

CHASING THE DRAGON

Can an 'ordinary mortal' keep up with a champion ultrarunner? Hiker and runner **Lucy Thraves** heads to the Brecon Beacons with last year's winner of the Montane Dragon's Back Race, **Simon Roberts**, to find out...

PHOTOGRAPHY: NEIL IRWIN

WHY DO WE set ourselves challenges? A challenge invites us to imagine a version of ourselves that's tougher, stronger, braver than the one we currently inhabit, and then forces us to grapple with discomfort, self-doubt and the temptation to give up on that vision. When we take on a challenge, we allow it to become the organising centre of life for the months leading up to it, aware of the risk we take in pinning our present efforts to a future point. The stakes can be high, the reward huge.

It's hard to imagine a greater challenge than the Montane Dragon's Back Race. It runs from north to south along the spine of Wales, taking in over six days a distance of 380km (236 miles), plus 17,400m (57,086 feet) of ascent. Much of it is off-path and requires total fluency in a vast array of terrains: from goat-like sure-footedness along the knife-edged arête of Crib Goch to brute strength and bullishness through the oceans of heathery tussock that cover central Wales' Rhinogs.

The race first came to my attention a couple of years ago, when I was in the depths of marathon training and in the throes of the idea of the challenge. Even then – I was running 70 miles a week and by most people's standards pretty fit – the race seemed inconceivably difficult.

Since then, I've done very little by way of long-distance running, my enthusiasm buckling under the strain applied by life in London, where pavements are a less-than-inviting substitute for mountain paths. So when I was invited to run

a section of Day 5 of the Dragon's Back – 20 miles and 2000m of ascent – I was apprehensive. When it transpired that I would be doing so with the winner of last year's race, Simon Roberts, my apprehension tipped over into something approaching concern for my health. But whilst my fitness may have died a death, my appetite for a challenge had not.

Starting steep

So it came to be that I met Simon in a lay-by at the point where the Dragon's Back route crosses the A4067, just west of Sennybridge in the Brecon Beacons. He was affable, with a generous laugh, and gave off the impression – in the way that elite sportspeople often do – of being largely unafraid.

"You just get on with it, don't you," he said, when I asked him how he copes with bad weather. I asked him this because the weather that morning was appalling: the cloud level was making its way down to the ground and rain began to patter on our waterproofs as we set off up a pathless slope that ascended dizzily from the road into the mist, like something out of a bad dream.

That slope belonged to Fan Gyhirych, a mountain that is at least honest from the offset about the challenge it presents: it starts off steep, continues steeply, and then concludes with a flourish of steepness to the summit. Our initial pace turned my thighs into reservoirs of acid within one minute. "This is ☑





“I wobbled down Fan Fawr like a Slinky toy collapsing itself down stairs, eyes fixed on the car park in the valley below”

[previous spread] Running through the summer greenery of the Talybont Forest as the end of the route [above] Descending Fan Fawr

one of my favourite hills in the Brecon Beacons,” laughed Simon, jogging effortlessly as I tried in vain to hide how out of breath I was. “It’s just straight up, no nonsense!”

This was how it became clear that I would be setting the pace. The first half of the day was characterised by featureless, undulating grassy upland, over summits Fan Nedd, Fan Llia and Fan Fawr. It wasn’t unpleasant to run on – if you fell over the bouncy grass practically returned you to standing – and I wondered if the previous week’s heatwave had dried out what would normally have been shin-devouring marsh. All the while I was impressed by Simon’s unshakable knowledge of the route. He seemed to be able to locate even the merest suggestion of a trod, and know instinctively whether it was the right one. I trotted along in his wake, weighing up how tired I was getting with how far we had to go. The familiar tussle between ambition and common sense.

Cake and Converses

I’d brought four energy gels with me, and by the halfway point I had had all of them. How woefully I had underestimated how much food would be needed. Coming from a road-running background, I hadn’t taken into account how much energy is expended simply staying upright in rough terrain, let alone the toll that repeated ascents and descents take on one’s reserves.

I wobbled down Fan Fawr like a Slinky toy collapsing itself down stairs, eyes fixed on the car park in the valley below. As we neared, a little green food van presented itself to me like a heavenly vision.

