

Classic Cliffs Ultra – Race Report – July 2009

I guess it was around the end of February when I first came across the Endurancelife.com website and the Classic Cliffs Ultra 57 mile race. Having just sorted out my entry confirmation for the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc and booked flights and accommodation for the race, it was time to finalise my racing for the year in preparation for Mont Blanc. With Mont Blanc consisting of 166km on trails including over 9000 metres of climbing, involving running through the night, I was in search of some tough events. On the Endurancelife.com website the Classic Cliffs Ultra was described as “The most brutal and gruelling ultra marathon to hit the south of England. This will be an exceptionally tough but equally rewarding ultra marathon, with 57 miles of spectacular terrain and over 5000m of vertical gain”. I immediately thought this race is just what I need! The race description then stated “Only the more experienced ultra runner should contemplate undertaking this true beast of a course “. Having only got into ultra running in 2008, I didn’t really consider myself an experienced ultra runner, but with Mont Blanc looming at the end of August, I had to gain as much experience as I could. With the Classic Cliffs Ultra starting at midnight, so the first four or so hours will be run in the dark, and exactly five weeks before Mont Blanc, the race seemed ideal. After a few clicks of the mouse, I was signed up!

Advance forward five months; it is 9:15pm in the car park above the tourist village of Clovelly, North Devon, as my wife and two boys drop me off. Already standing in the car park are around ten runners chatting to Gary Jolliffe the race organiser, waiting for the bus he has arranged to take us to the start. My wife asks “Why so few runners?” I explain that probably most of the other runners don’t require the bus as they will be supported throughout the night by their partners or friends. She can’t quite believe that not only are there ‘nutty’ runners, wanting to run through the night, but also even more ‘nutty’ people wanting to stay up all night simply to offer a drink and a few words of encouragement at various places along the coastal path. She was more than happy with her arrangement, to go back to the local B and B with our boys, enjoy a peaceful night’s sleep, followed by a cooked breakfast, before returning to Clovelly to watch me finish! “What time shall we return” she asks? Having completed the 56 mile London to Brighton off-road race last year in less than eight hours, I allow some extra time for the one extra mile and a bit more time for the hilly course along the coastal path and say to her “Come straight down after breakfast and I should be finishing”! Little did I know just how much I was underestimating the demands of the Classic Cliffs Ultra!!!

The one hour journey in the mini-bus to the start was an interesting experience. The mini-bus was full with nine amazing (or nine ‘nutty’) runners. There was Vicki Skelton who for fun runs 24hour races, sometimes around a 400 metre track. She was using the race as preparation for the Commonwealth 24 hour championships that take place in Keswick this coming September. There was another chap (please excuse me as I’ve forgotten your name) who had recently completed the Grand Union Canal – Birmingham to London 145 mile race, and was talking about running next year’s Lands End to John O’Groats multi-stage running race. As was another passenger who was also planning to run next year’s Lands End to John O’Groats multi-stage running race. He was using the Coastal Cliffs Ultra, like me, as preparation for the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc taking place at the end of August. As were in total, five out of the nine runners on the mini-bus. This included two brothers, Steve and Nick Tidball, who had won a magazine competition to run ultra races around the world. They had recently returned from a multi-stage ultra event in Namibia, next on their list after the Classic Cliffs Ultra was Mont Blanc, before heading out to Brazil for the six day Jungle Marathon! Now that is impressive!

After an interesting hour in the minibus comparing ultra run adventures we arrived at Port Isaac and stationed ourselves in one of the local pubs, where we registered, picked up the computer chip tag and met the other 25 odd solo runners, as well as runners completing the course as part of either a two or four person team. It was great that the pub welcomed us for registration and the race briefing, even though I didn't see one single runner purchase a beer. It was a strange situation sitting, chatting in the pub 11:30 p.m. on a Friday night, drinking Gatorade rather than beer, and then after last orders instead of heading home to bed, heading off to start a 57 mile race along the coastal cliff path!

