

HEART OF DARKNESS

With two ultra-distance events under their belts, Team *Men's Fitness* were ready for the toughest challenge of the lot. But could mountains and deserts really prepare them for the Amazonian jungle?

Words Joel Snape Photography Christiane Kappes



With 200km of running through the Amazonian Floresta Nacional de Tapajós in Brazil, the Jungle Marathon is one of the toughest ultra-races

on earth. Racers start in the remote town of Itapuama, and spend six days tackling swamps, hornets, vines and jaguars en route to Alter do Chão. Of the 106 runners that started the race, only 65 finished.

Nick: This one wasn't like the other races, where you came away going, 'Amazing experience, amazing people, I'd love to do it again.' Do I regret doing it? No, absolutely not. Would I do it again? Never, and I wouldn't recommend it to my worst enemy. But as a life experience, I'll never, ever forget it.

Darren: On the night before the race the organisers took our medical

assessments – they tested our pulses to make sure we were all right, checked our documentation. It all seemed quite in order.

Alex: You also realised that you were relying on the local hospitals, but it wasn't until later on that we realised how significant that would be.

Nick: Then we sorted out our kit bags. Alex was running with a 20kg bag, Darren and I were running with 18kg, carrying all our food for five days. On a normal day I'll eat 6,000-7,000 calories. Here you'd be eating two 800-calorie meals and expending 7,000 calories a day, but you couldn't carry much more. With water on top it was a crazy, crazy weight.

Darren: We all went to sleep that night in our Hennessy Hammocks. The guys who didn't have them were the most jealous people on earth. Those hammocks were so comfortable.



Team MF (left to right: Darren, Nick and Alex) waded through one of the Jungle Marathon's many swamps

Who is Team Men's Fitness?

Team MF was originally Darren Roberts, Nick Tidball and his twin brother Steve, all keen endurance athletes. In November last year an impressive performance in a special Team MF selection event bagged them a slot as representatives of MF and Berghaus at three of the world's toughest ultra-distance races. In the Namibia Ultra Desert Marathon, Steve dropped out with a broken foot and heatstroke – but the team also befriended Alex Bamford, who's previously taken silver in the European Duathlon Championships. Injury forced Steve to pull out of race two – the Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc – and with one race to go, Alex stepped in.

Day One
Itapuama to Dona Irene, 16km

Darren: The course material description of the first day was, 'It's a hideous, short sharp shock.' We were going, 'It's 16km, how bad can it be?'

Nick: It was insane. First off there was a water crossing, so you're soaked from the start. Then you're on the steepest slopes you've ever seen, way steeper than in the Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc. And you're running on fire ants, bullet ants, sharp vines. It's like the jungle's hitting you – my legs got lacerated by those vines. It's little things like that that you can't prepare for. And my hands swelled up – they were like watermelons.

Alex: That was my worst day. I was shocked at the amount of fluid I was losing and I started to feel sick, but fortunately we went fairly steady until the course flattened out. Even the

Darren: The medical team was very busy, and with several of them accompanying Danny and Darren to hospital, that left no plan B in place and the race seemed to be understaffed.

Day Two
Dona Irene to Paraiso, 22km

Darren: The course notes said, 'Day two is longer and faster, but wetter, with more swamps.' It took us about five-and-a-half hours.

Alex: At first we were a bit cautious with the swamps, but you soon realise there's no way you could tiptoe around – you'd wade in and then suddenly be up to your neck in brown water.

Nick: This was the day I spotted a boa constrictor while I was having a piss.

Darren: We finished the day in good order, no blisters, had a nice shower and settled down

'The first day was the worst. I was shocked at how much fluid I lost and felt sick'

eventual winner, Ryan Sandes, had a bad day on the first day.

Nick: Although we did OK and came in about 25th on the first day, it was a bit of a headfuck for me. Normally after a race you'll stretch properly, have a drink and relax. What we had was the antithesis of that. About four hours after we finished most people had made it in, but that's when shit started going wrong.

Darren: This guy called Darren Baker had a fit on the beach. Within an hour of that another guy called Danny Nightingale went down with a seizure.

Nick: From what we've heard, Danny's seizure lasted between eight and 11 hours. We're told when he got to hospital, they gave him diazepam and then he was in a coma for two or three days. The last thing we heard he was in hospital in Brazil with pneumonia. [Note: The race organisers tell MF that Nightingale has returned home safely.]

between the trees. We were only a couple of hours shy of the lead guys, but it was becoming obvious that a lot of the other racers were getting slower. We'd run with a Swiss bloke called Christoph – lovely bloke – and at one point we turned around and he was on the med mat with an IV drip in his arm from dehydration. It was also the first time we realised that the people in the villages we were staying in were trying to nick our stuff.

Nick: This was when people started to get pissed off.