Burger acquired, I asked Simon about how he eats during a race like the Dragon’s Back and his eyes lit up. Oh, he said, it’s brilliant. “They provide breakfast in the morning and a hot meal in the evening, and there’s unlimited cake at the finish. I once ate so much cake I made myself sick,” he said gleefully. And what about during the race? “I’ve got quite a strong stomach, so I can usually

take about three gels an hour. You basically want to keep your carb levels stocked up the entire time,” he explained. All long-distance runners have learnt to fear the infamous ‘wall’, the point at which your glycogen stores are depleted and your body starts burning its stores of fat for fuel. Avoiding that state during a long event like the Dragon’s Back is crucial.

Replenished, we set off on Pen y Fan with – in contrast to the desolation of the first half of the day – what felt like the entire population of South Wales. At one point my motivation came entirely from a will to overtake a girl wearing blindingly white Converse. It looked as though the cloud might lift – the mist became briefly luminous and golden, hinting at the presence of a sun somewhere behind it – but then, as if rectifying its mistake,

it doubled down in its efforts to make the day as gruelling as possible. Cross winds blew rain horizontally across the ridge that links the Beacons – Corn Du, Pen y Fan, Cribyn, Fan y Big – which we followed, the focus now on not losing balance or footing on increasingly slippery rocks.

Nearing the end of the route, we picked our way along the scarp of Craig Cwaredi. To our left, a curved, rocky precipice fell away sharply into soupy nothingness, like the edge of the map in a video game. Simon pointed into the abyss and said, “I do hill reps up there.” I laughed, assuming it was a joke. “No, really,” he said. “It’s where I practise my scrambling. It’s the only bit of the Brecon Beacons that’s rocky enough.” My reserves of incredulity at Simon’s dedication running low, I concentrated on following him off the



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[left] Battling wind and rain on the descent from Fan y Big [above] After the miles comes the smiles

ridge and down towards the valley that holds Talybont Reservoir and the finish of the route, and thought about what it must mean to have Simon's level of commitment to a race.

A couple of years ago I ran the length of the River Thames from its source in the Cotswolds to the Thames Barrier near Greenwich. It took a week in total, about 26 miles a day, and as such was the closest experience I've had to a multi-day ultra-run.

I remember being asked by bewildered friends, “How did you keep going?” – and it was a question I now put to Simon. “Grunting, mostly,” he replied. “I'm not really aware of it but I think I make a lot of weird noises. I think it scares off the competition.” Although he was partly joking, I wondered whether what he was describing – a kind of disinhibition – got at something.

My own answer attempted to describe the uncomplicated

sense of duty I had to complete that challenge. A kind of single-mindedness, but one that was so devoted to a cause beyond itself that it became paradoxically self-annihilating. Spending the day with Simon, I wondered again if the ultrarunner's sense of purpose over the course of a race approaches a kind of spiritual conviction. How relieving it can feel – and rare – to have such clarity of purpose, if only for the months leading up to the event, or even just for the event itself.

It occurred to me later that the question of how to keep going is one we all – consciously or not, ultrarunners or not – have to ask ourselves. Maybe the function of a challenge is to focus that question by rendering small and manageable the huge and unknowable trials of life, providing a safe arena in which to strengthen one's muscles for meeting whatever those might be. 🍌

“If you don’t push your limits, you won’t know what you’re capable of”

In 2021, Montane-sponsored athlete Simon Roberts became the first Welsh person to win the 236-mile Dragon’s Back Race. We quizzed him on what it takes to be a champion ultrarunner



How do you get to know the Dragon’s Back route as well as you do? You must spend hours recceing... “A huge part of the Dragon’s Back Race [DBR] experience is the preparations leading up to the race. The hours put in to recceing the route, the sleeping in cars and staying in bunkhouses throughout Wales: it’s a huge time commitment just getting ready for the race. I am based in South Wales so I have years of experience on days five and six, so I feel right at home on those hills in the Brecon Beacons. I love day five – it’s one of the hardest days, I know it well. I’ve also done a lot of racing up in Snowdonia, so I’m very familiar with day one as well. I have done the Dragon’s Back Race twice, but I do still get lost sometimes.”

