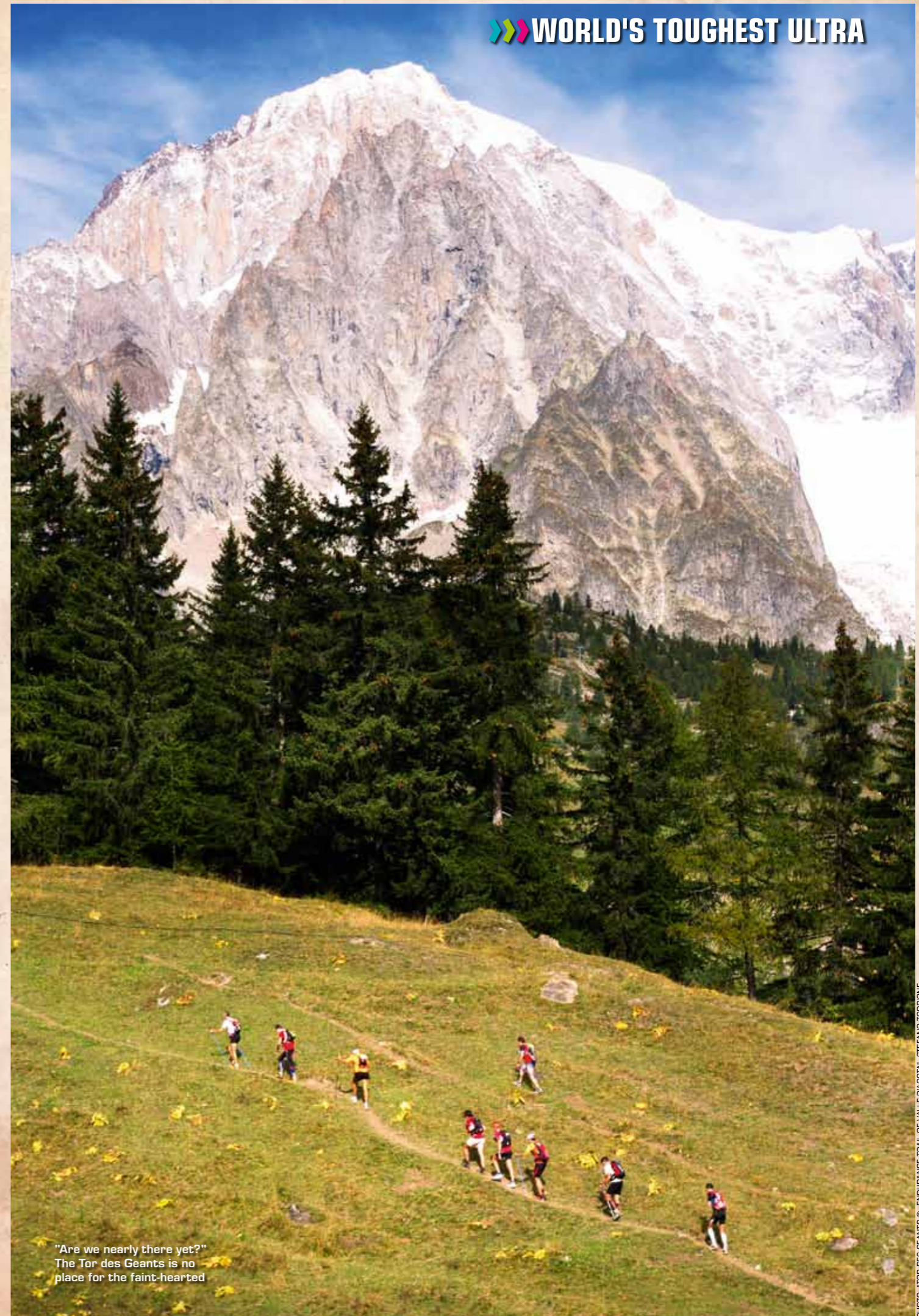


IT'S LIKE **RUNNING** FROM  
**LONDON** TO  
MANCHESTER,  
CLIMBING BEN NEVIS  
**18** TIMES  
ALONG THE WAY

WHAT IT TAKES TO COMPLETE THE WORLD'S TOUGHEST FOOTRACE, THE TOR DES GEANTS

Words by Julia Buckley Photographs by Hiroshi Hagiwara

WORLD'S TOUGHEST ULTRA



"Are we nearly there yet?"  
The Tor des Geants is no  
place for the faint-hearted



