

COOL RUNNING

You thought the UK was cold when it snowed this winter? Consider how **Simon Dicks** felt running a five-day Swedish ultra in -35°C!

Words Simon Dicks Photos Mikkel Beisner

This time it felt different. Back in 2016 I stood at the start of the Marathon des Sables in the Sahara Desert, my first ultra, not knowing whether I'd make it to the end of the first day, let alone the whole 250km five-day course. I finished 308th out of 973 finishers. By 2018, at the Jungle Ultra in Peru, I'd made a few adjustments to my training regime yet I was still apprehensive about my chances of getting through five days and 230km in the rain and humidity of the Amazonian jungle. I made it and finished fifth. Now here I am in February 2020 at the start of Northern Sweden's Ice Ultra, but this time I'm not here simply to complete, I'm here to compete.

The Beyond The Ultimate Ice Ultra is five days and 230km across frozen lakes, up and down snow-covered hills and Mount Kabla. When I started at the Mds the temperature was 40°C; now it was going to get to -35°C. That 75°C gap pretty much sums up the difference between where I was back in 2016 and where I am in 2020. I've finally got exactly what I need in my pack and nothing more; I've significantly improved my running technique; and my mind is exactly where it needs to be.

OK, maybe it wasn't quite that simple. As with any race, I was anxious the night before, packing and repacking my race bag, checking the mandatory kit over and over again, constantly worrying if I could live without an extra pair of socks, a spare mid-layer or additional calories. I checked and re-checked each item.

In the morning, from the moment Kris King, Race Director for Beyond The Ultimate events (beyondtheultimate.co.uk) had finished his briefing, time seemed to speed up. Medics checked each runner for every item on the mandatory list. If you don't have every item, you're not running. Everyone tucked into their own hearty breakfast – mine was 1000 calories-plus and it probably took an hour to eat as I'm not used to eating that much at one sitting.

My race food per day was as follows:

- 1000-calorie expedition food pouch for breakfast, and another for dinner
- 2 x Chia Charge bars (plus a third on the longest day)
- 1 x 20g block of Cheddar cheese (plus extra on the longest day)
- 1 x Clif Shot Blok
- 1 x homemade chocolate cookie
- 1 x 33 Fuel recovery drink
- 1 x Kenco 3-in-1 coffee sachet

- 1 x Cadbury hot chocolate sachet
- Nuun electrolytes (one per checkpoint and at the stage finish).

Every individual is different so you really must experiment and find what suits your body. It's taken me four years and I'm still learning – a 500-calorie breakfast might work for me next time.

RACE DAY 1: 31 MILES

In the final moments before leaving the Mountain Centre for the start I'm still debating top layers. I decide on two rather than three, a decision which is endorsed by my good friend Craig Williams who tells me, "Start cold; warm up; adjust layers." Perfect advice for my body as I'm determined to run as much of the course as possible.

As Kris does the 10-second countdown I am focused. I have a plan. I'll move at my own pace, at my effort level, and I'll stick to my movement strategy whether on ice or snow. We start running on a frozen road, the sun is shining, the scene is beautiful. That's why I do these races – for moments like this.

The first checkpoint is at 10km and I arrive with a very small lead as we hit the first of the frozen lakes. Decision time: snow shoes or not? I decide →

MEET THE EXPERTS



Simon Dicks has turned his running edge into his coaching business, focusing on running technique and fitness with clients focusedrunning.co.uk



Mikkel Beisner's photography perfectly conveys the beauty and extremity of the conditions at this race. See more of Mikkel's amazing work at beisnerphoto.smugmug.com





against them, but when I'm across and on the first climb, it becomes clear that they're essential, so on they go. Multiple practice sessions means it's a quick change, but stopping is still frustrating. Like any sport, we all talk about focusing on our own race, but having gained a minute, I'm hoping others have stopped to change shoes, too! I also decide to use my poles, but uphill only so I'm hands-free for downhill. I'm too hasty, though, trying to manage the poles and the gloves, which I end up dropping somewhere, and I have to run back for them. I meet fellow runner Aodh, who had kindly picked them up, but I'm happy to see he's in snow shoes, too.

At the top of the climb I allow myself a look back. The view is truly spectacular. Having never led a race before, this is a whole new feeling and I tell myself on the spot that no-one is going to take this away from me. For now I keep moving forward on undulating ice and snow, staying within my chosen effort level which I hope will keep me in front.

I'm moving nicely, feeling happy and absolutely loving it. I have music on. I'm almost in a trance as I move smoothly straight through the second checkpoint. I switch in and out of snow shoes a few

times, only to switch back again quickly, so I decide they'll be staying on for the rest of the day, and probably for most of the week. I have a good 10-minute chat at checkpoint three and then Aodh comes into view. At this point my race head switches on... I won't be hanging around for any checkpoint chats from this point onwards.

