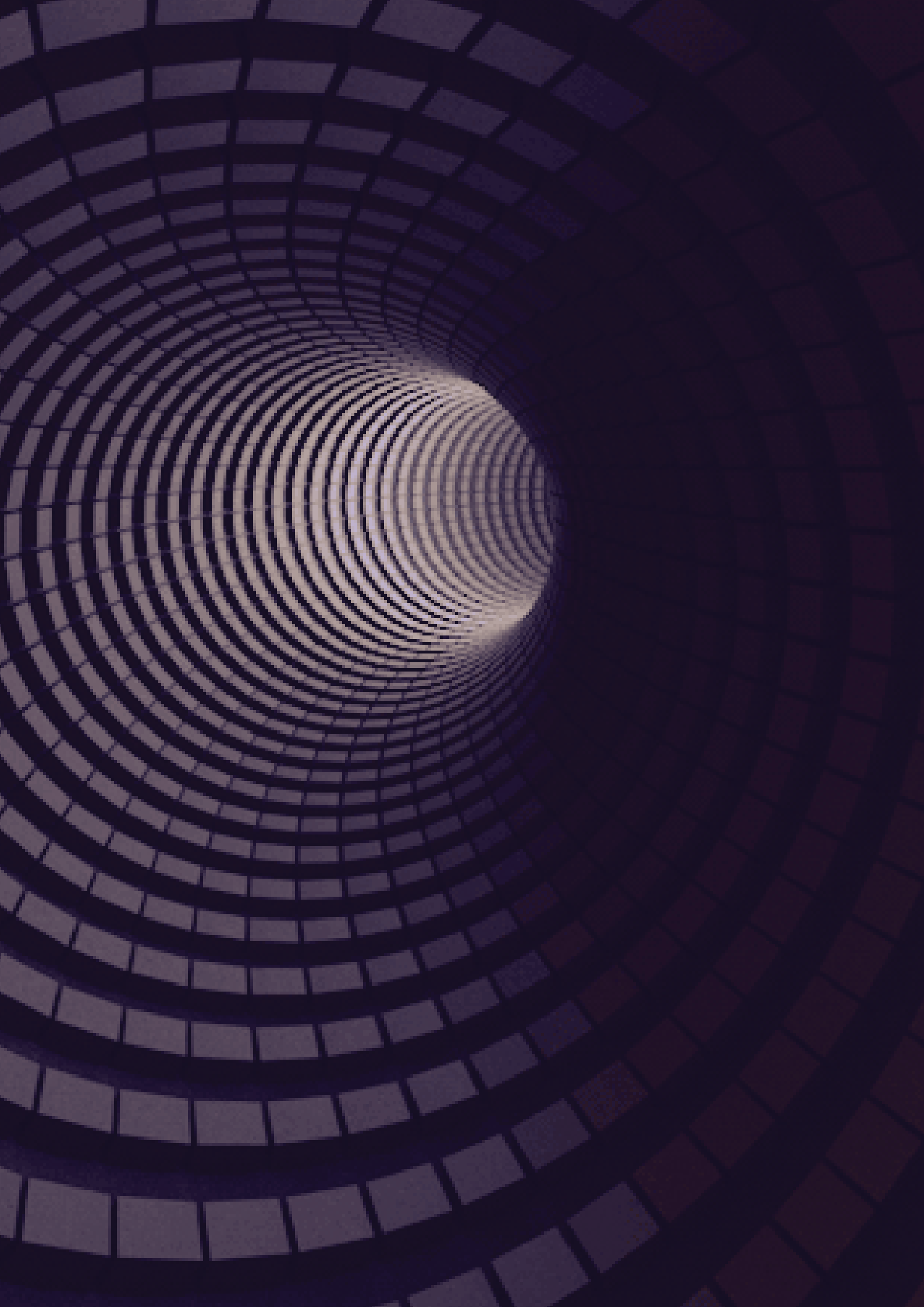


# Ultrarunning World

THE TUNNEL ULTRA - SPECIAL EDITION NO.2

LOCKBAIN EVENTS  
THE HARD STUFF





Karen Webber, the indefatigable RD's assistant, social media manager, aid station manager, masseur and general provider of comfort compassion and loving care of her charges who kept the online world entertained with her photos during the race, many thanks.

Our gratitude to Mark Cockbain, Richard Weremiuk (Race Drone Event Timing) and race helpers Byron Crook, Dave Fawknner, Alister Foy, Dean Talbot.

Thanks to sponsors Chia Charge, ERDINGER ALKOHOLFREI and Rockstar Sport who all helped make the event possible.



Karen Webber



Mark Cockbain



## The House:

### • Staff

- Abichal Sherrington - Editor
- Marcella Dragan - Graphic Designer
- Helen Hayes - Copy Editor

### • Photos

- Front cover: Group photo just before the start of the 2019 Tunnel Ultra. Photo by Mark Cockbain
- Back cover: Courtesy Cockbain Events



Ultrarunning World Magazine

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Send original and previously unpublished articles for Ultrarunning World magazine to the above email address. Last dates for submissions: August 4<sup>th</sup>, September 1<sup>st</sup> and October 1<sup>st</sup>. Please include a 40-50 word bio, some accompanying photos (if you have any) and a headshot for the contributors page.  
Thank you.

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## The Coast To Coast (C2C) Ultra

### Description

A 140 mile non stop race from Whitehaven to Tynemouth along the C2C route.

Time Limit: 38 Hours with internal cut-offs

Support: None. Runners must supply their own vehicled crew (Badwater style)

Hardness rating: 6 (43% finish rate)

Date: TBC ENTRIES OPEN



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## Lon Las Cymru Ultra

### Description

250 miles non-stop, mainly road, coast to coast of Wales, Holyhead to Cardiff (the UK's longest non-stop road race)

Time limit: 88 Hours

Support: Water ONLY every 25 miles. Drop bag access every 50. Minimal shelter

Hardness Rating: 8

Date: Oct 2019 ENTRIES OPEN

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## WHITE HORSE 100/50 TRAIL Cockbain Events and Beyond Marathon (Qualifier)

### Description

A 100 mile point-to-point trail race (with 50 mile option)

Date: 12th Sept 2020

Support: Several checkpoints/half way bag drop; Waymarked trail

ENTRIES OPEN: [www.whitehorse.run/](http://www.whitehorse.run/)

NO REFUNDS/DEFERRALS/TRANSFERS



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## Flat Bastard 50 and Double Flat Bastard 100

### Description

A flat probably WINDY 50 mile point to point race from Kings Lynn to Cambridge designed as an early year training run and also a platform for novices to work towards a qualifying 100 for the tougher events.

Turnaround at Cambridge for a return 50 for those wishing to go for a Double Flat Bastard 100

Time Limit: 12 Hours for 50, 28 for 100 (turnaround cut-off of 13)

Date: Sat April 4th 2020

Support: Checkpoints with drinks and snacks. Baggage transport, tracking.

