

Sur les Traces des Ducs de Savoie (TDS) (August 28th–29th, 2019)

Background

Late in 2018, I decided that my target long race for 2019 would be the TDS (Sur les Traces des Ducs de Savoie) which takes a less travelled route from Courmayeur in Italy back to Chamonix in France. I had my qualifying points from the UTMB 2017 and GTC 2018 races, so I just needed to get lucky in the race entry draw.



Figure 1: Map of the TDS route

In November the organizers announced that the race would have a new longer route and would now be 146.9 km and have 9100 m height gain. So, a what was already a tough race had just been made even tougher.

In January I got the news that I had secured entry and it was time to get ready for it. My initial training went well and then a long bout of achilles tendon issues prevented me from very intense training for months. Coming into the summer, I was able to increase my training intensity and get more time in the mountains. Definitely not as much training as I would like, but I lived on the hope that it would be enough to get me around the course.

Trish suggested in July that I head over to the Alps for three days and hike the route, and I took that opportunity to see where my fitness was, get some good mountain training in and familiarize myself with the route. For that trip I broke the route into three sections: Courmayeur to Bourg Saint-

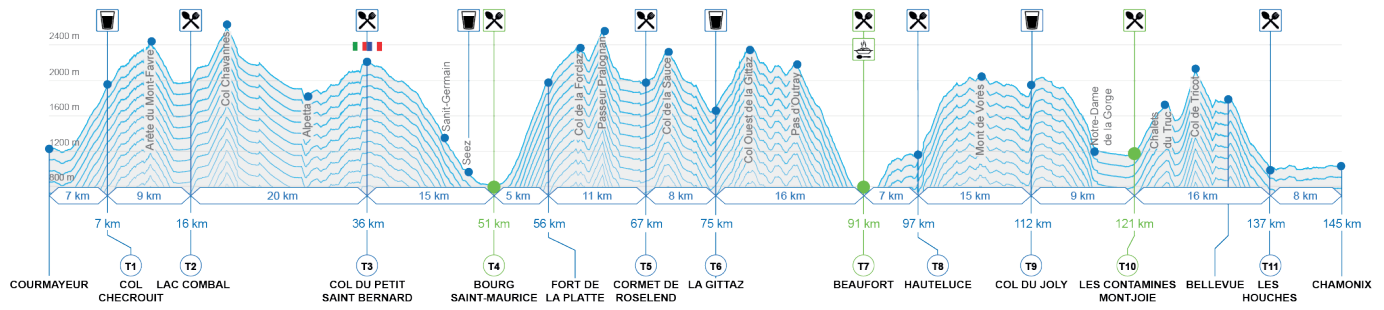


Figure 2: Height profile of the TDS route

Maurice, Bourg Saint-Maurice to Beaufort and Beaufort to Les Houches (deciding that I knew the last few kilometres to Chamonix well enough already). My trip coincided with a huge heat wave and I got to experience the route in very tough conditions and was able to manage it at a very good hiking pace. So, my confidence for completing the TDS itself was much improved after the trip.

The Sunday before the race, I flew over and decided to base myself in Courmayeur until the race was over. I spent the Monday chilling out up the mountains at Maison Vieille and most of the Tuesday banking as much sleep as I could before the Wednesday morning 4am race start.

The Run

One thousand eight hundred runners lined up in the centre of Courmayeur (1220 m) at 3am on the Wednesday morning for the race. After the formalities and speeches were over, we set off down the tiny pedestrian streets of Courmayeur at 4am. Eventually the route broke into a wide road which brought us down to Dolonne and after about 2 km we broke onto a wide trail leading to the Col Checrouit (Maison Vieille) (1956 m). Everyone moved steadily along this climb with little noise apart from the click of ski poles as people marched along. The weather was nice and as we gained elevation we entered the mist and cloud to keep us cool. We eventually reached Col Checrouit and had 7 km and 767 m elevation gain completed, a nice bit of progress to start with.

