

Public Footpath
Porthgwarra 3 3/4 m

IN AT THE DEEP END

Paul Halford took on three back-to-back marathons on the South West Coast Path. His legs survived to tell the tale...

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What am I doing? Why did I agree to this? Is it too late to pull out?

Those questions kept me awake the night before travelling to Cornwall for the Clif Coast Ultra Xtreme at the Atlantic Coast Challenge. It was a night on which I really needed the sleep, as in less than 36 hours I would be starting out on an attempt to run three marathons in three days over the technical and hilly terrain of the South West Coast Path.

I'm normally the one wishing it was me when looking at others doing wacky things like FKTs or point-to-point ultra runs. Yet, when I have the chance to do anything adventurous and challenging, I nearly always turn it down. But I also knew that I didn't want to go through life saying, 'no' every time, so, with less than two weeks' notice, I signed up.

I had done more than a dozen marathons and a few ultras before, including a five-stage, 100-mile race in the Himalayas. However, running for me has mainly been about performance rather than completion. I've tended to run to achieve a certain time or position rather than deriving pleasure from the act itself or from simply finishing. So, knowing I wasn't in shape to challenge for the top positions or be happy with merely my pace at the ACC, I was left

wondering about my motivation.

I was to have plenty of time to think about this on the hour-long journey from the huge caravan site near St Ives that doubled as race HQ and accommodation site to the start of the first day near Mackerel Cove. We started off in three groups, and I was in the fastest category, which would start off last.

There was no traditional race start but, as we were wearing GPS trackers, our times would start from the moment we stepped outside the minibus. With the clock already ticking, I spent so much time faffing to secure my rucksack – full of an abundance of kit and accessories required by the rules – that I was virtually the last out of everyone to get going. Starting so far back put a lot of pressure on and perhaps I was a little too keen to get back to the leaders.

I had told myself I was there to enjoy it rather than race it but, even at what I considered to be a very slow pace, walking most of the ups, by halfway it was starting to be a struggle. The longest run I had done in the previous year was 16 miles and I hadn't done many others more than 12 miles recently.

The race was billed as self-navigation and, given it was basically following the most famous path in the country, finding your way wasn't quite as straightforward as I would have imagined. Keeping the



Gareth Warne carried a wheelchair on his back for the three days to raise funds for Rett Syndrome charity Reverse Rett

ocean on your right works 99% of the time, but sometimes the official path goes inland a little. An online app from the organisers VOTWO showing the route and the live locations of all runners was a help, but I still managed to get myself lost just before the checkpoint.

The mental setback of realising I had gone two miles further than necessary just made the physical trauma more challenging. A run along a beach near the end was particularly tough.

Then I realised that the route was probably back up some steep steps on to the cliff edge rather than following others who had presumably taken the wrong route across the flat sands. It was so tempting to just carry on but I did the honest thing and climbed the steps. Or tried to. At one stage, my legs completely seized up and wouldn't move. Not even walking backwards made it easier although, after a minute or two of stretching, I got going again.

I hit the finish in Perranporth in

around five hours – twice my marathon PB! I had spent most of the last few miles thinking there was no way I could put myself through it again the next day, and the day after that.

By the evening, despite the fact that I was struggling to walk, pulling out had given way to a decision that I would demote myself into the slowest of the three groups on day two. This time I would start among the earliest. I would just try to enjoy it, walk it if I had to. After all, despite the publication of results, the organisers insisted it was a challenge not a race.

For me, it turned out to be a little easier than day one but still an ordeal. This time my navigational skills resulted only in a mile extra. Again, the last few miles involved a beach section. At St Ives Bay, I chose clambering over slippery rocks over wading through thigh-high water. The finish line for day two was at the caravan site, after five hours and 41 minutes of 'never again.'



The sight everyone dreams of: the finish at Land's End

With my legs feeling even worse than after day one, I spent some of that evening reading through horror stories – reports from previous years regarding getting lost, going to be longer than a marathon, and it had plenty of extremely technical, rocky sections. Surely there was no way I wanted to put myself through it, I thought. I slept on it.

I woke up thinking that I had come too far to give up. Finishing would be incredibly hard but it was preferable to

the alternative: both myself and others knowing that I had quit.

I would at least head to the start and not worry about how long it was taking, simply make it my mission to get to the end. I would walk it all if I had to, and take all day if required. After all, there is something indescribably enticing about finishing at Land's End. What more rewarding a finish line could you want than the symbolic end of the island and end-point for the country's most famous point-to-point challenge? →



Keeping the sea to your right will help with navigation. Most of the time...