Checkpoint four is the final stop before camp, at the bottom of a climb before a fantastic descent into woodland. The run downhill is amazing: you can see for miles. And it is even more fun to move at such pace knowing the camp at Aktse isn't far away. When I see the cabins I know I'm close. And I'm buzzing for my first ever stage win in an ultra. I see the race organiser's finish flags and adrenaline kicks in... I run past the finish line but nobody is there to see it. What an anti-climax. I shout "hello" and up pops a local Sámi on top of a roof, clearing snow. He logs my time and a medic tells me that I'm early...

The cabins are amazing; warm and cosy. Time to recover, time to prepare myself for day two. Aodh comes in second, followed by Alex in third – they're both lovely guys whom I would get to know well over the week.

RACE DAY 2: 27 MILES

After a relatively good night's sleep I see it has snowed overnight so the ground is soft. This means snow shoes from the off. By the end of the race, I'd forgotten I was even wearing them!

I was surprised by my performance on day one and feeling no pressure about the day ahead. There are three racing days left and it would be way too early to be thinking about the win. I'll follow the same strategy and tactics today and see what happens...

I run with Aodh through the first woodland then a lake before the 700m, 6km ascent of Mount Kabla. I stretch out ahead but I'm starting to lose some of the feeling in my hands. My biggest mistake of the race is having my down gloves packed away in my bag. I still can't remember why I did this, maybe a slip of preparation concentration. Once in the woods it's an operation to get the gloves on, which is frightening as the cold comes over you so quickly, and the pain from the burns on my fingers is a challenge to contend with.

They say experience is what you get when you do something wrong, so I put my small but painful mistake down to experience and remind myself how important it is to anticipate potential problems and plan for how I'm going to deal with them when they occur during the race.

A very quick stop at the second checkpoint to replace frozen water bottles and I'm straight off. As I work my way uphill I can see the guys behind me. I check my watch and figure out that I have maybe 10 minutes on them. It's a climb with a number of 'false' summits but the view from the top is extraordinary.

Getting to checkpoint three involves a mixture of running and power hiking as it's up, down, up, down... constantly. I see the checkpoint and pick up speed before executing a quick pitstop for warm water. Now it's a big descent down to camp at Arrenjarka.

The snow is treacherous if you





wander off the marked course, and even on that marked course you can find yourself deep in waist-high snow. That's what I discover on the way down. I haven't seen Aodh and Alex since descending Kabla. Knowing they could be close kept me pushing on – after all, they could have been just behind me... Again, the run to camp is through woodland, across frozen lakes, then more woodland, and, of course, more frozen lakes! I'm running free now; the mind, body and soul are happy, especially when I spot the cabins. A second stage win is incredible and surprising. I'm slowly starting to believe that I can do this.

The big downer for the day is hearing that my very good friend Lee Haswell has had to withdraw from the event due to suspected (and later confirmed) broken ribs. I meet him in the main centre and relax for a moment. It's never a nice feeling to see a mate injured and out of the race, but we're stronger in the long run as a result of these things.

RACE DAY 3: 26.2 MILES

Marathon day on the frozen lakes. We're the last cabin to be woken up, which leaves us with very little time to get ready. I'm in a right stress. Another lesson I've learned here is to take control of your own morning alarm!

This will be a great day of running;



non-stop, no walking, but challenging. It's very cold at the start line. My down gloves are on from the off today. I am totally focused on the task ahead. It's mostly frozen lakes today so I start without show shoes. But, in the first of the wooded sections I'm inches, then a foot or two, then waist-deep in the snow. A frustrating (but quick) change into appropriate footwear means I'm moving much quicker and with less effort.

After the first woods I cross a few lakes and run straight through checkpoint one. The medics call out questions and I say "yes" to all, moving swiftly on, hunting down the next checkpoint. Next up is a long, long lake section of 20km. Aodh looks like he's only a few minutes behind me. I think to myself that if I can just keep ahead at the checkpoint, the overall

win will be getting closer. I really am in race mode now.

Nothing changes during the next section, but my effort level has increased and I'm not letting up as I close in on checkpoint three – with 10km to go I just have to keep moving. I can feel myself getting fatigued, slowing down, and glancing back I can sense that I'm being hunted down. With that in mind I dig in, keep my cadence up and, eventually, see the island where the stage finishes. Leaving the main track of the frozen lake, the soft snow stops me in my tracks. 100 metres to go and they hit you with this! I'm cursing. But I trundle to the finish line and fall to the ground.

Now it's time to recover and get ready for day four. Dariusz is now second with Aodh in third. This result puts me 42

minutes ahead overall, but 42 minutes is nothing with the longest stage yet to come. However, now I feel like I have the opportunity to do something I would never have imagined possible. I'm starting to believe there's a chance that I can win the race outright!

RACE DAY 4: 41 MILES

It's an early start to a big day. Dariusz is out of the door fast. He's a good 100-mile runner, so him literally running out of the door gets us all thinking he's up for it. My plan for the day is to maintain my effort level, not blow up, and not lose the hard-fought minutes I have acquired. The 10 minutes wasted on day one could come back to haunt me. We line up at the start but it's Alex, not Dariusz, who flies out of the blocks...