The trail narrowed for the next leg which headed to Arête du Mont-Favre (2417 m). Initially there were a few bottlenecks when the path had a narrowing or a big obstacle but it soon opened up and we steadily climbed towards the checkpoint. It was still dark but the shapes of Mont Blanc on the far side of the valley started to be visible. In daylight, this is one of the nicest mountain views I've ever seen but on this occasion the view was only an outline.

We then had our first descent to Lac Combal (1970 m) on a narrow muddy trail and the first time cut-off of the race. I took it easy on the descent and enjoyed having a nice break from climbing. Also, dawn was breaking so the views improved and I could see Lac Combal appearing in the distance. The last few kilometres of the leg were nice and flat and before long we were at the checkpoint. We had 15 km done and it was time to restock supplies because the next food source was more than 20 km away.



Figure 3: Views at Lac Combal at dawn

Next, we started a steep climb to Col Chavannes (2603 m) the high point of the whole race and this meant climbing 633 m over a distance of 4.7 km. This leg started steeply and then flattened out as we passed close to Refuge Elisabetta before getting much steeper for the final climb to the col. This was the first time that I took out my ski poles to help me push up the steep climb. This was one of my favorite parts of the route and had a real mountain feel to it.



Figure 4: Col Chavannes (photo from July)

On reaching the col, we faced a long gentle descent for 8 km on a wide and relatively smooth trail; in the Gran Trail du Courmayeur race last year, we had run the first part of this trail in the opposite direction. I decided to take this section relatively easy because we only had 20 km completed and it was a long way to the finish. So, I headed down at a modest pace preserving my legs and energy for climbs and descents to come.

After this long and easy descent we dropped down a steep drop to Arpettes (1782 m) and then started an undulating trail towards Lago di Verney. The weather was warming at this point but the clouds were definitely saving us from the worst of the sun. After we passed Lago di Verney we had a steep climb through dense vegetation to make it to Col du petit San Bernard (2188 m). It was time for another good refuel, restock and small rest. I bumped into Mark Keogh and Stephen Wallace from Ireland at the checkpoint and we had a quick chat before moving on. Soon after we left the col we crossed from Italy into France to continue the rest of the race.

The next stage was essentially entirely downhill to Bourg Saint-Maurice (813 m) covering 15 km and passing through St Germain and Seez. I was happy descending this section (and was much faster than when I did it in July) but I seemed to be the slowest person around on the descent. The descent

was endless and things were heating up as we got closer and closer to Bourg Saint-Maurice. Coming into Seez, I met Mark Keogh again and we both took a quick stop in Seez before heading off at our own paces.

The checkpoint in Bourg Saint-Maurice was 50 km into the race and felt like an important milestone. It was very busy and in the heat, so I minimized my time there before heading out to the climb to Fort de la Platte (1922 m) which was 5.6 km away. This climb has the reputation of being the hardest of the route due to the steepness and exposure to the sun that was blasting down on us. Progress was slow, but trudged our way onwards and upwards towards the fort. Along the way we passed another fort called Fort du Truc and many of us were almost out of water reaching that point. I knew that there was a tap at Fort de la Platte when I was there in July and I hoped it would be operational now too; luckily it was!

The climb after Fort de la Platte was less steep and we made our way to Col du Forclaz before a small descent into a valley to start our tricky climb to Passeur du Pralognan (2558 m). This was a lovely mountain section and I particularly liked the trails and views along this section. At the start of the climb I was feeling very sleepy and decided that a small nap would be a good idea before the climb and the tricky descent that was to follow. I found a warm spot and set my alarm for 4 minutes time and went for a quick nap. I'm sure a 4 minute nap has no real benefit but psychologically it gave me a break and I felt more ready for the climb. Funnily, I woke up to four people asleep next to me!



