

## Mountain Marathons: An Overview

By Imogen Trinder (January 2021)

Mountain marathons are the reason I started fell-running. This is something that I owe to my dad, with whom I've run 5 of my 9 mountain marathons. Another way of putting this would be to say: it's all his fault! When I was younger, he would disappear for a weekend in October to take part in a mysterious event called the KIMM - at the time the Karimor International Mountain Marathon. Since 2006 it has been the OMM - the Original Mountain Marathon. I completed my first OMM in 2010.

The majority of mountain marathons are structured as two-day events, and have a number of options for different courses, split into two categories, linear and score. Both require good navigational skills, and it is impossible to recce any of the routes as you receive your map with the course details on the start line. Many named features, such as names of summits, are removed from the map, so even if you have visited an area before you would need to know it pretty well to be at any sort of advantage. It goes without saying that GPS is forbidden!

Linear courses are similar to any other fell race that requires navigation - you follow a series of checkpoints which must all be visited in the right order, but you can take the route of your choice between them. Score courses are slightly different. You have a time limit, and receive a map with a spread of checkpoints with different points values. Score class has a more tactical element, as you have to plan the highest scoring route you can manage in the time, bearing in mind that every 30 seconds you go over the time limit has a points penalty!

These days the OMM has the following course options available:

- **Elite**                      Approximately 85km and 4000m + ascent over two days.
- **A Course**                Approximately 65km and 3000m + ascent over two days.
- **B Course**                Approximately 45km and 2000m + ascent over two days.
- **Long Score**            Day 1: 7 hours, Day 2: 6 hours.
- **Medium Score**        Day 1: 6 hours, Day 2: 5 hours
- **Short Score**            Day 1: 5 hours, Day 2: 4 hours

Some years they have also offered a combined course, which features some compulsory checkpoints and a score section. I have always competed in score events, a variety of all three options depending on the circumstances of each year. Whilst the shorter options are clearly less time on feet (provided that all goes to plan), do not be fooled that they are less competitive. The leading teams in any of the score events are covering some serious ground in the time allotted, and the leaders on the linear courses are covering the fixed amount of ground seriously quickly.

Example map: Long Score Day 2, Langdale, 2017

So, you've chosen your course and you're gearing up for two days in the mountains in October, in the appalling weather the race organisers *always* order in specially. You'll probably be wanting some kit! The mandatory kit list piles up as follows...

Each competitor must wear or carry the following:

- Taped seams waterproof jacket with hood
- Taped seams waterproof trousers
- Clothing suitable for mountain running and walking
- Warm layer top.
- Hat, Gloves & socks
- Footwear suitable for fell and trail use
- Head torch capable of giving useable light for a minimum of 12 hours
- Whistle & compass
- Map (as supplied)
- Insulated sleeping system
- First aid equipment
- Survival bag (not a sheet)
- Rucksack
- Emergency rations (should still have at the finish line)
- Water carrying capability
- Pen/pencil for map marking (waterproof paper) in wet conditions
- Fully charged mobile phone

Each team must carry the following at all times:

- Cooking equipment including stove with sufficient fuel for duration of the race, plus some spare for emergency use, left at the end of the event
- Tent with sewn in groundsheet
- Food for 36 hours for two people

Papa Trinder's ultimate kit list also includes/specifies:

- Water purifying tablets
- Mug and spoon
- Tea bags
- Lighter
- Stove and fuel
- Pan
- Toilet paper (in plastic bag). The portaloos often run out!
- Sleeping mat - this can make a much bigger difference to overnight temperature than you might expect!
- Plastic bags for feet. There's nothing worse once you're finally in your warm, dry gear at the overnight camp, than the prospect of putting your feet in wet fell shoes to go to the loo! Many a competitor will be seen wondering around the camp with carrier bag socks on!
- Evening meal, pudding and breakfast. I like to take Expedition Foods dehydrated meals. They come in a variety of calorific options, and they actually taste like REAL FOOD, unlike some dehydrated meal brands.
- Bars/gels
- Electrolytes
- Compeeds
- Pants
- Fell shoes! One year, I did forget mine. Dad was not impressed.

Next up - training! If there's one thing I would recommend, it's practising with your pack. It's an easy thing to neglect, but once you've loaded up with 2 days worth of supplies and everything you need to wild camp safely in October, fatigue can set in pretty quickly. Those of you who have witnessed me chugging around Parkrun with a rucksack full of dumbbells/sleeping bags/bacon sandwiches may think I am mad, but trust me that you'll thank yourself during the final hour of Day 2! Beyond that, normal rules apply: practise back-to-back days, don't neglect speed work and get some elevation under your belt!

Some other golden rules...