Entries open to ANYONE that has completed at least ONE ultra.

ENTER HERE £55 and £125 ENTRIES OPEN. NO REFUNDS/DEFERRALS/TRANSFERS

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## Viking Way Ultra Winter Edition

Part of our Winter Double

Same rules as Viking Way... just colder and darker (new medal and t-shirt)

Date: 25/26 January 2020

Hardness rating: 8

Entry form via email:

[cockbainevents@outlook.com](mailto:cockbainevents@outlook.com)

Price: £140 ENTRIES OPEN



# Going Underground

By Al Mercer

The roof lighting clicked off and there he was, Han Solo, illuminated by my head torch, frozen in carbonite and embedded into the wall to my right.

I knew right there and then it was going to be a very long night, the first of two nights in this 55 hour race, running 1 mile up... and then 1 mile down the Combe Down railway tunnel in Bath.

Four months earlier I'd been one of 15 or so runners left in one of Mark's other races, The Hill (On Tour), when Storm Deirdre hit Wharfedale in Yorkshire and a thick layer of sheet ice settled over the 3 mile loop of trail we were running up and down as we tried to cover 160 miles in 48 hours. Running for charity I had wondered out loud at race HQ after the race was cancelled about how to make up the missing 100 or so miles to earn my sponsorship money, when the race director, Mark Cockbain, fixed me with that smile and said, "You could always run The Tunnel in March".

So here I was. Trying to run 200 miles back and forth along a 15 foot wide disused railway tunnel in Somerset, and I'd already seen a roof covered with Ridley Scott's aliens (aged soot deposits from passing trains back in the day) and a terracotta army of warriors lined up on the rocky outcropping of the left hand wall. All before the lights went out at 11pm and just 8 hours into the race, way before I could legitimately claim I was hallucinating.

Apart from the distracting visual effects my stimulation-deprived mind was conjuring from the rocky walls my race was going OK. I was moving well and pretty much on target to complete the first 100 miles in 25 hours, leaving me 30 hours to run the second 100. Foot and bicycle traffic in the tunnel

was light, it was a Friday night and the weather hadn't been great all day, curbing the usual number of dog walkers, bikers and families out for a stroll.

### Let the brass bands play

My training had been good, a 9 week plan from Dave the Fell Running Guy, 5 runs a week with a double run, back to back long/slow runs at weekends mixed with hill work, strides and strength training. I had really hit my straps for The Hill so the plan backed off the intensity a little and to be fair this was my first shot at a 200 miler so who knows whether it would be enough.

Race day meant a 90 minute drive from Gloucestershire to Bath on Friday lunchtime to race HQ at the southern tunnel entrance. Starting at 3.30pm in a small field of 40 we were off full of hope and some trepidation, as this was the first ever running of the event. Would we all finish? (lol) Would no one finish? (the odds were even). I recognised a few of my fellow runners from The Hill and The Chained Ultra's first running in 2016. The Cockbain runners and event team are a great bunch. Many outrageously good ultra-runners, but no big egos, no moaners (that's a rule) and encyclopaedias of running experience that they'll gladly share.



As with many Cockbain events race HQ was a simple affair, a small tent with a couple of wooden benches and the toilet a campervan portable loo in a narrow tent across the way. These events are not your mainstream commercialised ultras, with Waitrose-style checkpoints every 5 miles, support crew milling around and pacers allowed from halfway. It's all about the run and just enough to keep you on your game. They are rightly advertised as tough, not as a marketing tactic but as a warning: if you want T-shirts, medals and bragging rights then these are not the races you're looking for.

Released at the start in batches of 5 runners at a time our first eyebrow raising moment was around one third of a mile along the tunnel when a strangely glowing porthole in the wall began to emit a creepy tune, a kind of muffled, underwater orchestra of cats being strangled. We knew sometimes Mark joked about throwing in some psychological warfare into his events (the sounds of an oncoming train in the tunnel at mile 180 was my biggest fear) but a band of psychedelic cat torturers seemed a step too far.

Our next, "Oh?" moment was when we reached a hash mark on the tunnel floor that said 1700m...and that wasn't the end of the tunnel. Now most ultras are never spot on the advertised distance. That's a given. I knew a mile was 1600-something metres and 1700m+ over the course of 200 laps meant the actual race length was going to be at least 206+ miles, which come the end of the race when tired and punch drunk, an extra 6+ miles could add one or two hours onto your race time. For those at the slow end of the running spectrum (me) this was going to spice things up a little.

Dibbing my dibber in the dibber box thing at the end of the tunnel, I did a 180 degree turn and headed back down the tunnel for lap number two (and more cat music).

## Feet Start to Pound

The next 20 or so laps went smoothly enough. I'd had a minor equipment head scratch after a couple of laps as one way down the tunnel I was getting hotter than expected (being so far from the March night-time cold) so I tried delayering. When running the other way a noticeable breeze meant I was getting a slight chill and zipping up again. Some runners had gone for shorts, whereas I'd gone for tights. I was (and still am) unsure if shorts would have been a better choice.

This was my first ultra in my Topo Terraventure shoes with the extra wide toe box and they seemed to be working fine until, uh oh, that hot spot in my upper left quad seemed to be more than a distant echo from a training run last weekend. I'd been for a sports massage the Tuesday before the race and a little sore spot was picked up there. We dismissed it as perhaps a build up of lactic acid as it is not one of my regular known injury hotspots; and to be fair, it was too late to do anything about it if it was something more.

After sucking it up for a lap or two I was forced to drop to a run/walk to rest the throbbing in my quad. This seemed to ease the issue and knowing that over the course of an ultra various injuries come into focus and then fade out of consciousness as the hours pass. The body silently recruits supporting muscle groups to accommodate. I got on with the job and waited for it to subside.

"The Public Gets What The Public Wants"

As the new day dawned the tunnel began to fill with its

regular clientele. Dog walkers, cyclists, early morning joggers (I wished I had their energy) and families out for a stroll. Now we had to keep our wits about us as lycra clad cyclists streaked past on Strava kudos missions, scattering kids on tricycles, walkers holding hands and any other foot traffic failing to pay attention.

In the meantime the chorus of strangled cats had started up with the dawn and as lunchtime on Saturday approached I accepted I was starting to fall off the pace. I'd had a couple of wonderful chats with fellow runners and caught up with some friendly faces who had dropped by to see how the race was going. Throughout the night the usual suspects had kept me amused and the race crew (especially Karen, the best) kept me filled with coffee and snacks.