**T**he crowds lining the cobbled streets as the runners jogged the final mile through Courmayeur gave a spectacular welcome. Everyone from little children to QAPs clattered cow bells and cheered like crazy. The town square opened up ahead and there it was, the finish of the Tor Des Geants. This epic 208-mile ultra race had seen each finisher traversing dizzying peaks through Italy's highest and least populated region, the beautiful Valle D'Aosta. I looked in awe at the competitors. There was Laurent from France, who had spent the final day of the race hobbling on busted knees, and

Janne from Finland, who swore this would be his last ever ultra. Here they finally were. After all the gruelling, painful, endless miles, at last it was over... "Here, film us as we cross the finish," said Laurent, handing me his camera. I would have to wait a little longer to cross the finish line of the Tor des Geants. Training for an ultra race takes longer than I had originally thought...

Four months before last September's race my name went down on the competitors list. 208 miles and 80,000ft of climbing would be a big ask, but the course through the 4000m high Italian mountains surrounding the Valle D'Aosta looked stunning. Three months later however, I'd over-trained to the point where I was getting out of puff just climbing stairs. As painful as it was, the only real option was to pull out. However, the flights were booked, so I decided to take them anyway and use the opportunity to glean expert training knowledge from the competitors, from the elite to the ordinary – if there is such a person in an ultra race.

Standing at the start line of the race at Courmayeur with rock music blaring from the speakers, 356 competitors raised their trekking poles and cheered as the countdown began. As I followed

Main image: The last competitor crosses the line, accompanied by winner Ulrich Gross, his sister and fellow Tor des Geants competitor Annemarie, and a few locals

**350**  
NUMBER OF COMPETITORS WHO STARTED

their progress I learned that to get ready for a race like this takes more than a few months. The vast majority here were highly experienced ultra runners who'd completed many races of over 100 miles. The epic Tor des Geants is a fantastic race, but not an event for beginners. So how do ordinary runners like me and you get sucked into and attempt to train for such long races?

British born Stevie Haston, widely considered one of the world's top rock climbers, got sucked in recently. He has lived near the Valle D'Aosta and has been scaling its mountains for over 30 years. "I felt like I wanted to try something different, to experience the

## KNOW YOUR ULTRAS

**Stage races:** Cover a set distance each day with cut-off times. The 151-mile Marathon des Sables in the Sahara, for instance, is a six-day stage race with distances of 22k-82k tackled each day.

**Non-stop races:** Require runners to accumulate as many miles as they can in the time frame. The Tor Des Geants is one such race, as it doesn't have daily cut-off times within its 150-hour time limit.

MAIN PHOTO: TOR DES GEANTS © ENDURANCE TRAIL OF VALLE D'AOSTA; MARCO SPATARO

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PHOTO: TOR DES GEANTS © ENDURANCE TRAIL OF VALLE D'AOSTA, STEFANO TORRIONE

After a while I stopped asking them how long they'd been training for Tor Des Geants, because the answer was always the same: since they'd been into long distance running. Seasoned ultra runner, Daniel Probst from Washington, USA, who finished 49th in just over 122 hours, gave me a typical response. He did a 100-miler

**179**  
NUMBER OF COMPETITORS WHO FINISHED

as his first training race. That was five years ago and he clocked up nine more before entering the Tor des Geants, including the Hardrock 100-miler, considered the toughest mountain race in the US.