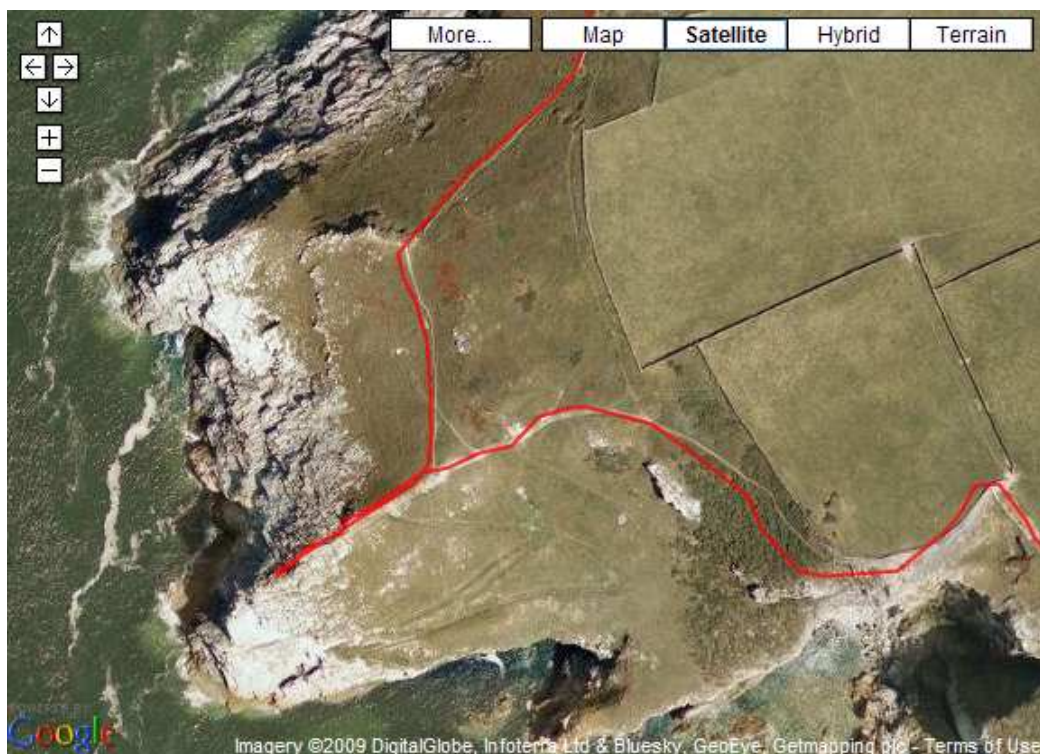
Following the race briefing there was a brief walk, chatting to fellow competitors, along the road down to the centre of Port Isaac. The village looked quite picturesque although being dark one couldn't really appreciate its full character. We re-assembled near the beach, but as it wasn't a coast to coast event I had no intention of getting my shoes wet by symbolically putting my feet into the sea. I checked that my Garmin GPS watch had found the satellites, turned on my tiny 28 gram head torch, and held my other torch, nothing 'flash' just a maglite torch, ready in my hand, all ready to begin. After spending quite a bit of time looking at the maps provided and reading the helpful comments printed on the maps back in the pub, I decided I would leave the maps in the camelbak pocket. I looked around to see if others had their maps in hand, and was relieved to see that only a few did. The coastal path must therefore be easy to navigate I concluded!

At 12:06 a.m. there is a brief countdown, and then GO! My intention for the Classic Cliffs Ultra was to treat it as a solid training run, (although to still remain competitive), take it easy during the night, and then if all was going well pick up the pace once it was light. I was therefore hoping to have some company during the night, hoping that there would be a lead group of runners running at a similar pace as me. Unfortunately, within moments of hearing the words "Go" as we head up a steepish road back past the pub, I find myself out in the front on my own. Although my intentions were for the event to be a solid training run, once the race starts, I automatically expect it to be hard, so jogging off from the start, when totally fresh, just doesn't sit comfortable with my competitive instinct. After a few seconds of jogging, I get back to my usual race approach and rapidly increase my pace to an intensity that feels normal for racing, i.e. heavy breathing! The first half mile is along the road before we are guided by a marshal onto the coastal path. This is the only marshal on the course providing directions, apart from the marshals at the Check Point stations at 13, 27, and 41 miles. It is therefore total self sufficiency between check points, although the organisers have left water supplies at H₂O stations at 6, 20, 35 and 50 miles. As I leave the road into the darkness, I am a bit apprehensive about what lies ahead. I think to myself maybe I should slow down for the lead group to catch up. Then immediately I snap back to race mode! Slow down, no way! So I run at a solid pace having to use both my head torch and hand held torch to keep on track. Keeping the words of Gary from the race briefing in my head "The path is pretty easy to follow, keep the sea to your left. Basically just stick to the path, which follows along the edge of the cliffs as close as possible. If you get to a track junction, turn left to remain near the cliff. You will get the hang of it as the night progresses."

