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Pristine Love for Running, with a Little Madness

BY GAËL DUTIGNY

On the last weekend of October, the little town of Albi in the south of France hosted a prestigious but grassroots event: the Albi24H (which will host the 24-hour World Championships next October*). I was there, scouting the affair and watching a brave Canadian friend, Thomas Beyer, rehearse for next year. It rained, but I was elated. The local food, the folklore, the people and the calm, easy vibe brought me back to the origins of our sport.

Everybody in Albi was highly courteous on the start line and in the race. Some people in the male and female categories came to Albi24 to secure a spot on their national teams. Two Frenchmen passed the 255k bar, which was the minimum qualifying distance for next year's World Championships and made it while being cheered by their families and two official national team managers. My friend Thomas met the 190k minimum requirement for his own Canadian national team (we'll find out later if he makes the team), and a Brit named Chris Kelly won the event with an impressive 273.3k (170 miles). Watching someone run consistently for 24 hours non-stop at a speed most can barely maintain on a simple road marathon is quite something.

That is one of the reasons Albi24H was such a party: the venue. I used to think nothing could beat trail running and hours of solitude anywhere in the wild, and I still consider a mountainous or deserted terrain quite a trip and a flawless place for letting go of tensions, digging deep into our souls and making new friends, both animal



and human. But such a small venue where men and women connect in peace and happiness for 24 hours without a single disruption from the

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busy world around us is quite a gift. The course was intelligently designed around two connected stadiums, and

runners went quickly from one track to another with some uneven pavement in between. The very first loop of the race was precisely 1307.56 meters, and all the other loops were 1495.34 meters. For the 100k race, you had to loop it all 66 times ($66 \times 1495.34 + 1307.56 = 100k$). Runners, crews and volunteers were all mixed up together in the somewhat confined space, having to share one single, but very well-managed, aid station. The race management gave a table and two chairs to each couple of runners, but most had a single table to organize their personal gear and nutrition. On our left were a husband and a wife from Sweden – she was running and he was crewing. On our right was a couple from the Netherlands – the wife was crewing and her husband

The track at the Albi 24H in France. © GAËL DUTIGNY

was running. In the middle was a single Frenchman doing the race alone, with no crew. French, American, Canadian, Swedish and Dutch. We were all equal men and women facing our good old ultrarunning gods.

The race started at 10 a.m. on Saturday and by midnight, our three teams had all experienced our share of drama, tears, vomit, sore muscles, flared-up tendons and irresistible little naps. While the Swedish lady cried and later almost passed out on one side of the track, my friend Thomas repeatedly yelled out on an isolated and dark corner of the other track to self-motivate and overcome leg pain. We all thought he

lost his mind for a bit, and he may very well have. I later found him with three English-speaking women, crew members for another athlete, all taping his bloody nipples and caressing his sore shoulders. I grabbed him by the shorts and pushed him back on track. I assumed the French were the only natural-born lady killers, but clearly, the Canadian (mad)men are not to be trusted either.

Running for 24 hours on a loop is a funny, crazy thing. But it's so fun to watch. After 10-12 hours, our Dutch friend decided to quit. He gave me a 20-minute, solemn explanation of why it made sense to DNF and what he would tell his friends and coaching students back in his home country. He sounded inebriated, surely out of exhaustion and adrenaline. His wife, an elite marathoner from the Netherlands, listened

silently but could hardly hide her laughter. Her husband had entered uncharted mental territory, and his delirium was as unhinged as it was comical. After a good 2-hour nap, it may even have been 3 hours, that same man returned fresh as a saltwater fish and ran faster than before, to the astonishment of his wife, myself and everyone around who had paid close attention to the circus.

Everyone on that track was struggling, but almost no one broke down in anger or frustration. The people who commit to racing ultras on a track are special. I think it takes incredible humility, a pristine love for the act of running and, a little bit of madness, too. An elite Frenchman proudly wearing his national team colors went zigzagging for several laps before disappearing from the event and never returning. Mr. Molle, a 74-year-old Frenchman

with his 12-year-old miniature pinscher dog, Alvin, in his arms, crewed his son Willy on the rook for about 8 hours. He had piercing blue eyes, a smile larger than life and an unconditional love for the sport and his son. He seemed so stoked just to be there, in the middle of the battle, with us all cheering, crying and yelling. Mr. Molle was undoubtedly enjoying every second of this pleasant chaos. His son Willy ended up winning the rook event with a time of 7:52:03.

Last but not least, none of this would have been possible without the determination of the race organizer, Didier Thiriot, and his team. Setting up such an event repeatedly over the years in a small French town like Albi, almost a medieval village, is no small feat. That's ultra-endurance right there. His French playlist from 30 years ago was quite

something. I've made new friends in France and that feels incredibly good.

*Albi, France, was previously the host of the 2016 European Championship 2016 and the 2019 World Championship. ▲

GAËL DUTIGNY was born in France, lived for many years in Mexico, and only embraced ultrarunning in college. As a journalist, he has traveled extensively and lived in Italy and India for many years. A 4-time UTMB, 10-time Marathon Des Sables, and 17-time Ironman triathlon finisher, he is now based out of Southern California, where he bakes daily croissants for his American wife, and raises their little zoo composed of a black cat, a gentle snake, a biting bearded dragon and an even more dangerous Chihuahua named Vasquez Joséphine Kiwi.

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