The time I was lapping meant it was going to be touch and go to make the 27.5 hour cut at 100 miles. I'd always known I'd be at the limit with a fastest 100 miler of 26 hours. This one was flatter and there were no navigation challenges to lose time to so I thought



# The Tunnel Ultra

a 25 hour 100 was possible. Without the quad situation it would have been and then who knows? My wife and daughter were due to visit race HQ at around 6.30pm after a day out in Bath and it was either drop when they arrived or wait for the axe to fall. I'd managed to get a text out to let my family know my plans and around 27 hours and 86 miles in I let my little girl do my final dib and I called myself done.

But I'm quite happy with what I got.

Yes, I'd like to have done better but this was my first crack at 200 miles. I met some great people, some new, some I already knew. I challenged myself and I'll be better prepared for the next one. As they say, you learn more from your defeats than you do in victory.

What did I learn? I need to be more disciplined with my rolling and stretching and get back into the habit of going to yoga. Both help me identify hot spots, tightness and potential injury. I need to do more core work as my lower back tired far more than I expected. I need to do more shorter races (50k to 50 milers) in between long events to help (a) remind me of the disciplines in training that I'm missing (b) remind me of long distance race craft and (c) tease out the areas that need attention from stretching and rolling.

I'm also too fat and need to do more speed work.

Will I be back? I did apply and made it in for 2020 through the lottery. Next up a couple of summer 100s, including one of Mark's 'easier' runs, the 1066 ultra from London to Hastings. Then back to Tennessee for another shot at a Croix de Barkley, before the Glyndwr's Way 135m Rebellion and finally, my old friend, The Hill (on Tour to the Cheviots this time).

A final note on The Tunnel has to be a huge congratulations to the two finishers, Bryan Clary (50:58) and Alan Cormack (54:36). Awesome. I don't know Bryan so well but I bunked



with Alan at The Hill and he is a great guy. He gobsmacked me a week later by running a 100 miler the next weekend. Thanks to everyone at the event, runners and organisers. Great job once again. Special thanks to the guys who shared a joke or a story with

me. You know who you are!

And if you fancy The Tunnel yourself join the 2020 waitlist or get in early for 2021. No promises Han Solo will make an appearance but you might meet a few strangled cats...

Alan Mercer is a long distance trail runner, living in Cheltenham, UK. He started ultrarunning in 2014 and has 30+ race finishes from 50k, 50miles, 100miles, multadays and 24 hour races, including a Centurion Grand Slam, MdS, Barkley Fall Classic and Cotswold Way Century. The Cotswolds, Brecon Beacons and Salt Lake City are his favourite running spots. His running heroes are Rich Cranswick, Carl Howells and Alan Cormack. His running dream is to finish one of Mark Cockbain's 'Hard Stuff' races.





# The Tunnel Ultra



Start

Sharon Spriggs



chia  
charge

Chris Foulds



chia  
charge



Tunnel entrance



chia  
charge

Jon Steele

# The Tunnel

By Claire Smith

When the Race Director of Cockbain Events, Mark, messaged me late on Saturday night in September, I knew exactly what it was about. He asked me if I wanted a place on the inaugural ultra event, The Tunnel, the following March.

Did I want to spend the weekend attempting to run 200 miles in a dark, cold, mile long tunnel? Hell, yeah I did!!

My prep for the race wasn't exactly ideal. I had been suffering with severe blistering on my left foot for a while and I had been having treatment for what turned out to be a verruca. I have never had one of these before, my only experience was, when I was young, seeing the kids in my class wearing those weird plastic socks during swimming. Anyway, turns out the treatment for one of these is rather painful, especially if you have ignored it for a month or 10... It basically involves something called cryotherapy, it looks and feels like frostbite for weeks after. Not particularly conducive to a long distance running race, it would have been sensible to have given it a miss but as most people already know, I'm definitely not sensible.

The night before, I packed my kit and felt strangely calm. I had no idea what to expect and therefore, I did not feel that nervous. I also think the lack of navigation required helped me. Getting lost is a daily struggle and with some races, it can present issues for me. There were the obvious jokes that I could probably still get lost in a mile long tunnel, but surely not? The race location is on a disused Victorian train line, called Combe Down Tunnel. This had been deserted for decades until it was renovated and reopened on 4th April 2013 as part of the National Cycle Network. About halfway through the tunnel,

you come across mini art installations tucked into the walls. These comprise of slightly creepy classical music and light circles, which pulse along to the tune. This artwork is called 'Passage' and I found weirdly comforting during the event.

Apart from the history of the location, the other thing that was interesting about this event, was the 'no crew' rule. I have not been part of a Cockbain event before and this was a new experience for me. I've actually been rather spoilt of late, with all my Deca Triathlon attempts, where I have had awesome people doing as much as they physically can (short of swimming, biking or running) to get me to the finish line, or try to at least. I had to do this... All. By. Myself. Wow. Ok, I can do this, I'm a strong, independent woman. Most of the time.

The other issue was there was no covered area for runner's kit. Just a small, muddy bit of land next to the path to place a bag or box with everything you think you might need. I stuffed a rucksack, a waterproofed bag inside it, with spare kit and food. I also packed a fair few painkillers, I had a feeling I was going to need them. I was right.

The last rule from race director, Mark, was no iPods or similar. The point of this event was to test yourself, running in mostly darkness with nothing to distract you for as long as possible. Did I think this would be an issue? Honestly, I didn't. I've done a Deca (have I mentioned that before?) and that involved the first 7 days either swimming or cycling with no music, up and down the same lane or road. It's not something I struggled with and actually I quite enjoy the mental break from real life.

So, there we were, a small, nervous

group of ultra runners, standing around laughing loudly at jokes that weren't that funny because it eased our nerves. I eyed the toilet facilities, which basically consisted of a camping loo, in a tent. That should be interesting later, I thought. Just before 3:30pm, we lined up to get our race number, timing dibber and once this was done, there was a short brief from Mark, whilst we stood in the rain, and we were off.

The tunnel itself was cold, dark and long. I mean, I knew it was a mile but that mile seemed really far. I had a plan of covering 4 laps per hour, using my tried and tested run /walk method. I had covered 262 miles before doing this, so I was fairly confident I could make it work. The first issue I had was the lack of distinguishing landmarks in the tunnel, to help me plan where I would run and walk. This may sound daft but it helps keep you on track later when your run sections become shorter and the walking bits longer... I decided in the end, that I would walk at each end of the tunnel, once I had dibbed in (timing), I would walk for a short period. Later in the event I realised there were numbers painted on the wall, which I became mildly obsessed with.

The afternoon turned into evening, not that it made much difference to us runners, as the tunnel was so gloomy, lit by low level lighting from 5am to 11pm every day. I shuffled along the path, up and down, nodding and saying hello to other Tunnelers. I was slightly regretting the coleslaw I had eaten for lunch. I know full well that it does not agree with me, but still could not resist a few mouthfuls, and now I was feeling it. Still, at least it kept my mind busy for the first few hours of the event. I had also began to feel a slight pain in my left hip which worried me. I started doing some

stretches to ease the tightness but it only got worse.