I am feeling pretty good, having eased off my training during the last week. There is a reasonable tail wind and the air temperature is pretty well perfect. I am running in just a tee shirt and feel neither too hot nor cold. It is nearly a clear night, with only a few clouds above; however, it is quite dark as the moon is a rather thin slither, being only two days after the new moon. I am really enjoying the experience and focussed to run the entire 57 miles on my own. After around 10 – 15 minutes, (it is hard to gauge the time running off road and in the dark), I look behind to see an amazing sight of a continuous path of head torches navigating around the cliffs. Although I wear a GPS watch, I seldom look at it during the race, apart from each mile when it beeps and displays the time taken to run the last mile. I find this

mile rep information useful, as a guide to how hard/fast I am running or alternatively when having a bad day, how slow I am going! With the noise of the crashing waves below, it is not possible to hear the mile beeps, so during the night I don't get this useful feedback. Seeing the torches behind, it creates a sense of being chased, hunted down. This results in me trying to run even faster along the coastal path in the dark. It therefore isn't long until I find that the path has disappeared! Which way do I go? I head in one direction, and stop, no definitely not that way as I sense a steep drop ahead. The only option is to retrace my steps. Just as I regain the coastal path the lead group of four or five runners make the sharp right hand turn that I missed and head up a steep climb. Going off course and losing the lead after all the effort to get in front makes me angry, I therefore blast up the steep climb (heart rate trace later shows 175bpm, quite near my max of 185bpm), immediately overtaking the lead group, ignoring the fact that I still have around 54-55 miles to go! After reaching the top of this climb, I decide to ease off the pace and really concentrate on not losing the path. Hoping that I will get better at keeping to the path as the night continues, as suggested at the race briefing.

The next 30 – 40 minutes goes well as I gradually move away from the chasing lights and stick to the path. Running in the dark actually seems to make the up-hills easier as you have no idea how far away the top is. It's just head down and keep on going up until you reach the top. It is on the down-hills where it is more difficult to run in the dark. There is a mixture of sloped gravel paths, steep steps, and gentler grass down-hill slopes. With limited visibility from my two torches, total concentration is required to avoid tripping over. Just as I feel I have got the hang of following the coastal path, the path disappears as I realise that I am now running on rock rather than soil/grass and the slope is beginning to descend quite quickly! I immediately stop (which was quite fortunate when viewing my running trace on Google Earth – see photo below!) and I retrace my steps back to the path, this time happy that the following runners haven't caught me up as a result of going off course, or so I thought! I continue along the coastal path paying even more attention to where the path leads.



Running Trace on Google Earth – Watch Out for the Cliff!!!

I then get a real surprise a few minutes later when I can see some torches probably around 300 metres ahead of me. Are they part of the race? How did they get there? I reassure myself that they are probably some people out for an overnight hike. I very soon realise this isn't the case as I am only catching them at a rather slow rate, they must be in the race! Luckily we soon start yet another steep climb and I rapidly catch the torches, as I continue to run up the climbs rather than walking which the majority of experienced ultra runners tend to do. Rather aggressively I ask the two runners "How the hell did you get up here"? They calmly reply, "Just sticking to the path, making sure we don't go astray". I think for a moment maybe I should run with these two guys until it is light, save me going off course again, however, I find their pace just that little bit slower than what I was wanting to run, so shout out "see ya later" (a Kiwi expression for good-bye, it doesn't actually mean see you later, well not during the race anyway, so I hoped!) and run off into the dark.

