

MRT Winter Spine Challenger North 24



Saw this a bit back, thought it looked terrible and that I should give it a shot.

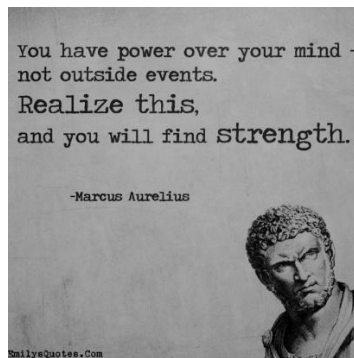
Teamed up with Jordan.

Our aim: to complete.

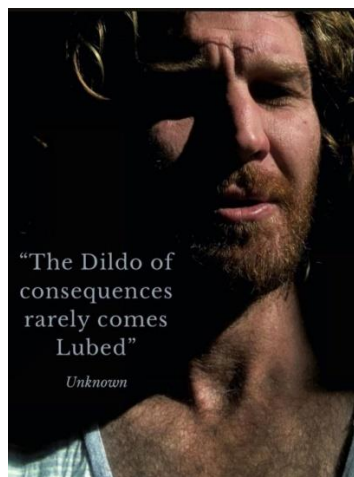
Success surely hung on prep, nutrition, hydration, sleep & pace.

Oh, and *resolve*, the biggie, did I have it?

I seized on a quote from Marcus Aurelius which I felt would keep me from quitting:



Struggled with this as I couldn't remember if I had power over my mind or external events or whether they both had power over me and the Roman dude didn't look too sure either. So, I settled on this to carry me through the dark times:



Prep: 42 years carrying a heavy bag up big hills (not all the time as I had to go to work and do the washing up and stuff); 3 weeks in Spain over Christmas walking & climbing in shorts in 20° and eating several squid in one sitting. Then 1 week reacclimatising to uk temps and field testing various sock options by wading icy puddles

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on the moors with different combinations on each foot for comparison; timing how long a brew in a howler took; and practicing 20 minute power-naps, (the optimum according to research) by blowing my $\frac{3}{4}$ thermie up donning a Lifesystems emergency bag upside down (face-hole cut in the foot-end), laying against my rucksack and setting a timer on my watch. Also, I watched a proper athlete (1,000km of chaos) and benefited from vicarious training, feeling much fitter after seeing him run around the Irish bogs dragging a tyre.

The weight of what I had committed to disturbed my sleep randomly in the 2 months prior, occasionally waking up realising I could perish out there, yeah I was used to winter mountaineering and 10+ hour days but what if I downsized my food or clothing to race quotas then didn't recognise the signs of creeping hypothermia till too late to help myself? What if 1 pair of Dachsteins, 2 pairs of tights & 2 pairs of waterproof socks wasn't enough and I should have ordered more stuff and now the delivery window was closing?

Race weekend relieved me from these stabbing insecurities as I entered the zone I am most comfortable in, the 'it's too late for whelping now so just get on with it' zone - like at uni or work when the deadline passes, the background static subsides, you energise, step up to the plate and deliver.



High Cup Nick



Little Dun Fell



Little Dun Cairn

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Nutrition: well, I'm not an athlete so I've never eaten (drunk? suckled?) a gel in my life but I don't let that stop me being a) snobby about them or b) giving scientific reasons why I eat real food. My homemade trays of flapjack ($\frac{1}{4}$ butter by weight), energy slab (wazzed-up nuts, dates, seeds & wotnot) and chunks of cheese were the high-fat foundation of my 4hr rat packs (but don't test me on the science because my science isn't biology) - anyway 3 of these ziplock pouches/day with random surprise extras in like fudge, GF cheese pitta, plain crisps or sesame crackers in case boredom got in the way of fuelling-up (which it did on one of my 12hr recces when I only ate 1.5 ration packs). I was working on 16hr days (ha!) so 3 packs would see me to the aid station for proper scan.

