling me I've moved up in the ranks. Running feels almost effortless.

Iain and Robin surprise me a few kilometres down the road. We are all in high spirits. They tell me to keep going, but there is still a long way to go, so don't be overconfident.

I reach Rifugio Frassati at 14:51 and spot Stefano: my old friend. Coke, cheese, crackers, off I go. I have been feeling good for 6 hours now, I don't think a crash is coming.

I tear up on the last coll. I have so much energy. I get a text from Uisdean. He says: "you're absolutely flying!!". Coming over Col Malatra I remember looking at the Mont Blanc Massif. I have never cried with happiness before, but I cried with happiness at that sight. Courmayeur is just over there and nothing in the world can stop me now.

I crossed the finish line in 104:02 hours in 63rd place out of around 1100.

Minutes after crossing the line, a lady filming a media interview asked me a question on camera. "Why do you run?", she asks. I was lost for words. Why do we run? I think I said something along the lines of "for the people, community and the environment." But that's not true. We simply run because it is fun.