After running for what seems quite a time, I am a bit concerned that I haven't reached the first H₂O station. This was meant to be at 6 miles. As I can't hear the beeps on my GPS watch I have no idea what pace I am running at. Although there seems to be non-stop steep climb after steep climb, I feel that I am running at a reasonable pace when it is semi-flat, although there is not much of this! I finally reach the first water station. I can't remember how long it took, but it felt like it had taken forever! I think to myself that it must rank right up there as one of my slowest six mile runs ever! I begin to get a worrying feeling that it may well be a long day!

There is a further seven miles of pretty well much of the same before reaching the first check point a Boscastle. The path continues with loads of climbs and descents, but during this stretch I manage to avoid going off course, until immediately just before Boscastle, as I approach the checkpoint apparently from the wrong direction. A check of the watch and it shows 2 hours 43 minutes, my slowest half marathon ever! Although my GPS watch does show that I have run more than 14 miles! After a quick gel and drink, I continue on my way up yet another steep climb as I see two torches descending down to the checkpoint, probably around two minutes behind. During the run I have a mixture of energy supplies stored in my camelbak. From previous events I have found that filling up the camelbak with carbohydrate drink doesn't work well for me. After a while my body rejects the sickly sweet solution. I therefore now only put water in the camelbak and carry a variety of carbohydrates in the pockets. For the Classic Cliffs race I have, Cliff bars, High5 gels, jaffa cakes, and the 'magic secret' chocolate covered coffee beans! Over the course of the 57 miles I consume 3 Cliff bars, 2 gels, around 6 - 8 jaffa cakes and nearly 150 grams of coffee beans, in addition to a few biscuits at each checkpoint. I don't really know how this compares to more experienced ultra runners, but it seems to work for me. Of course the most important ingredient is the water. I must have filled up my 1.5 litre camelbak reservoir probably four or five times.

Progressing on from Boscastle, (which like Port Isaac looked quite a scenic village but couldn't really appreciate it to its full due to it being dark), I settle down into a more relaxed pace, realising that it is going to be a long run. With it being a dark night I have needed my hand held torch on continuously in addition to my head torch. My head torch is a quality Petzl LED torch, where the batteries last for hours. My hand torch is only a Mini-Maglite, not long after three hours of running the batteries have gone. Luckily at the last minute back at the pub I had put the spare batteries into one of the camelbak pockets. A quick change of batteries and I am back on track. (I make a mental note to purchase a quality LED hand torch before heading to Mont Blanc). After what seems an endless climb the path seems to flatten out a bit as it cross fields. An amazing sight, which was a little 'freaky', is running right through the middle of a group of cows, who were sleeping. It is only as I am nearly on top of them that I see their

eyes shining back at me, still unable to recognise their dark bodies. There is a bit of a commotion as they all wake up and run off in all directions, luckily avoiding me as they spread everywhere!

It is not long after the cow scare that I realise that I have strayed off the path again. As I am at the top of a hill, the crashing waves below are not so clear, and as I am near a point where the cliff path changes direction easterly, I am not totally clear which way to go. The two previous times I went astray was following a path down to the very tip of a point on the coast. I was very cautious not to repeat this mistake again. I finally find some footpath arrows pointing in three different directions, none of them with the familiar acorn symbol representing the coastal path. One arrow points somewhere towards the direction from where I have come, this therefore leaves a choice of two. Looking at the map, which I have since taken out from the camelbak pocket, I try to work out where exactly I am. I conclude that I am at the point along the path where it heads east. The two arrows must therefore represent: left - down to the very end tip of the coast, and right - to follow the coastal path. Convinced that I have correctly located the coastal path, I continue running checking the yellow footpath markers, but start to get concerned that the acorn symbol is not appearing on any of them. I also have a feeling that I am running inland, as it seems to be getting quieter although the wind is masking the sound of the waves. A wee while later I come across a road! On no, what am I doing here! I check the map to try to work out where I am, but with no land marks visible, it is not totally clear. Obviously my position that I previously thought I was at wasn't correct, as if it was I wouldn't now be lost! Deciding what to do at 3:45 a.m. in the morning isn't easy. After contemplating the prospect of retracing my steps heading back across the fields to try to find the coastal path, I decide on turning left onto the road to head in what feels like a northerly direction, with the intention of joining the coastal path at the next opportunity, once I establish exactly where I am. A few minutes later I reach a road junction with directions, I am therefore able to determine where I am. I am way off course, having been running directly inland for the last mile or so. I then work out that I can follow the roads and rejoin the coastal path at the next water station at Crackington Haven, the 20 mile point.