Figure 5: Passeur du Pralognan (photo from July)

I enjoyed the somewhat tricky climb to Passeur du Pralognan but was horrified to find a big queue for the descent down the other side. We were told it would be at least thirty minutes waiting to descend

this section. I had knew the descent to come was tricky, but I had done it in July with no problems. For the race, it was roped up and this slowed the pace at which it could be tackled. Also, I could see any buffer on the race cut-offs being eaten up by the wait. In the queue I met an English runner called Louise and we ended up descending together to Cormet de Roseland (1975 m) for a quick refuel and restock. We got ready for the impending night section and decided to stick together for the night.

We started up a moderately steep grassy climb to Col de la Sauce (2307 m) and mid way through the climb the head torches went on for the long night ahead. We were entertained by a musical selection from the phone of a runner ahead (The Killers, Foo Fighters, ...). The descent off Col de la Sauce was a nice trail which apparently brought us past La Sauce (I didn't notice it!) towards La Gittaz (1665 m). The trail brought us along the impressive Chemin de Curé trail which was carved out of a cliff face. Many people say that the trail is haunted at night, but we didn't see any ghosts. We ran down this trail somewhat oblivious to the massive drop to our right. We descended to La Gittaz which looked very quiet, but when we entered the checkpoint it was packed full of other runners.

Another steep climb followed which brought us to Côte d'Ani (2236 m) and a higher summit (2391 m) before descending on a faint slippery trail to Lac Noir. At Lac Noir it was time to change my head torch batteries because I was finding it difficult to follow the faint trail. With new batteries it was a whole new world in terms of trail finding. When descending towards Col du Sallestet (2111 m), Louise said she was getting tired and we needed to hatch a plan to catch some sleep. Loads of people had decided to sleep at Col du Sallestet, so we decided to try this too. We planned for a thirty minute nap, but mine turned out more like two five minute naps in a thirty minute window. But, it was all beneficial and we were able to move faster as a result of it.

We eventually made our way along an undulating trail to Pas d'Outray (2181 m) which marked us being 84 km into the race. Next up was a descent to Beaufort (741 m) over a short 7.6 km distance. We made steady progress down the descent but it eventually got monotonous. At one stage I joked that we must be below sea level by now. The checkpoint in Beaufort (92 km into the race) was our first time having access to our drop bags that we left at the start. So, I did a complete clothes change, shoe change, ate some food that I had packed and took some time off my feet. It was hard to drag ourselves out of the checkpoint for the remaining part of the race.

The next section was a steady climb through a forest towards Hauteluce (1190 m). Louise told me that she needed some sleep so we planned another sleep at that checkpoint. The climb was tough going but we eventually had sunrise again and this helped us push to Hauteluce. At the checkpoint we planned a quick sleep for Louise and I stocked up on caffeine. We left the checkpoint a lot more refreshed.

The next climb Mont de Vores (2067 m) was a big one and I was climbing okay but laboring on this section. It was quite hot and I was quickly getting through my water supplies. We made steady but slow progress on this section but I found the heat to be progressively oppressive. On the way up Mont de Vores I was struggling in terms of pace and was starting to be a lot slower than Louise so I suggested she headed off at a faster pace but we kept going along together. A race official at Col du

Very (1961 m) was able to give us a glass of water which was a nice addition to my hydration.



Figure 6: The trail along the side of Mont Joly (photo from July)

Next we moved along a trail along the side of Mont Joly to Col du Joly (1989 m) and I got a second wind. I wasn't able to keep up with Louise or the ad hoc group of runners that had developed but I was able to keep them in sight along this trail. I laughed when I was scrambling up a tricky section and there was a sign telling us not to try to ride a horse up it. The streams that were on this section in July had dried up, so there were no chances to stock up on water en route. Just before Col du Joly they made us trudge up a small hill to get to the checkpoint. Again, time to restock and refuel for a downhill section to Notre Dame de la Gorge (1210 m) and onto Les Contamines Montjoie (1170 m).