Day Three
Paraiso to Pini, 38km

Darren: This was a bad day for me. I didn't have enough food during the day, because I was sharing mine with Nick and making sure Alex had enough to eat because he's only five per cent body fat. I didn't think I'd be the one to suffer.

Nick: We set off at 6.30am. It was a long day. A lot of it



A sweating Darren tries to deal with the tropical conditions



Alex and Darren (below) pause to hydrate their suffering bodies



was walking, but when you started running you felt like you'd explode. At one point we hit this sweet village and loads of kids came out to greet us. Alex and I were both holding kids' hands – it was genuinely heartwarming. Straight after that checkpoint there was a hill and Darren looked like he was going to die.

Alex: He went really quiet and slowed up a lot. He managed to eat a PowerBar and after about 15 minutes he just started gassing off, going, 'Look at where we are! This is amazing! Look at these swamps! Do you think we should take a picture?' Then an hour later he crashed again.

Darren: I've hit these walls in Namibia, in the UTMB, when I was in the Army... I suppose a lot of people would quit, but I just get my head down, shut the fuck up and get on with it – nut through it. Nick and Alex knew to leave me alone.

Alex: At one point, Darren said, 'I'm drawing on every sinew of experience I've got to nut this one

out, lads.' That made us laugh. He was never going to stop.

Nick: You don't need people going, 'How are you?' You just let them get on with it. But then we got to the shittiest camp of the lot. We were being eaten by flies, there was shit everywhere, no showers, we were washing in the Amazon so it infected our cuts. And one of my expedition foods had gone rancid in the bag somehow. All of a sudden I had this massive energy deficit, a real low. I could have cried. But there were people in way worse conditions than us. People were getting covered in rashes and whiteheads.

Darren: Nick was starting to get abrasions on his heels and, remembering what [survival expert] Colin Towell [see box on p63] had told us, I said, 'Sort it – now.' Nick said, 'Nah, I'll be fine.'

Nick: You know he's right, but you're going, 'What fucking difference does it make, I can't get clean, there are ants on the floor and I'm covered in shit,



At Pini camp, with no showers available, the racers are forced to wash in the river

'My groin was burnt, my heels were raw, and I was right at my pain threshold'

and the only place I can wash is the Amazon, which is full of shit too. What's one blister in this whole heap of shit?

Day Four Pini to Tauari, 24km

Darren: We all set off together, but decided to let Alex go ahead because he was in good order. I took it steady at the start, to gauge how I was.

Nick: This was the first time you were running on your own, and you'd start to hear shit... hornets, monkeys, jaguars, the place was alive. We'd been told a jaguar won't hunt you unless it's teaching its babies to hunt. But a lot of people saw jaguars, or got tracked by them.

Darren: Nick and I ran together for half an hour, but I felt good so I left him. Actually I had an amazing day. Alex came ninth, I came in about 25 minutes later. Nick came in two hours after us – we were really worried about him.

Nick: My groin was burnt to shit, my heels were raw, and I was at the threshold of how much pain I could take. My heels had gone from manageable blisters to infected, and the doctor put me on penicillin. Other people seemed willing to put up with trench foot or gangrene – but I wasn't at war.

Darren: We tried our hardest to persuade him to keep going. For me these races



Alex's feet are attended to by a medic at the end of day five

are about regret – I don't ever want to regret not doing things. Nick's more intelligent – he says, 'I won't regret stopping.' And stops.

Nick: It was genuinely the best decision I made in the whole race. I felt like my body was rotting.

Darren: By day four we felt the organisation was so bad that we were saying, 'We might as well have done this by ourselves.'

Nick: Mike Wolff, who was racing for The North Face,

said, 'In a way it might be easier on your own, because then you know that you've only got yourself to rely on.'

Day Five Tauari to Aramanai, 89km

Darren: We got up and said, 'Yes or no?' to Nick.

Nick: I said, 'No.' I had a big grin on my face.

Darren: I turned to Alex and said, 'Got any last things to say to Nick?' And he just said, 'When

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

Team MF's survival coach tells you how to deal with the jungle's biggest threats

Survival expert Colin Towell has trained the SAS, US Navy Seals, Marine Commandos and Richard Branson – so when Team MF asked for some jungle survival training, we knew exactly where to send them. 'We worked on how to take care of yourself from the moment you arrive to when you leave,' says Towell. 'If you try to do what you normally do in the UK in the jungle, you'd be stuffed within a day. We looked at the psychological effects of working in a hot environment and tried to recreate what they'd need to do after a typical day. It's all about keeping things tight – even a small scratch that wouldn't bother you in a normal, temperate environment can turn bad overnight in the jungle.' Here's Towell's advice for beating the big jungle dangers.