Daniel said of the Tor des Geants event: "That monster eats a bowl of Hardrocks for breakfast!" So, if there aren't too many races out there that come close to the TDG for toughness, how do you know you're ready? The smiles and shouts of 'Hello' in many different accents and languages as the

runners passed us on the second section from Valgrisenche to Cogne seemed to imply that they were actually enjoying themselves. Daniel said, "For the Tor Des Geants you should have lost all signs of sanity. Your friends should be calling you crazy, you run 100 mile races back to back for fun and you enjoy the buzz of being awake for thirty or more hours at a time. You think walking for hours is just part of running, and you strike up conversations with imaginary creatures... If you get to the point where this describes you then you are ready for Tor des Geants." Ok then!

To get a feel for how much training is involved, consider that the Tor des Geants is like running from London to Manchester whilst climbing Ben Nevis 18 times along the way. Compared to the Alps, most of Britain is pancake-like, and every competitor I asked said repetitive hill training was a must. Each one I passed tackled the thin Aosta mountain paths with admirable grit, ignoring their protesting legs. Janne from Finland said, "As well as building your muscles from going uphill, you have to learn not to put the breaks on when you're going downhill. In Helsinki



Left, a competitor makes the gruelling climb to the Crosatie Pass, towards Planaval  
MAIN PHOTO: TOR DES GEANTS © ENDURANCE TRAIL OF VALLE D'AOSTA, STEFANO TORRIONE  
Below, more of the brave – some say mad – participants in last year's Tor des Geants. Notice how they are all smiling? Like we said... brave or mad?



there is only one big hill, so I train on that, up and down for five, six hours or more, walking up and running down as fast as I can." 26<sup>th</sup> finisher Bruce Grant from British Columbia, Canada, said, "I knew we would be facing a ton of climbing, so I really put a lot of focus on hiking steep hills in the last months before the race."

Although ultras are known as running events, walking is actually normal for almost everyone and I saw lots of it, especially on the longer, steeper stretches of mountain. Even Italian, Ulrich Gross, the 2010 race winner walked on the steep climbs. However, Ulrich must have lingered over the impressive scenery less than most, with a time of just over 80 hours. His performance was phenomenal, beating the second place finisher by over five hours. Ulrich put this mainly down to the fact that he'd slept for only two hours during the whole race. So to be the best, you also have to train yourself to cope with a lack of sleep for days. 24 hours into the race, I first

noticed the lack of sleep in the runner's faces. You can see it in their eyes, which take on a certain dreamlike quality. This is where the years of hard earned training kick in.

"I do 30 hours training per week, besides my job which is 40 hours," says Ulrich. Sometimes I wonder if some of these athletes have more

**130**  
AVERAGE FINISH TIME IN HOURS

hours in the week than I do - how on earth does he fit all that in?

As with all training, there's no doubt that having a training partner helps with your ultra preparation. Ulrich trained relentlessly with his sister Annemarie, running in mountains together from an early age. Annemarie Gross wasn't too far behind her brother, she was the first woman to finish, coming in 4th overall in just over 91 hours.

But surprisingly, training for ultras is not all running. Annemarie's strong running physique belied this - she made steaming across the Italian mountainside look easy on the middle section between Donnas and Gressoney St Jean, already having run

**WANT TO RUN AN ULTRA?**

Abichal Watkins is the only Brit to have completed the Self Transcendence 3100 Race, New York, the longest certified footrace in the world. "Multi-day ultra running is a lifestyle choice," he says. "With the amount of training required it can't really be anything else. This plan would suit runners who can run a marathon distance comfortably (your time is not important). The longer you take over these stages, the less chance of injury you have. The whole body needs to get stronger together, so supplement your running by core strength and cross-training." Find more advice from Abichal at [www.multidays.com](http://www.multidays.com) [www.ultrarunningworld.co.uk](http://www.ultrarunningworld.co.uk)

**6-12 MONTHS TO GO**  
Along with your normal short, medium and long weekly runs, build your endurance by running 20-30 miles once a month at a steady pace. You're probably running 50-60 miles per week at this stage.

