

**Legends Trail 2023, the one that had it all...**



As you all know, I only write a report if it was a special run and this one surely qualifies. A bit of history, as written in my first legends report (2018), I started as a volunteer in the first edition of legends trail (2016). I saw the pain and suffering and promised myself never to try to participate in such a gruesome race. A lot has changed since then. This was my third time and second finish of this ultimately beautiful race. If you win, the only real reward is a free ticket for the next edition, which I gladly accept. This may sound strange to a lot of fellow runners but I can't wait to go back to the dark and cloudy hills of the Ardennen. As you may guess already, I really enjoyed this edition. I said it repeatedly to the volunteers, the track is extremely hard and technical but of course that is just the thing I'm looking for in this type of race. Before I write a short race report I would like to stress the fact that a finish in this race is a work of many years, to be able to compete and enjoy the race is an even longer journey. There are so many details of this race that have to run perfectly. I would like to explain some of them so maybe you can all learn and use this information for your own trip. Of course these tips are individual and may not apply to you all but there might be a lesson for all that want to learn. You can of course skip this section and move on to the race report directly.

To navigate I use my Garmin fenix 6x, I never had a problem finding the right path and when I was a bit distracted or unattentive, my watch signaled this and I could track back a few meters to take the right road. Though I didn't need it, I had an Etrex 35 as backup, even a second Etrex in the drop bag. As a backup for these I knew I could navigate to the PC's using my Garmin explore app on the smartphone with offline maps. The devices are also worthless if you don't have the necessary hours of nightly navigation expedition experience where you learn to find your way in the dark woods and paths have disappeared.

My feet were impeccable during the whole race. Arriving at the checkpoints, my feet were always dry and without any injury. To achieve this I choose Enji toe-socks and compression socks. Two layers of socks prevent blisters, toe-socks even more. Compression socks take care of the swelling of the ankles, no swelling for me. For the passage of the Venen I chose waterproof socks in combination with the toe-socks, resulting in dry feet after this horrible muddy section. I also changed shoes at every checkpoint. Choosing for ideal grip on wet rocks and trees for the first part (Ourthe-paths: salomon wildcross: gtx), more cushioning for the second section (hoka speedgoat 4) but still a decent grip. For the third section I had my Altra Olypus in combination with the sealskinz socks, perfect grip there. From CP3 to CP4 I used my La sportiva shoes but those were not the best choice because the grip was not ideal for the steepy parts from Spa to Theux, my feet were dry nevertheless so no real bother.

The last section I knew the terrain would be very slippery and I still wanted to race so I had my Inov8 X-talon shoes that have excellent grip for this terrain. I knew that having wet feet for this last section wouldn't pose any problems so no problems there.

As for food, I had my fair share of stomach issues but managed to overcome most of them using some tricks I learned over the years. The hot meals on the CP's don't work so well for me as I don't take enough time to sit, eat, or digest properly. I made the mistake of trying to eat some food on CP1 to CP3 but I skipped the hot meal on CP4, I should have skipped them all and rely on the food I know works for me. I carry wraps with cheese/majo/salad and have some in the dropbag, which I can eat easily and repeatedly. If I would have done the whole trip with those, there would not have been any stomach issues. I never had any real energy problems as I had some trick to get the calories needed. In my camel I have a mixture of isotone powder and ORS which I know very well and I never get bored of, enough hydration there. When needing some sugar I could use some 'druivensuiker' or some wine gums which always seem to work for me. For the hard sections at the end of each stage I had a bottle of cola to give the extra energy to keep up the rhythm. So I could always count on my sugar and water supplies.

On the mental side of things I think my long experience in these events does the most. Last year I ran 6000 km with 160.000 m D+ and over the last 6 years I've been averaging 100 km weeks, all without serious injuries. This legends edition I ran 90% of the race solo and had no real issue with that. I'm really used to 'running in the zone' so I'm only focused on keeping on moving and making it to the next CP. In the nightly hours I listen to an audio book about training to keep my mind in the game. For me this is one of the more attractive parts of these events. You only have to think about finishing this race, tackling all the challenges the race presents. I really don't think about anything else and enjoy the simplicity of this action. One goal, one focus. Of course it helps to know a lot of real friends are also on the track or following at home, running the race with you, at least in thought. I do consider myself lucky to be able to go all the way without really having to suffer. I still think I'm less challenged there than a lot of my fellow runners that have to dig real deep to just be able to finish or go as far as possible. I always say I'm a comfort runner and that didn't change in this race. Ivo passed me at CP3 and I had no problem letting him go, I had no need to force myself to push my limits, second place is enough and I rather enjoy the race than to win it. One thing more on the mental side, I arrived early at the start so I had time to analyze the track in detail. As I knew at least 80% of the track I could build a mental picture of the race with different sections and difficulties (mudd, steep hills, technical terrain,

long boring sections, ...). For some this is a disadvantage but for me it helps to manage the race.