There was no signal in the tunnel (obviously, as it's deep underground), but you got a little bit of 3G at each end. I had already texted my partner to say that I was worried about my times slipping and this was the message I sent him at 11:11pm. *"Lights just gone out. Weird as sh\*t... I've f\*cked up my leg which is getting worse but I've taken lots of drugs."*

Not ideal. But I've had worse pain to deal with, so I cracked on, my confidence was being tested at this point.

Once you have your head torch on, the tunnel takes on a darker, more theatrical feel to it. The walls are mostly a rough stone, which even when you are in a normal state, with the light of a torch would look odd. As a fatiguing runner (who is always a little dehydrated, despite being told to drink more), those walls took on a life of their own. There were people and animals in them that would catch your eye as you ran past. The three old men, standing against the wall, that I saw regularly, were seen by others and apparently there were badgers spotted.

I began to feel sleepy around 3am, which I thought was odd, as I'm used to sleep deprivation and this was only 24 hours into the event. In hindsight, the Codine I was taking probably didn't help. Karen (part of the race crew and a friend) had arrived at some point and she woke me from my catnap (whilst I was still moving) by calling my name loudly and making me jump. I was a little confused but hid the fact that I had been asleep pretty well I thought. Until I spoke to her later and she laughed and said that she had woken a few others up as well during her walk through the tunnel.

I decided that it was Redbull O'Clock and rummaged around in my bag to find a can. I would drink some whilst walking and then place the can alongside the path. This made it interesting to find again on the next

lap which kept me occupied for a while. The sleep monsters didn't leave me though, despite the Red Bull, I counted down the hours until it was 5am and the lights would come on again, hoping that this would snap me out of the sleepiness that was slowing me down even more than my injury.

I hadn't really stopped for any sort of break during the event so far, but at around 4am, I shuffled to the main crew tent and asked for some tea. The bench looked so inviting and I didn't have to be told twice to sit down. The tea was hot and sweet and the gazebo was heated, it was bliss! The timing guy even worked out that I could still make the cut-off if I got a move on. This gave me some hope and with the help of the short rest, caffeine and some Oreos, I started again with a renewed sense of purpose.

It didn't last very long though, as the pain kicked in again, forcing me back to walking with the occasional attempt at running, which was more speed limping by then. At some point, I remember running past the timing table at the end of the tunnel and noticing how many people had already pulled out of the race. There must have been about 10 at that point (only around 30 started). I was really surprised by this, confused even. I think it was then I realised how hard this event really was and how I had massively underestimated it.

I struggled on. I set myself a goal of reaching 80 miles by around 4pm that day. Even that became a test, as I was in so much pain. It had now spread to my other hip and my festering

verruca foot was really sore. Mentally, I was still strong and if I could have made the 100 cut-off, I would have continued, without a doubt. This time my body had let me down, not my mind.

Another visit to the crew tent at around 10am and this time, I shuffled off with a tomato Cup-a-Soup. This turned out to be the best soup I had ever tasted! As a race director of ultra events, I had seen the power of tomato soup in play but never experienced it myself. I remember animatedly explaining to someone, who I don't think was even racing, that he needed to have some, as it's life restoring qualities were so amazing...

But even the soup could not get me to 100 miles by 7pm that night and I knew it. I sent this message to Jon around 11am... *"I don't think I will make the 100 mile cut-off. I'm trying but in a lot of pain now, hard to run."* I was gutted although I was trying to remain positive. I got to my 80 miles and handed my timing dibber back to the RD, Mark. He told me I had more in me to give and mentally I did. So much more. It was really frustrating and I was very jealous of the others (only around 12 by then) still running.

Amazingly, only 2 runners made it to the finish that weekend. The Tunnel had swallowed many experienced ultrarunners and spat them back out again, with feet, broken and bruised. What an awesome event it was and despite the pain and DNF I loved it and definitely want to go back for another go.

Founder of Brutal Events, mum of two (now grown up) children, Graphic / Website Designer, Vice-president of the IUTA (International Ultra Triathlon Association) and Ultra Endurance Athlete.

<http://brutalclaire.co.uk>



# The Tunnel Ultra



After 6 hours

Rank	Name	Time	Status
1	M. R. D.	17:18	
2	P. B.	17:18	
3	E. D.	17:18	
4	K. C.	17:18	
5	A. M.	17:18	
6	D. W.	17:18	
7	B. C.	17:18	
8	A. H.	17:18	
9	E. C.	17:18	
10	A. W.	17:18	
11	J. I.	17:18	
12	K. G.	17:18	
13	S. B.	17:18	
14	S. B.	17:18	
15	P. C.	17:18	
16	A. M.	17:18	
17	M. H.	17:18	
18	S. D.	17:18	
19	V. O.	17:18	
20	F. L.	17:18	
21	R. C.	17:18	
22	B. C.	17:18	
23	J. S.	17:18	DNF
24	C. L.	17:18	DNF
25	A. M.	17:18	DNF
26	A. M.	17:18	DNF
27	S. P.	17:18	DNF



After 15.5 Hours

Rank	Name	Time	Status
1	G. A.	34	
2	A. C.	34	
3	M. R.	36	
4	B. C.	36	
5	D. B.	35	
6	E. C.	35	
7	B. I.	35	
8	C. H.	34	
9	A. W.	33	
10	J. I.	35	
11	K. G.	32	
12	S. B.	34	
13	A. H.	31	
14	N. W.	28	
15	P. C.	29	
16	A. M.	28	
17	M. H.	25	
18	S. D.	30	
19	V. O.	25	
20	F. L.	32	
21	L. C.	33	
22	E. A.	28	
23	A. K.	31	DNF
24	C. F.	32	DNF
25	B. C.	31	DNF
26	S. P.	31	DNF
27	A. M.	31	DNF
28	A. M.	26	DNF
29	S. P.	29	DNF
30	P. C.	10	DNF
31	A. M.	10	DNF
32	A. M.	10	DNF



# The Tunnel Ultra

Sammy Daye



After 21 hours

After 21 Hours		
G	Arthur	53
A	Corrach	48
M	Raffan	45
B	Clary	48
B	Barker	46
E	Cottan	45
B	Irvine	48
C	Howells	47
A	Nesbitt	42
B	Irvine	46
R	Gussoni	43
N	Wheeler	36
S	DAYE	39
F	Ibarra Caban	41
P	Cury	37
A	Mercer	35
M	Haigany	31
L	Conlin	41
C	SMITH	42 DNF
S	Braithwaite	39 DNF
A	Hall	25 DNF
V	owins	25 DNF
A	Kafeshi	21 DNF
C	FOWLS	25 DNF
B	Crook	14 DNF
R	Clarke	31 DNF
J	Steele	7 DNF
A	Nykes	26 DNF
S	Beasley	29 DNF
J	Price	16 DNF
S	Strigg	7 DNF
A	MARTIN	21 DNF

Mike Raffan



Richard Weremiuk (left) and Byron Crook



# The Tunnel Ultra 2019

By Guillaume Arthus



How far can someone run in the dark? This was the underlying question in the first edition of the Tunnel Ultra. Being a Cockbain event, there was everything you could expect from it: a very experienced line-up of runners, very little support, extreme conditions, gruelling miles and a tight cut-off. It was the hard stuff.