Running along the road is a million times easier than along the coastal path. I get into a smooth rhythm, turn off my torches as it is beginning to get light and the road is smooth, and in a short space of time reach the water station. Having run around two - three miles on the road, although I have run probably a mile or more off course, I realise that I have still probably gained time on my fellow competitors, due to the difficulty of the coastal path terrain compared to the ease of road running. The water stations are unmanned but fortunately there is a man in a van supporting one of the runners and two relay team runners waiting for their team mate. They confirm that no runners had gone past yet, so to avoid gaining any unfair advantage due to getting lost and running along the road, I decide to wait at the water station until the first runner arrives, before I continue onward to Clovelly. While waiting I fill up my camelbak, eat some jaffa cakes and have a relaxing chat with the relay runners and the man in the van. Quite a bizarre situation in the middle of a race! After what seems quite a lengthy break, but most likely only around 10 – 15 minutes, Andrew Coulthurst arrives at the water station.

By this time it is now beginning to get light. I explain my situation to Andrew, and we leave Crackington Haven together. It is not totally clear where the coastal path recommences again after the village, but Andrew has walked this part of the coastal path before so knows the way, so we run together for a while. We shortly reach another steep climb and settle into a walk, and time for a chat. Near the top of the climb, which is now possible to see as it is light, I get back into running. For the second time I shout out "see ya later" to Andrew (as he was one of the runners that had got ahead of me earlier that morning).

The next section of the path is the only section I was familiar with. The last few years as part of my job as a University Lecturer in Sports Science and Physical Education, I have been fortunate to accompany students for a week's Outdoor and Adventurous Activities at Widemouth Bay. For the five miles either side of Widemouth Bay I know the way, and therefore for the first time during the race, I can totally relax and not worry about which way to go. This combined with the section from shortly before Widemouth Bay to after Bude being relatively flat results in this section of the race being the quickest of the 57 miles. During this stretch I pull in to the second checkpoint at Widemouth Bay. I have a quick chat to Gary and the other guys from Endurancelife. They offer me a hot cup of coffee, but being on a 'roll' after finally running a few quick miles after taking 5 hours and 42 minutes for only 27 miles, I was keen to keep on moving at this relatively fast pace, so decline the drink.

As I head out of Bude, beginning to think that I have 'cracked' the worst of the hills, I start to make calculations on what time I would reach Clovelly, which was only a marathon away. Thinking if the remainder of the course was like the last 5 miles, maybe I could run 9 minute miles, so only another 4 hours to go. Hopefully then I wouldn't be in too much 'trouble' from my wife and boys for arriving late, after telling them to get down to Clovelly straight after breakfast. The next ten miles or so definitely awaken me from my 'dream world' of running 9 minute miles. The section from Bude to the Welcome Bay check point at 41 miles is extreme! I now understand what is meant by the coastal path being described as "exceptionally tough" and "a true beast of a course". By the time I reach Gary and the Endurancelife team I am nearly on my hands and knees. It was non-stop climb then descent. No flat at all! After the first climb following Bude, I began to get that funny feeling in my head, which provides me with a warning that my brain needs a boost! Although I had been taking on board carbohydrates throughout, obviously I had not been taking enough, so it's time for another Cliff Bar, and then onto the emergency magic of the chocolate covered coffee beans. I tend to refrain from taking the coffee beans until I get the fuzzy head warning, as I have found in the past that the caffeine boost only tends to last around 5 - 6 hours. So if you start taking caffeine earlier than five hours from the finish, it results in a really difficult end to an event as the caffeine boost no longer works. Having experienced this in past events, it is not pleasant. So to avoid this I hold off from the coffee beans as long as possible. Confident that I have less than 5 hours to go to Clovelly I am more than happy to start munching on the beans. Within 5 – 10 minutes my fuzzy head is gone, although I don't really get the boost, as the terrain is just so tough!