Which are your favourite parts of the route? “My key highlight would have to be day one in northern Snowdonia: it’s the craziest terrain of the course, super-sharp ridge lines and mega-steep scrambles. Scrambling up Tryfan and running across Crib Goch are definite highlights. Plus, if you’re lucky with the weather, those views! I also have a soft spot for day four, the Elen Valley. I had never been to this area until I did the race in 2019. This area is stunning, with beautiful green hills and stunning lakes. I’ve been back to the Elen Valley many times since. I love it. It’s a real hidden treasure in Wales.”

When you’re doing something as physically demanding as the Dragon’s

Back Race, do you find moments to enjoy the landscape? Or are you just too focused on the physical challenge? “In the past, yes, landscape-gazing was a huge part of it. Beautiful mountain views can definitely help take your mind off the pain. Since I’ve found this warrior competitive mindset, sadly not: I’m just totally focussed on the running, head down and moving forward. I can dig myself quite deep! It’s intense down there so I’m not really taking notice of the views. It’s pure concentration, managing the effort, trying not to trip or get hurt.”

How do you know when to push your limits in a race like the DBR? Are you ever worried about pushing yourself too far? How do you know where to draw that line?



“At last year’s race, I was probably pushing the limits every day. If you don’t push your limits, you will never know what you’re actually capable of. You never know, you may find yourself leading a race. There were many moments when I was red-lining, especially when trying to keep up with Russell Bentley on the road sections. You take yourself right to the edge and if you go over, you have to drop back and correct yourself to get yourself back in your rhythm. It’s a risk you must take sometimes. I had trained well and had done the homework so I knew I could handle a big effort.”

What are your hopes for this year’s race? How prepared do you feel? How much does winning again matter to you? “I’m feeling strong now. There were a few setbacks early this year, what with catching Covid and getting injured at the Cape Wrath Ultra in the Scottish Highlands. But recently I’ve been on a good track, getting strong and enjoying the training. So, yes, I’m going in for a win, to defend my title. Last year, history was made with me being the first Welsh person to win the race, something I am very proud of, and this year I have the opportunity to become the first person to get back-to-back overall wins. That would be quite something. It’s a strong motivator, I’m feeling ready to race hard!”

What are your ultimate mountain running goals? Are there any places in the world that you’d love to run that you haven’t yet? Any events you’d love to try? “There are quite a few races on my bucket list, the first one being the Barkley Marathons in Tennessee. It’s known as the race that eats its young. I’m a little bit obsessed with it and its history of being the hardest race out there! Another race I would like to get to would be the Iditarod Trail Invitational: 1000 miles across Alaska in winter just sounds like an epic journey! Also the Montane Spine Race coming next January. I’m looking forward to doing well at that one.” ☑

GEAR PICKS: SIMON’S FAVOURITE PIECES OF KIT

The outdoor gear Simon uses has to meet the highest standards of design, durability and performance. Here are some of his favourites...

MONTANE PHASE LITE WATERPROOF JACKET

The Montane Spine Jacket served me well in the Montane Spine Challenger North Race, however for the Dragons Back this year, I will be swapping to the new Phase Lite Jacket. It’s very lightweight at 300g and has a Gore-Tex active shell that provides great protection and also gives a tougher denier material than the Spine.

MONTANE GECKO VP RACE VEST

Another piece of kit I used on the Montane Spine Challenger North race was the Montane Gecko VP 20+ race vest. It’s a super-lightweight 20-litre race pack, which is essential on very long races when there is an excessive kit list that is heavy to lug around. The pack fits all of the Spine Race mandatory kit list with ease. This leads on to the other Gecko packs in the range: VP 5+ (5 litre) and VP 12+ (12 litre).

I love both: they are perfect for the shorter distance ultra-marathons or just for any big day out in the hills. I love that they are so lightweight and have an array of storage which is all easy to access on the move. The fit is great with no bounce when you are flying up and down the hills!

MONTANE DRAGON SHORTS AND SABRE TOPS

When running in the summer, I like to keep myself cool wearing the Montane Dragon Shorts and Montane Sabre tops combination. It’s great gear, very lightweight to wear, and very breathable – keeping you cool in the summer.