The Tunnel was straight into that vein. 200 miles to run back and forth in the 1 mile Combe Down tunnel near Bath. The tunnel doesn't appear at first sight to be that hard to run in, but anything small repeated 200 times can take a huge toll on the legs and minds of even the most experienced runners.

While waiting alongside the nearby pub before going to the start line the runners gathered and shared their thoughts about what was to come. Concern seemed to be the consensus.

The monotony of the tunnel and the lack of natural light was expected by all to have a deep mental impact. The icing on the cake was the classical music playing in the middle of the tunnel. Listening to a broken record for 48 hours was expected to be quite a torture device.

At least the runners would be sheltered from the elements. So they thought.

On Friday 8th March at 3:30pm, 34 lost souls started under the whistle. Within an hour, the individual strategies started to play out as they respectively grasped the environment of the herculean task ahead.

Most runners were surprised by the tunnel itself. The 1 mile loop is actually 1.06 miles. The tunnel is not flat either. The 1% expected overall

slope is misleading as it is an upside down "V" shape. 0.7 miles ascending at 1.5%, 0.4 miles descending 1.5%. Those are not mere details, those variations are all times 200. It provides 13 miles bonus mileage and doubles the elevation gain required to finish the event. The 55 hour cut-off stays the same.

By 5pm, 4 runners were splitting away from the rest of the pack. That early in the race it was merely a show of strength and the application of different race strategies. The quartet consisted of Bryan Clary, Mike Raffan, Alan Cormack and Guillaume Arthus. Guillaume decided to keep a steady pace while everyone started to slowly reduce theirs. By 6pm, he took the first position and it looked like he was going to keep it.

As the night descended the runners

weren't much affected as it was already dark for them. With the night came the wind and temperature swings. The tunnel humidity was creating several microclimates so their running kit needed to be adjusted all the time. One more parameter to master before conquering the Tunnel.

At 11pm, Guillaume had a 2 lap lead and was still cruising as the tunnel's dimmed light went completely dark. In pitch black, the ballet of headlamps reflecting in perfect circles through the wall of the tunnel was mesmerising. With the music switched off, the tunnel was delivering a masterpiece of running: a silent hell.

While it was starting to take its bounty with the first DNFs, the Tunnel was holding its promise: cruelty. While the full pack was slowing down saving the legs for the night and waiting for better hours, Guillaume was having none of it, "I cannot believe what is happening right now. I actually love it in here. It is beautiful in the dark."

As the light came back up at 5am, his lead increased to 5 laps, aka 10 miles.

As Saturday dawned, bikers and walkers came back and the runners weren't alone anymore.

After 24 hours, still in the lead, Guillaume got a scare as he came close to fainting by forgetting to fuel for the last couple of laps. The Tunnel is sneaky, the repetitiveness will force a runner to make mistakes. Luckily, he didn't pay the price for it. "He is a runner so strong, I wonder how long he can keep it up?" "That is quite some running he is doing right now." Guillaume had planned to run 65 laps at that pace before slowly decreasing. This never happened, during lap 57, his legs started to lock. It was deep, way too deep, tight quads and calves on both legs were turning into bricks. By the end of lap 59, he had to sit down and stop, he was trying to massage the lock away before attempting to run again. It took him 1h19 to do his 60th lap, just like that, he was gone. The 10 miles lead was now meaningless, "I was crushing then I was crashing." The Tunnel punished him for his fast start, the

other runners would have to slay the Tunnel without him.

As the second night settled in, sleep deprivation drastically shrunk the size of the field. Running through two nights is difficult enough as it is. The tunnel was making it even harder: underground, day is night. Hallucinations were kicking in for everyone, faces, rabbits, chasing dogs, portraits were to be seen and never real.

By Sunday noon, only 4 runners were left: Bryan and Alan out of the original quartet, Bobby Irvine and Lena Conlin. Bobby was in the lead by a lap in front of Bryan, looking absolutely fantastic. The next lap, he was done. 89. He was mentally exhausted, the Tunnel can crush you in a second.

A few hours later, it was Lena's turn to throw the towel. After an all night

gruelling battle, she managed to run 73 laps, effectively becoming 4th overall and first woman.

Two runners were left with 8 hours to go, Bryan was 6 laps in front of Allan and with 4 laps left, they teamed up. Time to slay the Tunnel. They worked together until Bryan completed his 100th lap, winning the Tunnel Ultra in 50:58 minutes.

Alan, now alone in the tunnel, could not catch any break. He needed to move if he wanted to make the final cut-off. With 24 minutes to spare, he cut the finish line to become the second finisher of the inaugural Tunnel Ultra.

The Tunnel, while letting 2 through, held all its promises, leaving a very experienced field of runners in pieces. If ultra running is 90% mental, the Tunnel dialled it up to 99%.

Frenchman Guillaume Arthus has been running ultras since 2012 taking part in Sainte Lyon, Sinister 7, UTMB, EcoTrail de Paris, MdS, Tor De Geants to name a few. He has a YouTube channel with material covering a range of ultras at [Runnexplorer](#).



# The Tunnel

By Andrew Nesbit



Scrolling through Facebook one day when a post from Mark Cockbain caught my eye, 200 miles back and forth through a tunnel, what kind of lunatic would want to do that? Me! Was the answer. Several months and many logistical nightmares later I found myself standing at the mouth of the tunnel about to embark on a journey into the unknown...

The race started at 3:30pm, we were released in groups of four every few minutes to avoid congestion at each end of the tunnel. I hung back to let my group get ahead of me so I was running at a pace that suited me and I soon settled into a nice rhythm. The first few laps went well, I was running faster than I had planned but I always do at the start so all was good. We knew the lights went off at 11pm until 5am when we would be plunged into

absolute darkness, so much of the first few hours was just waiting for it to happen.

To be honest, staring down a long lit tunnel was starting to play with my mind and vision after only 4 hours. When the lights eventually went off at 11:09 I found it quite a blessing. The tunnel in pitch black was nowhere near as bad as I had been anticipating which was a relief and I was quite enjoying it. I adopted a run 300m walk 100m pace through the first night using the distance plates on the floor that I had initially thought would be awful, seeing them every 100m but they turned out to be very useful. Ran a good few hours through the night with David Barker, a friend I knew from running The Hardmoors 200 with in 2017, it was good to have a catch up and the first night passed by

quite quickly.