- Once you're out there on your chosen course, **DO NOT FOLLOW OTHERS!** It is such an easy thing to do - something I've been guilty of on many occasions - but it is a really bad idea. There are at least six different courses live at the same time, and you have no idea whether the people you're following are going to the same checkpoint, or even if they're on the same course as you. The only circumstance under which this might be a good idea, is if you're planning to bail out and just want to get to the nearest marshalled checkpoint.
- Navigate together. Even if one of you is a stronger navigator, it's important to make decisions as a team, to both take bearings and to both keep an eye on any handrails and catching points. Two minds are better than one, and mistakes are easy to make when you're cold, tired and hungry.
- Double check the control, and ask your partner to as well. Each checkpoint will be labelled with two letters, and you will have to dib the control point with an electronic dibber attached to your wrist. If you dib a checkpoint that is not on your course, you could be disqualified or receive a points penalty. Hopefully this won't happen (as long as you're not following a random team you've spotted!) but occasionally you do happen upon a checkpoint on the way to the one you're looking for. It might sound a bit "belt and braces", but whoever I'm running with, I make sure we both confirm the letters aloud before any dibbing takes place.

And now, for some MM anecdotes! I would say I'm telling you the mistakes I've made so that you don't have to make them, but getting lost is kind of par for the course. I hope, however, that they will give you an idea of some of the highs and lows

## **2011: The Greatest Tragedy**

Day 1, medium score.

A tough day out in my £4.99 Decathlon waterproof, which definitely needs replacing for something better quality after this event. We leg it in to the overnight camp with 7 minutes to spare. 180 points, top third of the leaderboard. Excellent! As an old man and a 17-year-old, Dad and I are well impressed with this result. All going well so far.

Day 2. Victory has gone to dad's head. "I think we should do this," he says, gesticulating wildly at the map to indicate a route that we are definitely not capable of doing in 5 hours.

Me: Are you sure we can do that?

Dad: Yes, definitely.

Me: Okay!

Dad knows best after all.

4 hours later...

Me: Where the f\*\*\* is this f\*\*\*ing TEN POINT b\*\*\*\*\*d of a checkpoint?!

Dad: I don't f\*\*\*ing know, it should be here!

We are lost, looking for the lowest scoring checkpoint on the map, and have been for a good half hour or so. Almost two hours later and in a lot of pain and discomfort, we come in 50 minutes over time, losing all of the points we had accumulated on Day 2, as well as some of the points we had scored on Day 1. Devastation all round!



## 2019: The Biggest Win

As mountain marathoning is something of a family tradition, my sister and I are running the Medium Score in Largs. The walk from the event centre to the start line is about 2 miles, and by the time we get there, I already have blisters. Damn Inov8s. We have a slightly shaky start mucking around finding our bearings.

Navigating the remainder of the first day goes surprisingly well, and of the 7 OMMs I've completed, this is the first day that it has rained!

One of the problems with the overnight camp is that you arrive there around mid-afternoon. Whilst you'd probably not want to be out running for that much longer, after you've had your tea at 4pm there is absolutely nothing to do! Sitting outside the tent to socialise with other runners is impossible - torrential rain/sleet, dark and low temperatures drive everyone into their sleeping bags.

Because the event always takes place on the last weekend in October, we get an extra hour in "bed". This is an awful waste of a lie-in, especially when you've borrowed a tent off Paul Skuse that rains on the inside. (I jest of course, I am very grateful for the loan of his ultra-lightweight gear that I accidentally burned a hole in!)

The clear, dry weather on Day 1 is made up for on Day 2 - sideways sleet, high winds and low cloud make for an arduous 6 hours. To make matters worse, we are told that the finish line is further away than most years, and that we therefore an extra 15 minutes to stay out in the rain. Joy.

En-route, we keep bumping into the same team, one of whom turns out to be the organiser of the Saunders Lakeland Mountain Marathon (SLMM). Little do we know that come July 2020, such things will be a distant memory!

The day goes well but timing is tight - we come in with 10 minutes to spare. One of the great things about score courses is that when you finish, you have no idea whether the position your given will go up or down - just because a team finishes later than you doesn't mean they have fewer points, so until everyone has come in you can never be sure! On this occasion, however, we're over the moon to hold onto our place as second female team, my best ever result!



Finish Photo: Medium Score Day 1, Largs, 2019

### Fun facts

- Every year that ends with a 6, the OMM takes place in Galloway Forest Park.
- When the OMM is in Scotland, they wake you up with the sound of bagpipes at 6am on the morning of Day 2! (If it takes place elsewhere, a foghorn-volume alarm is the alternative.)
- In Borrowdale, 2008, the event was called off due to 'The Great Storm'. This was the only time the event has been stopped since it started 1968. The only time the event hasn't started was in 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which would have been the 53rd OMM.
- I have been carrying the same Snickers bar as my emergency ration since 2010.

If you haven't competed in a mountain marathon before, I would highly recommend giving it a go. It's the best kind of type 2 fun you can get. For fairer-weather runners, the SLMM or the OMM Lite are great summer options. At the more grueling end, there used to be Marmot Dark Mountains - an overnight, winter version. Sadly this event was retired in 2020, but I live in hope that someone will revitalise it. Other UK options include the ROC Mountain Marathon, Mourne Mountain Marathon and the Scottish Mountain Marathon. The OMM also run events in the Alps and Japan.

The women's fields at mountain marathons tend to be on the smaller side, and I for one would love to see more Fs on the scoreboard. Whatever your gender though, if you need any more info than my 2000-word ramble, you know where to find me - on a screen until further notice.