**4-6 MONTHS TO GO**  
When this becomes normal, start back-to-back long runs - using the day after your long run to run with tired legs. You could try 15, 20 then 26-milers one day followed by 20 miles the next. Once a month have a 40-50 mile weekend, you could sign up for a race. These also help you learn how to deal with blisters and chafing and let you get advice from other runners.

**2-3 MONTHS TO GO**  
Once long back-to-back runs become normal start training twice daily, once in the morning and once in the evening. Start with short distances and build up so that 10 miles per day in total is not a toll. By now you'll be on 90+ mile weeks. Enter your first 100-mile race. After a 2-3 week recovery period, resume training and schedule another 100-miler race 6-8 weeks after the first. After recovering from your second 100-miler, resume training gradually and work back up to 80-90 miles a week. Train for your chosen multiday event, for example the Tor des Geants, over the same terrain and for the same distance that you'll be covering in the race.

## WORLD'S TOUGHEST ULTRA


Bottom pic: 2010 winner Ulrich Gross is interviewed after his epic win. It's a wonder he can still stand, let alone hold a conversation. Main pic: just a tiny part of the course he conquered



150km. Annemarie told me she actually does almost as much walking as running, with long hikes lasting seven or eight hours. But she also stressed that inner strength is essential, "One must be very self-confident" she said, "I always just keep thinking, 'get to the finish!'"

As the days went by, Annemarie must have brought those thoughts into play. Lack of sleep and sustained

preparation occurred in the years of endurance running I did prior to even thinking of this race. By the time I sent in my entry, there was no question in my mind of not finishing or being able to do it. Mental fortitude, a positive approach and a belief in my ability were the best preparations I could bring with me. Physically, I ran a couple of early-season 100-mile races, including the Hardrock run. It's funny to think of

blue sky, towering mountainside and end-of-summer greenery. I saw runners laugh, cry, grit their teeth and reach deep down into reserves they didn't know they had to finish this 208-mile ultra. The training they had put in to get this far was a mission in itself, and my hat went off to everyone in the event. My race was over before it even started, but although that was a lesson learned for me, it's definitely not a lesson for all. If you have done a fair few marathons, 50-mile and even 100-mile events and think the Tor des Geants could be your next aim, Abichal Watkins' training plan will help you prepare. Train long, train hard, steel your mind. Then go for it. 

# 80:27.23

FINISHING TIME OF CHAMPION ULRICH GROSS

exertion was showing, even in the elite runners, as they tackled the final stages, the 44km from Valtournenche to Ollomont and the final 48km to the finish back at Courmayeur. Some looked haggard, some exhausted, some with just grim determination holding them upright and keeping their bodies moving, following the never-ending paths up and over the peaks. 26<sup>th</sup> finisher Bruce Grant told me that getting the mind ready for a race like this is just as important as training the body. "My mental

Hardrock as training!"

Like almost everyone I spoke to, Bruce's attraction to ultra running was because he had fallen deeply in love with the mountains. "The course was very much more difficult yet more beautiful than I thought – I loved every step while cursing some of them at the same time," he said.

By the time they crossed the finish line, the Tor des Geants for me had become a spectacular display of runners' strength, both physical and mental, against a beautiful backdrop of

### MORE ULTRA RACES

- **Osmotherley Phoenix**, July 2, 33 miles, Yorkshire and the Humber [osmotherleyphoenix.wikidot.com](http://osmotherleyphoenix.wikidot.com)
- **Al Andalus Ultra-trail**, July 11-15, 136 miles, Andalucia, Spain [alandalus-ut.com](http://alandalus-ut.com)
- **Lakeland 50/100**, July 29-31, 50 or 100 miles, Cumbria [lakeland100.com](http://lakeland100.com)
- **ULTRArace Peaks**, August 21, 40 miles, Peak District, Derbyshire [ultrarace.co.uk](http://ultrarace.co.uk)