5:09am the lights flicked on and we went from dark to light with no gradual change like outdoor runs. So far I'd been running pretty consistently and managing my time at the drop bag area well. I felt good but had to keep my focus to hit 50 laps inside the 27.5 hours cut-off. Things continued going well, nice strong coffee and small amounts of food seemed to be working.

I had started to feel the pain of chafing downstairs, I planned to lube up when I returned to the drop bag, this went on for 5 laps because I kept forgetting about it until I was a few hundred metres down the tunnel, to the point where I had to be reminded by someone else that I needed to do it. So I lubed up and pushed on to hit the 50



lap cut-off. I noticed my times at the drop bag area had started increasing gradually throughout the day whether being down to tiredness or indecision I wasn't sure? Despite this I hit the 50 lap mark around an hour under cut-off. Then I used up 45 minutes of that buffer getting changed, wiped down and more lube applied. I figured it was better to get the chafing area in the best condition I could for going into the second night, after getting changed and fed I felt good, so the next 2 laps went really well.

11:09pm I was on an outbound lap when the lights went off, within minutes I could tell this was going to be an entirely different experience from the first night. The darkness along with the tiredness threw my senses into bits, I lost all depth perception. I could see headtorches in front of me but I couldn't tell if they were 10 metres or half a mile away, the majority of the time my guess was wrong. By the time I was returning to the drop bag area all I wanted to do was get out of the tunnel, I started stumbling about through being tired and hallucinating, these hallucinations were to become some of the craziest I've ever experienced through running (as well as recreational pursuits in younger days). To try and explain some of them at one point I stopped dead in my tracks because there was a large perfectly round smooth boulder in front of me. I had to step to the left to get around it only for another few steps further another boulder exactly the same in my path again at which point I thought to myself, "hold on there's no boulders in this tunnel." Turns out the boulder was just my head torch beam on the floor in front of me. I was running along for large parts of it out of the peripheral vision in my right eye, I was no longer in a tunnel but more of a vast cavern with plants, trees and ponds with waterfalls. It was nothing short of insane.

I got back to the drop bag area which had now been moved into the tunnel but it was getting easier to spend more and more time there. I was acutely

aware of time slipping away, coupled with the tiredness and hurting it started eating away at me. I was taking a coffee every other lap and walking 500 metres drinking it then leaving my cup, running the rest up and back down the tunnel, picking my cup back up until one lap when my cup was gone, never to be seen again. I can only conclude some local walking through the tunnel saw it and picked it up.

It was a weird scenario with the laps, while the outbound lap was tough as it was ever so slightly uphill, it was warm, returning was easier running downhill but cold and getting colder. I ended up putting my waterproof pants on over my leggings to try and keep warm. Ironically this 'indoor' race was the one and only time I've ever put my waterproof pants on. By now my pace was all over, one lap might take 50 minutes the next 30 minutes either way the calculations weren't going in my favour. Then one outbound lap I was nearing the far end but could barely keep upright, I had to sit down so I slid down the wall in an upright fetal position and the next thing I

knew I was waking up as people ran past me. I got myself up and headed to the end of the tunnel to dib in. That half a lap had taken 1 hour 3 minutes, by the time I returned to the drop bag area it was an hour and a half for 1 lap. I was done, Alan persuaded me to go out for another lap with him which went ok but still slower than the pace I'd have to keep up for the remaining 13 hours. I quit defeated and broken. I remember talking to the film crew who were there with Guillaume, he was asking me all sorts of questions that I couldn't really answer so I decided to go for 1 more lap, he asked me why, when I knew I couldn't finish, I replied, "Why not there's nowt else to do." I got back made a makeshift bed in the gravel at the side of the path and slept.

In the end I was on the course for 38 hours and completed 62 laps. I was the 5th from last person to drop out but was 9th furthest distance wise. So do I need to get faster or just be more efficient with my time management? I guess the only way I'll find that out would be to try again next year but I'm not that stupid...

I'm Andrew Nesbit, I started running in 2013. I did my first marathon October 2014 and finished my first 110 miler in May 2015. I love taking on challenges just to see what can be achieved and how far down the rabbit hole I can go. Visit the blog at: [andynez](http://andynez)



# The Tunnel Ultra 8 – 10 March 2019

## An ultra-run with a difference

By Lena Conlin



The Tunnel Ultra was a brand new race and the aim was to run 200 times through the Combe Down Tunnel within 55 hours. The Combe Down Tunnel near Bath was a disused railway tunnel which is now part of the Two Tunnels cycle path, it is about a mile long. The tunnel is dimly lit from 05:00 – 23:00 then the lights go off. There is also a sound installation in the middle of the tunnel which is a series of lights and violins which plays constantly in the central third of the tunnel between about 09:00 and 19:00.

The race organiser Mark Cockbain (Cockbain Events) designed this ultra which would not only test physical strength but the mental strength to run for hours on end with no mental stimulus. The rules were tough too, no support allowed, athletes needed

to be able to take care of themselves. No ear/headphones were allowed as the tunnel was still open to cyclists, other runners and walkers so runners had to be aware of their surroundings. Runners were to run on the left hand side in single file unless passing another runner. Mandatory kit was a whistle, a phone and hi-visibility top which was to be worn at all times.

Logistics for getting to the start of the race were another element to this challenge. The Combe Down Tunnel is not accessible by car, there are no local car parks either. Competitors had to carry their box or bag of supplies either  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile from North end or around 3 miles from the south (Bath end) to the start at the North end of the tunnel.

Bags and boxes were left outside the

tunnel at the competitors own risk. There was a loo tent and a support tent where we could get hot water and hot drinks a short distance away from the tunnel entrance, inside the tunnel there was a table with water, cola and snacks. Registration was 14:00 - 15:00 where the competitors were issued race numbers and dibbers for timing and lap counting.

At 15:30 on Friday 8th March there were 31 starters who were set off in small batches a few minutes apart to avoid congestion at the dibbers which were attached to the gates at either end of the tunnel. It was wet and windy as Storm Gareth had arrived.

I was nervous as I did not know what to expect, the race had never been run before so I was unable to research it. I am not keen on tunnels, I had

only ever run 113 miles in 33 hours as a previous long distance and never attempted to stay awake through 2 nights.

The first lap was not so bad but it was definitely longer than a mile. Later on I noticed markings on the floor that stated that the tunnel was actually 1700 metres long. The tunnel walls are a mixture of brick and bedrock, the bedrock was all strange shapes, I could see faces and animals in the walls. The floor is good smooth tarmac with a white line each side then loose stones at the edges. It was cold in the tunnel and south to north it was windy. At the north end, as it had been raining a while, water was leaking through the ceiling and the ground was wet.

