

Patrouille Des Glaciers (PDG) 2008.

Thank you so much for sponsoring me to do the PDG. We have been overwhelmed by your generosity. I did the race on March 18th with team-mates Jeff Colegrave and Anders Swensson. The challenge was met, the goal achieved, my feet may never look the same again, and a fabulous sum of just over £28,000 was raised for the small charity of Auditory Verbal UK. They are as supremely thrilled as we are.

I started a fairly strenuous training schedule in January comprising long gym sessions, skinning (walking up-hill on skis) in the mountains and running up hills pushing Henry in the buggy. Long gym sessions made me feel I was making rapid progress and the trainers were generous in their praise, but as someone pointed out, the average age of members of the Bath & Racquets Club is 60. I moderated my optimism.

The low point was skinning up one afternoon from Verbier to Attelas. The weather closed in, I became lost and disorientated, had to call the emergency services and was finally rescued by a ski patrol, from the piste, and only 15 minutes from the village!

My emotions lurched from thinking we could do a good time and all would be well, to wondering how I could possibly conceive of attempting such a feat.

Eventually, Friday April 18th arrived and, for those interested, I give a synopsis of events below:

1300: We leave Verbier in convoy, and head for the village of Arolla. Over the preceding 3 weeks, the Swiss Army have poured alpine troops into Valais, and stationed them at Zermatt, Arolla and Verbier and at the various control gates en route. They have prepared the fixed ropes at the inhospitable places in the mountains and cut snow steps on the steepest terrain.

1500: We check in at the not very welcoming school hall in Evolene. A team of soldiers check our packs – avalanche transceivers, shovels, rope, compass, head torches, the list goes on. Anders, our third team member and local guide, is informed his rope was 30 cm below regulation (it is 29.7 metres!). Go and collect a 50-metre Swiss Army rope or find another of the correct size. Return and have it rechecked. Swiss efficiency; they could have done with this rigour at UBS. The sunshine we have left in Verbier is now gone. The wind is up and it is discernibly colder.

1800: Assemble in the windswept marquee on the edge of Arolla. Supper, safety briefing, and announcements. Brigadier Marius Robyr notes that deteriorating weather means that there is a question over the race being run. A front is coming in from Zermatt bringing snow and high winds. Further announcement at 20.00 hours.

20.00: The race is on. Return to our dormitories, which look as if they were last used for the filming of the Great Escape.... come to think of it...

2100: Check our kit, tape up our feet to deal with the inevitable blisters, fill water bottles, and pack our surplus items into bags that will be trucked back to Verbier. Some gentle Swiss humour filters down the corridor - not too many Brits seemed to have signed up. Skis, goggles, beeps, glasses, a fully charged Swisscom emergency phone for each team, survival bag, compass, electronic ID tag, harness, rope, energy gels - backpack for it to all go in.

2200: Sleep - Yeah right! Hut life is not for me.

0230: Wake up, or rather, get up. Put on kit, pull on backpack and switch on head torch. Climb on the bus back to Arolla for race preparations.

0400: First team leaves as the snow falls, and the only colour visible in the dark is the red jackets of the Swiss army competitors. 90 minutes to go.

0430: Skins on - visit the loos - check skins - revisit the loos - check the camelback water hose hasn't frozen - proceed to warm up. Why do we have to do some warm-up skinning when we have 8 hours of it ahead of us?

0530: Starter's gun, snow is falling and we are off. The breathing and click of boots on bindings are all that can be heard as the climb begins. It's black, bleak, snowing, and windy.

We find some rhythm and tuck in behind one another, slightly unconvincingly. Anders sets the pace. There is no conversation. We move quickly and as the light appears, just after 0615 we can see the Col de Riedmatten. The control gate is below it and that is the cut off. We keep pushing on and make it 1 hour and 15 minutes. Initial relief.

Skis go on our backpacks, 300 feet of climbing up to the top of the col. Two Helicopters sweep in and hover, like a scene from Apocalypse now surveying the hundreds making the ascent. At the top, we grab the fixed ropes and start making our way down until it is flat enough to put on our skis. Two narrow trenches run down the mountain and they are jammed with bodies

trying to descend as quickly as is safe. Some of the professionals come down the middle of us, running down the 40 degree icy couloir, pushing the rest of us aside.

We get to the flat bit – skis off the pack and put them on. Struggle to put boots into ridiculous lightweight bindings. Goggles are covered in snow. Put on drier gloves. Breathing hard. Feeling sick. Cannot face an energy gel. Training was easier than this. Snowing still.