The descent started with a tricky rocky and tree root strewn one and tough on tired legs. We were in the heat of the day and the heat was energy sapping. But we eventually negotiated our way to Notre Dame de la Gorge and then had a very flat section of the route into Les Contamines Montjoie. Even though this section was very runnable, the back of my right knee was telling me to take it easy so I did it at a fast power walk instead.

We had a quick stop at Les Contamines before heading on a long climb to Chalets du Truc (1721 m) and onwards to Col du Tricot (2120 m). This climb was exhausting with the sun beating down on us. Pretty much immediately, it was clear that Louise was going to be a lot faster from now on, so she headed off at a faster pace. I steadily made progress up the hill but at a very slow pace. We got some respite from the sun in a forest section but otherwise the sun was relentless. I was tempted to stop in Chalets du Truc for a drink but I was tight on time, so I kept moving towards Refuge du Miage (1564 m) at the bottom of Col du Tricot.



Figure 7: Small hill before Col du Joly

At the bottom of Col du Tricot, I reached my low point of the race. I was exhausted from the heat, moving slowly and it had dawned on me that I had about 200 ml of water left. Facing into a big climb with no definite prospect of extra water for many kilometres had me doubting my ability to complete the 18 km left. I fired a quick text to Trish at home expressing my doubts and I was told immediately that “you always knew this was going to be the hardest part of the race”. I googled the height of Col du Tricot and worked out I had 500 m to climb to the top. While mulling my prospects over, a helicopter flew over the col and rescued someone off the climb. Not giving me much confidence! Nonetheless, I decided to follow two runners moving at a slow pace and see how I got on. About 100 m higher up the col, two South African runners found a water spring coming out of the rocks. I managed to get about 600 ml into my bottles and I continued up the climb. A breeze picked up and I was slightly more hydrated so my energy for the climb returned. I was relieved to make the col and started my descent immediately towards Bellevue (1801 m).

The descent to Bellevue went well, I was alone but I was familiar with this stretch from my July trip. I knew that we would descend to a river, cross a shaky bridge and then climb for a while before a flat section to Bellevue. I was delighted to see water coming out of the rocks everywhere immediately after the bridge and I soaked my clothes, filled my bottles and headed off up the small climb and flat section to Bellevue.

The section from Bellevue to Les Houches (1010 m) was a relentless downhill through fields and forests. I can't say that I enjoyed it much and my mind was exhausted throughout. I was almost two days with fourteen minutes sleep, so I wasn't thinking very logically through this. But, I just kept

putting one foot in front of the other to push for Les Houches. Eventually, after many leg busting kilometres, I reached the Les Houches checkpoint still an hour inside the race cut-off for that point. All that was left was a 7.8 km trail with a gentle climb to Chamonix (1035 m).

I trudged along this route, initially as fast as I could, but then I eased off when I knew I was making good enough progress. Sunset happened after about 3 km, so the head torch was back on. With my tiredness, I was just about keeping my focus once it got dark and eventually I made it to the outskirts of Chamonix. When I hit the pedestrian section of the town, I managed to break back into a run and was greeted with cheers, claps and high fives as I made my way through the last few hundred metres to the finish. Before long I hit the finish line and I was relieved that I could stop.

Soon after finishing, I was told that seven hundred runners didn't finish the race, so I was glad that I was amongst those that did!

The recovery from the race has been good. I seem to be relatively okay, apart from the pain behind my right knee. I can now descend the stairs without holding the railing again! Since the race, many people have asked me whether the TDS or UTMB is a harder race. My answer is that the TDS is harder on the body but the UTMB harder on the mind (at least for someone as slow as me who has two full nights in the UTMB). But, the TDS time cut offs are more aggressive so it was hard to build up a buffer on the cut-offs and easy to lose it. I still think the UTMB is more difficult.



Figure 8: At the finish the day after