As for sleep management there wasn't a lot to manage. I had a lot of experience with power naps of 10 min. Just taking a nap at the side of the road in the forest worked super for me. When I tried this now I woke up instantly because of the never lasting rain on my face, no sleep allowed. This caused some periods of half-sleep-run where I didn't really progress as I wanted. I had some caffeine pills and a gel to counter the effects but luckily when the sun came up these moments disappeared magically as I had experienced before.

Back to the race.

It was a great surprise to start at the 'barrage de Nisramont', a well kept secret. Though I didn't really enjoy the bus ride as we were all just eager to start the race and enjoy the last bit of sunshine before the last dark night. I had done some hikes with the family in December in this region and in November last year I did the 205 km long 'nightcrawler' at the shores of the Ourthe so I knew the terrain very well. I also remembered a lot from 'great escape', previous legends editions. As this was really my type of terrain, I started off quite well to end up as the leading runner after the 25 kms loop. The tempo was challenging at the start as everyone was eager to get this thing done. I tried to focus on a rhythm I could manage in the long term. It seemed this was rather fast so I stayed in front for about 100 kms. From the Ourthe to CP1 was almost a copy of the 2018 edition (but in the other direction) which I ran on race day then and in many training sessions before so the terrain was well known. I managed the 20 km long climb to the Baraque Fraiture quite well and knew there was a 10 km descent to CP1 as a reward. I knew I had a little advantage on the second runner so I made the stop short so I would be gone when the next runner came in. The next section was rather smooth with some of the few 'runnable' sections of the trail. I knew that at km 72 the real fun would start with about 12 climbs, one after the other up to CP2. As the hills were very steep, running was out of the question. Running downhill was also a challenge in this edition: too steep or rocky/muddy to make speed. I think this was one of the factors that made this edition hard, no easy downhill recovery. Most of the hills were known from last year and my countless D+ trips in this region, it was like playing in my backyard. I tried to keep my own tempo rather than focus on the others but apparently it was a fraction faster than most. I have to be honest, I thought the last few hills before the CP would destroy most runners as they were so steep and muddy I thought only few would make it before the cutoff. My head start on the other runners was limited now and I could talk to them before I took off for the next section. I felt strong but saw my competitors going the same pace so I knew the race was far from

finished. The next section was again all on well known terrain, I ran hours on these high planes in all seasons in all conditions. It was great to be able to do these sections in daylight but this was also the baddest section as for the weather. It had been raining on and off for 24 hours and there was a fearsome wind. I'm glad I still had enough energy to keep on running as having to pass here at hiking speed at night must have been really hard. I know navigating these swamps must have been a challenge for most but having done the 3 rivers of pain (track by Maarten/Marek) numerous times I knew every rock and bridge to cross. No fastest time here but I still could enjoy these beautiful rivers. I was still leading the pack, no idea what the competitors were doing. When I arrived at CP3 I needed a longer break. I had to take some time to eat as I was having troubles with the stomach. I also wanted a 10 min sleep. Ivo and Volker came soon. When Ivo wanted to start he asked me to join him and I thought this was a good plan. Because of the stomach I couldn't follow his tempo and I was slowing him down so I told him to move along. I had my hardest time then, I wanted to sleep 10 min but couldn't because of the rain so I really struggled there. I even had trouble following the track because of the continuing rain. My shoes didn't have a good profile so I had to manage the descents with great care. But I struggled on and managed to limit the damage to 20 min at cp 3.1. At that point daylight brought new energy and I could hike/run at a decent pace again until CP4. Between Spa and CP4 there were some crazy steep sections with or without paths, hard and enjoyable. I saw Ivo here and he looked fine but told me he found me 'looking too fresh'. I left the CP and Ivo had a 30+ min advantage on me. I fixed my gear, got rid of my raincoat (it actually stopped raining, incredible) and went for it in t-shirt and race-shoes. My legs felt strong (as they did all of the race) so I decided to race the last 50 kms. Ivo knew I might try so he was hard to catch, I needed 2 hours at a crazy speed to catch him. On the steepest/longest climb I passed him, taking a little advantage (175 m D+ segment, I ran the 8th time according to Strava). From that point I pushed all the way to the finish, going down very hard even on technical terrain and giving it all uphill (a bit slower than hoped). All went according to plan, the legs didn't give up, the feet were fine, everything was fine, I could really live the victory, enjoy the finish. As a reward I found my wife and children at the finish, no better finish than this with my own family and my running family.

Great trip, I will be back to enjoy this event.