The sounds went off at around 7 pm and there were less and less members of the public, there was no light at the end of the tunnel then the lights went off. Even though I had expected it to happen it was still a shock. I turned on my head torch and suddenly the tunnel was brighter than it had been when the lights were on. The tunnel seemed massive and the faces disappeared. As the night went on there were less and less runners. The already cold tunnel was even colder.

At 5 am the lights were back on and by 6 there was light at the ends of the tunnel again. At 9 am the sounds started again and the tunnel got busier. It was much busier than Friday afternoon.

I had 27 ½ hours to reach 100 times through the tunnel. I was a little worried as the tunnel was longer than a mile and I had done my pacing calculations on a mile. I was relieved to get to 100 lengths in 25 ½ hours 105.6 miles, that was without the trips outside the tunnel to the loo tent or the support tent for coffee.

As the sounds stopped in the tunnel for the second night there were only a few of us left and not many members of the public. I was spending a lot of time on my own. About 22:00 the tiredness kicked in, I struggled to focus my vision. I had a 15 minute power nap. Getting going was tough my muscles had stiffened up, it took

a couple of lengths to get going again and then the lights went off again.

I spent most of the night alone I think there were only about 9 runners left and we were all spread out. I was relieved when morning came, I hoped that it would stop the road and the walls moving around which had slowed me down enormously. I knew now that I did not have time to complete 200 lengths but I was not giving in until I could carry on no further. I had been managing a lap (2 lengths) in under half an hour but this had slowed overnight to around 40-45 minutes. There were soon only 4 runners left, I was the only female, the tunnel was really busy. I was moving much slower and struggling to keep warm. I layered up and carried on, but very slowly. Then there were three. On my 73rd lap I really struggled, the floor and walls would not stay still; I stopped and started, making very slow progress. My vision was all over the place, I was struggling to concentrate. It took me an hour and a half to complete that 3400 m. I dipped for the last time and handed my dibber over. I had gone as far as I could.

I failed to complete the 200 laps, I completed 146 laps in 46 hours 1 minute. The 2 men I left running, Bryan Clary and Alan Cormack were the only finishers, first was Bryan



who completed this amazing ultra in 50 hours 58 minutes and Alan in 54 hours 36 minutes.

This was a fantastic event, tough, not much stimulus, no gradual dimming of daylight, no slow down to perk you up but there was no navigation, no need to carry tonnes of kit, and the weather was not too much of an issue. The other runners were friendly and the race crew very supportive. I would recommend this race and would like to have another attempt some day.

Many thanks to Mark and the crew, Karen, Richard, Byron, Dave, Alister and Dean.

I am a long distance runner and triathlete from North Yorkshire. I started running in 2006 and completed my first 5 km in 2007. In 2010 I ran my first marathon and a year later completed my first ultra, The Round Ripon Ultra. I am 52 and I have completed several races over 100 miles and was the first female at Hardmoors 110 in 2017.



# The Tunnel Ultra

By Alan Cormack



I have participated in events organised by Mark Cockbain previously and when he announced the Tunnel Ultra in 2018, I was instantly intrigued.

The concept of the Tunnel Ultra, is 100 laps of Combe Down Tunnel near Bath with 55 hours to complete.

I had attempted the Viking Way in January during which I was timed out. My immediate thought when being driven to the finish line in Oakham, was that I did not want to compete in The Tunnel. I seriously considered pulling out. Once I had something to eat and a good night's sleep, I was glad that I hadn't said anything to Mark and didn't really give it much thought until a fortnight before the race.

It was when we received the Race Brief and telling us about the lack of parking near the start that I seriously

started thinking about the race.

What I wanted to do was to arrive in plenty of time, be well rested and be as relaxed as possible before the race start.

I immediately contacted the local hotel about being able to park in the car park and after being told of the cost, I decided to look elsewhere. I found a farm shop half a mile from the start who were more than willing to allow me to park my car and camp.

I arrived the day before the race, walked down to the tunnel entrance and ran down through the tunnel into Bath for a swim and a shower. I then understood when running through the tunnel, about the strange music and lights.

On the day of the race, I had a good night's sleep and walked down

through some muddy fields to the start line where I recognised quite a few of my fellow runners.

Due to the location of the race, all the runners had to be self-sufficient. Some runners had taken chairs and plastic storage boxes. All I took was an extra pair of trainers, some extra clothing and a carrier bag of food. I felt very lightweight!

At registration, we were all given a dibber to be worn around our wrist so we could "dib" in at the end of each lap.

After a group photo and a quick race brief, we set off in bunches of five at 5 second intervals.

As this was a railway tunnel, my GPS watch wasn't going to be of much use. I had no idea how to pace myself so I set out and started running at what

I felt was a reasonable pace. I did get a comment from another competitor that they felt I had gone off too fast so I made a conscious effort to slow my pace down. I had a long way to go and I didn't want to fatigue myself too early.

Another drawback of the uselessness of our GPS watches was that it was difficult to know how far we had actually gone and it was easy to lose track of how many laps we had done. There was a whiteboard which was updated occasionally with the lap count. During both nights, this wasn't updated due to Race Director Mark, staying in a luxurious hotel while we were running up and down a railway tunnel! It was reassuring to know that I was keeping well within the cut-off which was 100 miles in 27.5 hours. I was so paranoid about forgetting to dib in at the end of each lap, that on some occasions I was double dibbing and this confused me and Richard Weremiuk who was in charge of the tracking system.

Mark had kindly provided a checkpoint which was 100ft outside of the tunnel, this was a luxury small gazebo with the finest leftover Pot Noodles and Cup-a-Soups from The Hill On Tour Ultra. We felt very spoiled indeed and Mark is clearly going soft. Many thanks to Karen Webber, Dave Fawkner and Byron Crook who were superstars, keeping the kettle on the boil and masterful at keeping the Pot Noodles constantly on the go.

Time was just immeasurable in the tunnel and it was hard to tell the time or even tell what day it was. At some point during the race, runners were starting to take rest periods and have a sleep, covering themselves with foil blankets and Karen Webber's Dry Robe was also a very popular blanket. During a rare period when it wasn't being used, I grabbed it, put it on and lay down for 2 minutes on the path to shut my eyes only for Karen to give me a kick to tell me to get going again. She was very firm and I wasn't going

to argue.

During the night the lights went out and mercifully, the weird music was also switched off. During the evening, we had to use our head torches and it was actually easier to see as the tunnel lights were very dull.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> night, the number of runners started thinning out so when I was starting a lap, I suddenly realised that the number of runners had diminished and I was wondering where everyone had gone.

Come Sunday afternoon, I was surprised how few of us were actually left and it became a very lonely race apart from the general public running and cycling through. By the Sunday evening, we were down to four of us, Bryan Clary, Bobby Irvine, Lena Conlin and I. It was really surprising and disappointing that Bobby and Lena pulled out after such a heroic effort of getting so close and I really hope they come back and complete The Tunnel Ultra race as they are more than capable. That just left Bryan and myself who was 6 laps ahead of me and he asked to run with me so I ran with him until he became the first finisher. I had my last 6 laps to do on my own with the Tunnel



to myself. This was when I started hallucinating which was a very strange experience. I was so delighted to be on my final lap and I have never been so happy to ever finish a race, ever.