Off we go, push, skin, pole, and it is going to be like this for too long. The pros seem to keep passing us, while we (I) labour away. Am finding it a lot harder and I expected to be a lot quicker. I am the weakest link.

Next; the Barma Hut. It's another cut off, but we are fine for time. I am now feeling rotten. A cup of thin soup from an army canteen is thrust in my hand and a slice of orange. The sun peeps out. "Let's go," calls out Jeff without irony, or sympathy. Hut-man.

We keep on skinning to the bottom of the Rosa Blanche. Suddenly it is crushingly steep and kick-turns (zig-zagging up the mountain) are needed. I look up; right up the back of the Rosa Blanche. It is 1,200 feet of ascent. There are hundreds of competitors toiling up it. This is the middle of nowhere, there is not a ski lift for miles and yet it is a mountain studded with human endeavour. Each person is kicking his or her boot into the mountain side, step after step. On the tricky sections, there is a rope to hang on to. I look down; I am only at the bottom of it. Skis off, start climbing, or "boot packing" as someone once named it. Bloody silly name.

I keep on counting to 50 and then again, and then again. Every time I look up it seems so far that I don't want to look again. One step then another, people immediately behind and in front, you cannot stop. Occasionally I slip and my pulse explodes - 500 feet to go.

Then, just under the ridge, I hear cowbells and cheering. These spectators have been up half the night, making the journey on their own skins across the glacier to see this race and cheer the competitors on. I am amazed, humbled and dazed.

We make the top, which is 10,000 feet. No time to enjoy the view, although the sun is now out and you can see the back of Mt Fort in the distance. Head down, attach skis and push on. Ski on, lots of fresh snow, lots of bumps. Then I hear Jeff who, for the first time in hours, is behind me, shout out. He has hit a bump and one of his lightweight, super-evolution, carbon fibre state of the art skis has just broken as it hit the base of a mogul.

This is a 3 person per team race; 2 man teams finishing don't count. Jeff cannot believe it - nor can I - (less of a weak link now though). He skis slowly to Anders, who is fixing on the skins again. Last climb: Col de la Chau. Anders duct tapes the ski - it can travel up hill just fine but will be a big problem on the way down. Also, Jeff is 6 feet 3, weighs 15 stones, and he cannot be helped down by a skinny Anders and a wheezing Simon unless we are going to finish the race tomorrow.

We drag ourselves up, blisters chafing hard. Suddenly the crowds are at the top. They offer us food and drink, as the teams make the Col, rip off the skins for the last time, and prepare for the 3,000 feet ski down.

We are off, and it is a run we all know. We have to go slowly; Jeff's ski is flapping around like a semi-detached body part. Every 50 yards he hits a bump and the ski buckles, and so does he. We carry on as best we can, progressing nevertheless.

Ruinettes: We are getting close. The snow is slushy and weekend skiers look at us with bemusement. 1000 feet of downhill remains.

Down to the Medran lift station. Skis come off and we hastily put them on our backpacks. 1km to the finish line. The blisters are now crying out and the boots are like sandpaper; we try to run. I am suddenly pretty overcome by it all. We are nearly there. The race is nearly over. No more skinning ever again. We try to get a rhythm going as we jog, but it's not so fluid after seven hours of grind. The crowds are huge. They are magnificent, enthusiastic, uplifting.

We can see the finish. Friends are in the crowd. Huge cheers. Huge tears. Thankfully, my sunglasses are on.

The finish: Pass the line and we are here. We register. We hug each other. Our time is 7 hours and 5 minutes. The time is good; not the quickest but we have beaten a lot of Swiss army teams and many others. It's over. We did it, the money is raised, someone hands me a beer, and the sun is shining.

Well, somehow it was not so bad. A second beer and the memories are already rosier.

And so it is, mission accomplished. This was an alpine race typically undertaken by *les hommes des alpes*, and joined, in our case, by the odd urban interlopers. We did not scale Everest, nor was it the Marathon des Sables, but it was the most gruelling challenge I have undertaken.

There were teams that didn't make the cut off, and others that pulled out along the way. It was hideous. It was exhilarating.

I want to thank you all again. Auditory Verbal UK has transformed Henry's life and your money will allow other children to be as fortunate. Jacqueline Stokes who runs AV tells me they will now be able to ramp up the number of small children who can be offered training and therapy. The funds raised will make a huge difference to this little organisation and to lots of little lives. Thank you for your generosity and thank you, Katie, for it was your idea.

As for me, they only run this race every other year, but in 2010 there is the 16-hour one they start from Zermatt.....