Coming up to the first checkpoint, I realised I had inadvertently cut off some of the course (it would later emerge to be perhaps around a kilometre). I spent some time considering if I should retrace my steps but then thought I would carry on and that it would make up for inevitably getting lost and running further at some point later on. I wasn't racing anyone, after all.

With my luck changing and still not adding on any extra distance, I reached the second and final checkpoint expecting to have only around 10km to go. The person manning the station insisted it was more like 10 miles! The further the race went on, the more over-distance it appeared to be from my conversations with others who had done the event before. It would end up at around 28 miles, according to my watch.

However, the complete change of mindset for day three helped hugely. The technical sections were nowhere near as bad as I expected. To be fair, a lot of my progress along the good terrain was so pedestrian that carefully picking my way over rocks and scrambling over boulders was not much slower. In contrast to most people, I enjoyed the last day the most.

The First and Last House Pub near Land's End is visible for miles from the end, but there's a tough uphill stretch to get to it. I thought that was the finish, but there was a further cruel incline.

I was a little emotional on the last few strides up the finish. I was so elated,



Exhausted but elated, Paul conquers demons to complete the challenge

I might just as well have run from John O'Groats. The traditional Cornish pasty laid on by the organisers at the finish was the best I've ever had. Normally, when finisher medals are thrown around my neck after an event, I toss them quickly into my bag and throw them away when I get home. This time was different, though. I even posed for a selfie whilst wearing it.

I spoke to a number of different people on the trip who do this sort of challenge several times a year. They live not for PBs but for the accomplishment of finishing. Could I become one of them? Well, at the very least, I'd shown myself

I'm a bit higher up on the 'stickability scale' than I gave myself credit for. And I now understand – if I didn't before – why people do these things for fun.

As the euphoria has since died down, I wouldn't say I'm fully converted (my legs won't let me forget). However, it's an experience I'll never forget, and I've no doubt the positive memories will long outlive the darker ones.

• For 2021, the Coast Ultra Xtreme is growing to a five-day event (October 6-10), with the Atlantic Coast Challenge sitting alongside over the same three-day route (October 8-10). Register for both at votwo.co.uk



RECORD RUN

The coast path FKT

Running about 80 miles in three days along the Cornish cliffs is difficult enough. But what does it take to run the entire 630 miles of the South West Coast Path in a little over 10 days?

Just a few weeks before the Atlantic Coast Challenge, Kristian Morgan broke Damian Hall's South West Coast Path FKT with a time of 10 days 12 hours 6 minutes. He started out at Poole Harbour in Dorset, and passed through Devon and Cornwall before ending up in Minehead in Somerset.

All the more impressively, he completed more than 100 miles on the final day with an injured quad impeding his movement.

The Inov-8 sponsored athlete would typically start at 4am and run in darkness for several hours. Although supported by his mother, who travelled around meeting him in a van, logistical mishaps on a couple of occasions left him successfully begging locals for water and, at one point, even the loan of a torch.

He also had to deal with a heatwave on some of the days. With very little cover on the coast, to help stay cool he made a makeshift 'legionnaire's flap' for his cap and took dips on the ocean.

Perhaps surprisingly, Kristian, who was fuelled by Purition products, did only around 60 miles a week in training.

Citing the mantra, "It's better to arrive 10% undertrained than 1% overtrained", clearly the mental side of the preparation was at least as important for him.

The online running coach undertook plenty of cold water swimming in a local lido in the build-up. "It's pretty darn cold and it takes a lot of determination to swim in cold water so I used that as part of my mental strength training," he said.

Kristian, who hopes next year to attempt an FKT for the Appalachian Trail, added: "Every ultra you start there is that point of, 'I can't do this', but you go past it and then you think, 'I can do it' and you draw on those experiences of overcoming what you didn't think was possible."

So what does it take to be mentally ready for a challenge such as this?

"It's down to desire, ultimately," believes Kristian. "If you don't have the desire to do something, you're not going to do it, but if you really have the desire you'll be motivated and you'll want to push. I was motivated and had the desire to go for this long trail this year. Mentally, that really helped me. I never really thought, 'I'm going to quit' because I wanted it so much."

"I think the mental aspect is huge. If you don't have the right reasons for wanting to do something, I don't think you'll be as successful."



Run or walk, this three-day epic is as much for those who aim to complete as those who compete