Once I had finished, Mark said that he had never wanted someone to finish a race more which meant a lot to me.

I want to say thanks to Mark, Richard, Karen, Dave and the other runners for all of their chat, encouragement and support. A special thanks to Byron who was an absolute superstar, who kindly drove me back to my tent at the farm as I couldn't face walking over muddy fields at 11pm.

I started running 14 years ago age 38, my first race was a 10k, it just about broke me! I enjoyed a few marathons then I stepped up to the D33, a local Ultra in Aberdeen before trying a 55 mile ultra and I continued to push the distance. I have done over 70 ultras now and it has given me so much, physically and mentally.



## Into The Light At The End Of The Tunnel

Opened in 1874, the 1,829-yard (1,672 m) disused Combe Down railway tunnel was once the UK's longest without intermediate ventilation. Closed in 1966 the tunnel now forms part of the £1.8 million Two Tunnels Greenway walking and cycling path which was opened on 6 April 2013 and is the longest cycling tunnel in Britain.

Choosing to stage a race over two days inside a tunnel immediately invokes archetypal images and ideas that have very deep roots. The proposition of a journey and a passage from darkness to light is the outer layer which many of us encounter in our day to day lives, passageways, corridors, underpasses, subways. Tunnels take us deeper into ourselves where we experience entering the dark, the unknown and places where we may have to deal with fear, hopelessness and despair. These are states of mind we usually try and avoid. (Click for more about the [symbolism of tunnels.](#))

Reaching the end of the tunnel and

not being able to enter the light is perhaps akin to the Hindu idea of reincarnation where we return and have another life until we reach a level of consciousness where it's no longer necessary. There are also parallels with the Native American vision-quest that is a part of traditional tribal ceremonies.

Ultras and especially multiday take us deeper within ourselves and the fewer distractions we have, the quicker we reach a more subtle strata of our being. If we are able to endure this inner tunnel and emerge into the light, invariably, as in the vision-quest, we bring back a gift of knowledge, some insight or a feeling that enables and encourages us to take our next step with renewed confidence and hope.

Like the sound of these challenges?  
There's more on the horizon.

- Battle of Hastings 100 - took place 6th July 2019
- Lon Las Cymru Ultra - Oct 2019



- The Chained Ultra (Escape From Meriden) - November 15th 2019
- The Hill Ultra on Tour - 13th December 2019
- Viking Way Ultra Winter Edition - 25th January 2020
- The Tunnel Ultra - March 6th 2020
- Flat Bastard 50 and Double Flat Bastard 100 - Sat April 4th 2020
- White Horse 100/50 Trail - 12th Sept 2020

[www.cockbainevents.com](http://www.cockbainevents.com)



# The Tunnel Ultra

After 26 hours

60 DNF	
A Cormack	53
B Clary	54
B Barker	51
E Cottan	50
B Irvine	54
C Hourilis	53
A Nest	47
L Conlin	47
R Giussani	48
N Wheeler	42 DNF
C Smith	40 DNF
F Ibarra Carbon	46
P Cury	43
A Mercer	39 DNF
M Haigney	34
S DAYE	43 DNF
M Rattan	50 DNF
S Braithwaite	42 DNF
A Hall	39 DNF
V Owens	25 DNF
A Kapeshi	21 DNF
C Fournis	25 DNF
B Crook	14 DNF
R Clarke	31 DNF
J Steele	7 DNF
S Myles	26 DNF
S Beasley	29 DNF
J Price	16 DNF
S Priggs	7 DNF
A MARTIN	21 DNF

After 26 Hours

Minimum  
50 Laps  
by 19:00



# The Tunnel Ultra



Bryan Clary

Name	Laps	Status	Hours
A Cormack	74		
B Irvine	81		After 39
B Clary	82		Hours
L Conlin	67		
D Barker	71	DNF	
C Howells	66	DNF	
A Nesbit	62	DNF	
E Cottom	71	DNF	
R Giussani	65	DNF	
F Guerin	51	DNF	
P Cury	49	DNF	
N Wheeler	62	DNF	
G Howells	60	DNF	
C Smith	40	DNF	
A Mercer	39	DNF	
M Haigney	34	DNF	
S Daye	43	DNF	
M Raffan	50	DNF	
S Braithwaite	42	DNF	
A Hall	39	DNF	
V Owens	25	DNF	
A Kashefi	21	DNF	
C Foulds	25	DNF	
B Crook	16	DNF	
R Clarke	31	DNF	
J Fyles	7	DNF	
J Beasley	26	DNF	
A Price	29	DNF	
S Spriggs	16	DNF	
J Steele	7	DNF	
A MARTIN	21	DNF	

Ellen Cottom



Dave Barker

## Final results

### The Tunnel Ultra

March 08, 2019

RESULTS -

#### The Tunnel

Pos	No.	Name	Team	Cat	Laps	Time
1st	6	Bryan Clary			100	50:58:41
2nd	31	Alan Cormack			100	54:36:12
3rd	2	Bobby Irvine			89	44:28:11
4th	25	Lena Conlin			73	46:01:10
5th	7	Dave Barker			72	37:22:27
6th	11	Ellen Cottom			71	37:36:55
7th	28	Carl Howells			66	31:48:56
8th	9	Riccardo Giussani			63	35:25:34
9th	10	Andy Nesbit			62	38:17:21
10th	8	Guillaume Arthus			59	25:10:33
11th	30	Fernando Ibarra Carbon			51	27:21:31
12th	15	Mike Raffan			50	23:40:56
13th	23	Pascal Cury			48	27:35:23
14th	16	Sammy Daye			43	24:01:55
15th	1	Stephen Braithwaite			42	19:52:40
16th	14	Neil Wheeler			42	24:26:06
17th	29	Anthony Hall			39	20:47:33
18th	33	Alan Mercer			39	24:00:14
19th	26	Claire Smith			39	24:01:49
20th	22	Mark Haigney			34	23:57:38
21st	12	Rick Clark			31	14:30:31
22nd	13	Simon Beasley			29	13:02:32
23rd	17	Alan Myles			26	13:10:26
24th	34	Vic Izzy Owens			26	15:45:22
25th	19	Chris Foulds			25	12:19:22
26th	24	Adrian Martin			21	09:10:48
27th	32	Aleks Kashefi			21	11:50:26
28th	20	John Price			16	10:54:25
29th	5	Byron Crook			14	08:56:18
30th	4	Sharon Spriggs			7	02:38:54
31st	27	Jon Steele			7	03:55:45



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*The Tunnel Ultra 200*

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