Hydration: I maxed the tea on offer at each of the aid stations then set off with 2 x 500ml soft-flasks of water hoping for extra on the way - bit risky but 1kg of water is enough to carry, even for an Aquarius. On the above recce I only drank 1 x 500ml so clearly carrying water was no good without drink discipline.

Sleep: according to my calculations (of which there were many) (before) (and during) (especially since Jordan insisted on expressing distance in imperial, requiring me to multiply everything he said by 1.6 then divide by 5 to estimate time then again by 4 to get real), we could afford 3hrs sleep at each of the 3 aid stations. The drill: admin - switch out ration packs, socks, grunderwear, charge headtorches, garmin batts & phone, then shower if available, eat and drink; sleep 3hrs; admin - repack, dress for the conditions, eat, drink, kit-check. Aid stations were typically crowded with people high-stepping over drop-bags onto your battered bare feet while you blink away waves of melatonin and focus on moving your things once, in the right direction.

Byrness was an intermediate check but had food, and I found out at registration that you could bivvy there in the church. I had a massive crash the last km and despite walk-eating & drinking I couldn't shake it off so arrived practically asleep on my feet. A breakdown in communication resulted in me (coeliac) eating mince & mash with oxo in (1st ingredient wheat). 20mins of vomiting later just to be safe and I sat down to the GF option before the 400m walk back to the church. The sermon must have been worse than a training-day powerpoint when the 'facilitator' insists on reading the slides to you, as the congregation were all snoring in sleeping bags between the pews. Sometime later I awoke to my alarm, then in a terrible panic roused Jordan to inform him that it was half-seven and we only had 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ hrs left and would have to run 40km over the

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Cheviots at a pace we couldn't sustain. The exchange, frantic from my pew and naively calm from his took several volleys to convince me that it was 19:30 Thu, not 07:30 Friday, partly because I no longer understood the concept of Thursday and partly because my watch (which I believed more than Jordan) had somehow switched to 12hr format (and I couldn't remember the button sequence to even get it back). This precipitated a poo in the woods on the climb up Byrness Hill which had me wondering how detailed the dot-watching was.

Pace: well, we ran all the way down the other side of Great Shunner Fell but generally we rushed rather than ran (which I find more stressful than running because you tend to overstretch) (to which my swollen knees are now testament). We were in this to complete, and all the maths told me that we could do it by rushing, therefore all that running would achieve was unnecessary risk to our mission objective. I had 10kg on my back and on one of my recces (Dufton to High Force) I ran half of this (about 12km) with 9kg on my back and woke next morning to find I had developed a six-pack; so clearly running + weight could have unpredictable impacts. This again, was science (well biology), so running was conveniently eliminated from the plan in favour of not DNepping (which around 30% did).



Greg's Hut Spine Warden John Bamber



Sunset Hadrian's Wall



Peaty Ice

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Hallucinations: with my student days far behind I was looking forward to these as the mark of an endurance athlete but weirdly they didn't seem to coincide with sleep dep. Randomly I saw urban graffiti (snow patches on rock), a line of druids (snow on the root bowls of wind-downed pines) and a horse that became a person in a blue cagoule with a clip-board waiting in the blizzard by the Great Dun Fell masts. Couple of members of the public confirmed that the 6 horses I saw at a road crossing were real though. Insufficient sleep caused us to nod-off whilst moving, feeling a system shutdown and weaving on the path precipitated the practiced 20-minute inverted bag sleep in snow hollows, an effective reset.

Team or solo? Jordan was the perfect companion, great craic, agreed our strategy and stuck to it, ignored pain (his ankle looked like a doner kebab for most of it). I think both of us were capable of completing on our own but 4½ days solo would not have generated the laughs and the memories.

Thanks to all the dot-watchers and for the messages this was very encouraging when I realised I could spare phone batt to check in.



Yaktrax coils ineffective on water ice



Jordan's cankle



Time for curry & shower



Louis Hume