For a moment, I think, "Let's have some of this", then I tell myself not to get sucked into a battle. Alex has an hour and 39 minutes to make up over the day and I know I just need to keep moving at the pace which has served me so well so far. It's actually nice doing the chasing and not being the chased for once. At each checkpoint I ask how long ago Alex left, which allows me to keep focused and not lose my head with the fact he's surging forward.

Today is mainly flat, with either frozen lakes or woodland; all stunning. It makes me feel privileged to be running in such a place. My memories of the day will be that it was just one foot after the other for hour after hour, ticking off the checkpoints until they eventually got closer

and closer to the finish line. Staying focused is super-tough but I've trained for it. At the final checkpoint, a Sámi gives some basic instructions that we aren't far from the finish. Great news, except his idea of far turns out to be different from mine. This last stretch seems to go on forever. It's so interesting how your brain can keep your body going along quite comfortably, then new information can make your brain think differently and ultimately affect your effort level when the finish is not as close as you think. With this increased effort level, my brain is telling my legs to stop and walk. I don't. I've battled too hard and for too long to allow this to happen.

The last stretch concludes on a frozen

lake with large, uneven and impossible-to-run-on ice cracks. Not exactly what I needed at this moment, but it doesn't matter. I can see the end point in the distance and my legs are kicking on. Hearing the team shouting and clapping, I speed up, zoom under the underpass, then up the hill to the centre and into the Arctic circle, super-manning onto the ice. This is a special moment for me. Alex had finished 12 minutes ahead – a great day's running by him – but three firsts and a second have got me home.

My good friend Lee Haswell picks me up off of the ice, puts his arm around →



'It's actually nice doing the chasing and not being the chased for once'



‘Our bodies are battered and sore but we’re smiling on the final start line’

me and told tells me I’ve had won the Ice Ultra 2020. It simply doesn’t sink in.

Now it’s time to relax once more in the centre. It feels surreal as the race is won yet there’s still one day to go. The fifth day would be a day to enjoy running with new and old friends.

RACE DAY 5: 9 MILES

The group photo is all battered bodies, sore muscles, tendons, blisters – the normal for a multi-stage race. But there are also plenty of smiles as we move onto the start line for the final time. It’s a sad moment as this really has been an amazing experience, but it’s got to come to an end today.

Aodh, Alex, Dariusz and myself decide to run this stage together, which we do. It’s a great end to the week. We soon catch up with my Jungle Ultra mates Lee and Craig, who had sped off at the start. Dariusz decides to walk the last few kilometres so the three of us run the remainder of the course to the finish, and I enjoy one of my best moments from the entire race, sharing a good, emotional chat with some amazing human beings.

Finishing, as you can imagine, feels fantastic. I’ve achieved something I hadn’t thought possible. Was it the focused and dedicated training that had allowed this to happen? My mind? Or

was it a combination of all of those things? Whatever it was, it had all come together and opened up my world. It made me determined to discover what more I can do with my body.

THE BIRTH OF FOCUSED RUNNING

Not long after the Ice Ultra, in June of 2020, I launched Focused Running, my coaching business for runners. Focused Running was actually born on the long bus ride back from Jokkmokk. Learning to run efficiently is what made the difference at the Ice Ultra. That process wasn’t just one thing – it was a combination of both physical and mental changes that made the difference, and ultimately landed me the overall race win that I’d never dreamed possible.

Now I spend my time indulging my greatest passion: training fellow runners. I am a level 1 and 2 certified Lydiard Endurance Coach and Certified Running Technique Specialist, specialising in analysing an individual’s running technique and developing a bespoke coaching programme.

If you’re interested in improving your running and racing, whether it’s merely to get to the finish line of a long-distance race or even to compete for a podium position, then get in touch at focusedrunning.co.uk!



Simon (right) with good pals Lee Quinn (left) and Craig Williams (centre)



YOUR PERSONAL COACH

Layering is the secret all year round

It probably comes as no surprise that layering plays a role in running in cold conditions, but getting it right in hot weather will also pay huge dividends.

TEMPERATURE CONTROL

One of the most efficient ways for the body to self regulate is by sweating, or heat loss through evaporation. A clothing system that works in alignment with the body’s own thermal regulation system will help the body stay comfortable, i.e. not too hot and not too cold. The first layer next to the skin is important for moving liquid moisture or liquid sweat away from the skin, a mid layer can be added for warmth in cold conditions and an outer layer needs to protect the body against the rapid cooling effect of wind chill and wet weather whilst allowing moisture vapour or sweat vapour to escape to the outside, i.e. it must be breathable.

CHOOSE WISELY

Synthetic fibres like polyester and polypropylene are popular first layers and when constructed into a fabric with good moisture management properties, like a push/pull property, they are very efficient at wicking moisture away from the skin surface and are fast drying. These are particularly important for colder conditions and wearing a first layer within a garment system. Wool is great at holding moisture without feeling wet and although less effective at wicking liquid sweat, it feels warmer when cold or cooler when warm through its own self regulating characteristics. A technical nylon will hold onto more moisture than polyester.