Chatting with the Gary and the Endurancelife team again at the checkpoint at 41 miles, reached in 8 hours and 25 minutes, I ask if they are heading to Clovelly. If so could they please pass on a message to my wife, who they will know as she will be with two boys, easy to recognise, as miniatures of myself, i.e. not carrying any excess fat, but unlike myself at the moment buzzing around bursting with energy! The message simply being, that I won't be there for breakfast, more likely there for lunch. I predict at the pace I am going, the last 16 miles will take me around 3 hours 15 to 3 hours 30 minutes! I actually find this quite funny as back in the pub in Port Isaac, Vicky Skelton had asked me what time I was planning to finish in. Not wanting to sound too confident, I gave her the vague answer "I'll be finished in time for lunch, implying by 12 noon", knowing full well that my plan was to finish not too long after breakfast. And here I was now accepting that maybe I might even be late for lunch!

Leaving the checkpoint at Welcome Bay with yet another steep climb, which definitely seem harder during daylight as you can see the severity of them as you begin, I begin to focus back to the aim of the day, this being a training run for the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc in five weeks time. I therefore take the approach to think of the remaining 16 miles as if I was running Mont Blanc and have to continue running all day until 6:30 p.m. This change of attitude works wonders, as I ease of the pace, reduce the intensity,

and really enjoy this last section to Clovelly. Although the fact that the terrain flattened out quite a bit may have helped as well! As my GPS watch shows 55 miles, I can see the large entrance building next to the Clovelly car park in the distance. Unfortunately before reaching Clovelly there is still one last drop down to sea level, before climbing back up to the car park. During the last few miles I begin to pass a number of walkers, who are surprised to see someone running along the coastal path. A few ask where was I heading, and all are very supportive stating "Not far to Clovelly, keep it up".

Finally after over 58 miles of running (extra due to getting lost), I start the final descent down to Clovelly harbour. I see the Endurancelife banners indicating the finish. I then hear my wife and boys shouting out. I run the last few metres along the small harbour front and up some final steps to receive a warm welcome from the small group gathered at the finish. I place my electronic chip into the chip recorder to stop the clock at 11 hours 54 minutes. I enjoy a complimentary Cornish pastry and recovery energy drink, and take in the superb setting of Clovelly, as I wait to welcome the second runner home. My boys ask me why I have taken so long, as my late arrival has delayed the start of our three day family coast to coast cycle tour from Barnstaple to Devon, (the real purpose of our family holiday to Devon). I simply reply, "It was tough, really tough!"

It is now nearly two weeks after the Classic Cliffs Ultra. Since the race I have frequently reflected back on the event. It truly is a classic! The course was great, a real challenge. The midnight start was unique, and really added to the event, with running through the night being quite special, being something I had not done before. Although from my race report above, I may have given the impression that the course is dangerous with there being the potential of running off a cliff. This isn't really the case, as although the path is always near the cliffs, during the dark section of the coastal path, there aren't any really steep drops to fall off. That is unless you are totally disorientated! The course is therefore 'awesome'! Combined with the faultless organisation from the friendly team, the Coastal Cliffs Ultra is definitely an event you should put on your 'to do' list. For those runners in training for the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc the event appears to be the perfect preparation race. Although how effective it is at getting me around one complete lap of Mont Blanc, I will just have to wait and see!

With this being my sixth ultra event, I can quite clearly state that the Classic Cliffs Ultra has been the most challenging of them all, but also probably the most enjoyable. Simply getting to Clovelly, no matter how long it takes is really quite an achievement. This is the first time I have ever recorded down my reflections on any of my races. But as the Classic Cliffs Ultra has made such an impression on me, I wanted to record it down, for my benefit, so I can recall the experience in the future. Recently, as I am new to Ultra running, I have enjoyed reading other competitor's reports on ultra runs, as it helps to get a feel for the event. I have therefore submitted this to Gary at Endurancelife in the hope that he will publish it on the website. I know it is a bit of a novel, and not the shortest of race reports, but if you have the endurance to get this far through my race report, you definitely have the appropriate characteristics to complete the Classic Cliffs Ultra.

All the best with your ultra running,

Stuart Mills

5th August 2009

UPDATE: I managed to complete the 103 miles around Mont Blanc in 26 hours 29 minutes, finishing in 22nd place. The experience I gained from the Classic Cliffs was **extremely** beneficial during the UTMB.