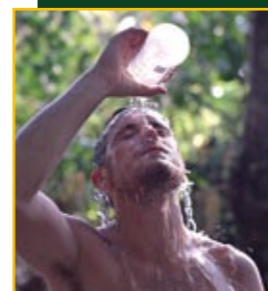
Blisters

'If your blister hasn't already popped, you put a needle just into the bubble and draw off two-thirds of the fluid, then inject tincture of benzine (also known as Friar's Balsam) into the bubble, mixing it with what's in there. It hurts like hell, but it cauterizes the wound. It's also an anaesthetic once the initial pain's worn off, and it cleans the wound. If it has burst, you put the tincture onto a cotton wool ball and dab it onto the open wound.'



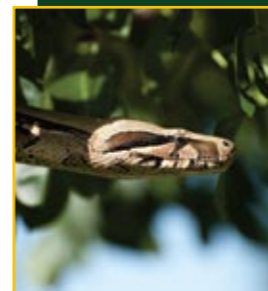
Dehydration

'A lot of people don't realise that dehydration signifies the onset of things that'll take you out of the race, like heat exhaustion, heat stress or heatstroke. You can run through some dehydration, but the others will start to shut you down. Look out for key symptoms such as drowsiness, lethargy, headache, slurred speech or blurred vision.'



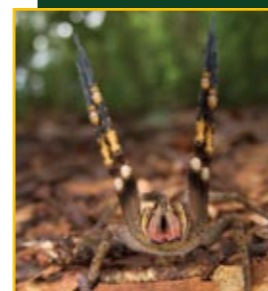
Snakes

'No animals want confrontation unless it's essential, so when you've got loads of runners on a trail, the first runners will scare the biggest wild animals away. Most snakes will hide rather than attack you if they sense the vibrations that show you're coming, but if you're coming at speed they might not have time. The best move is to step on logs or boulders in the path and check what's on the other side, rather than jumping over them and potentially landing on a snake.'



Spiders

'Brazil has a dangerous spider called the wandering spider, which mainly comes out at night. These will stand up as a warning before they attack, but if you're going for a piss in the dark you wouldn't be able to see that. I advised the boys to take a headtorch with a red light – insects won't go for it as much as a white light, and it won't annoy the other campers.'



Feelings of doubt begin to creep in for Nick...



... while Darren struggles but manages to 'nut through it'

you. One Brazilian guy squirted a load of insect repellent on and walked straight through. He got absolutely nailed.

Darren: They say you should stand still and leave them alone, but these hornets were pissed off. I ran the fastest 400m I've ever run uphill, screaming.

do we get to share out your food? We were sad to see him go, but this was the ultra-marathon day. I had a good start and was into the jungle with the frontrunners for about 10km before Alex caught me. As a team we were top-40, but on our own we were both top-15, going fast, bombing through the checkpoints. I didn't see anybody for about three hours.

Alex: I wasn't feeling 100 per cent that day. There was a hornets' nest right on the route, which everyone got caught by. The hornets were very organised – they'd send out attackers to get

Nick: I was on the press boat and I could see the steam rising out of the jungle. I felt sorry for everyone. And witnessing the organisation was the biggest shock I've ever had. When Ryan Sandes, the leader, got to the finish, there was one Brazilian there, who asked him to help put up the finish! Ryan had to show the organisers his watch to confirm his finishing time.

Darren: I was desperately trying to catch Alex, but I had immersion foot from being in the water so much. At nightfall the whole jungle seemed to start

HOW WAS IT FOR THEM?

One gold medal, two fractured feet, 572km of racing and an awful lot of blisters. Team MF reflect on one hell of a year

Darren Roberts

Namibia Ultra Desert Marathon 1st
Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc 721st
Jungle Marathon 11th

The past year has confirmed two things: I love the adventure that ultra-running offers, and ultra-running is something I'm pretty good at. Winning the Namibia race was amazing, but just completing the Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc was a huge achievement for me. The Jungle Marathon was one of the hardest races ever, but it did not change my mind about ultra-running. Never have I participated in a sport that pushes you through so many barriers and feelings. You can start feeling the fittest you have ever done and within hours you can be a dribbling wreck. It takes serious training to do well, but more than that, it takes more mental strength than you ever thought you had. I encourage everyone to give it a go. You'll find out a lot about yourself.



Nick Tidball

Namibia Ultra 11th
UTMB Completed 83km
Jungle Marathon
Completed 100km

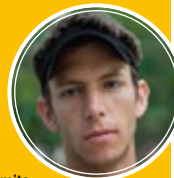
I've loved this year – it's been the most intense year of my life. It's been great travelling with Darren, Steve and Alex to these mad places to race, and sharing experiences like chemical burning each other in the name of making blisters bearable. Next I have a few goals that involve shorter distances! I'd like to take my marathon time below 2hr 30min, and my 10K time below 30min, then concentrate on triathlon during next summer. I want to represent my age group for GB, then go on to do the Hawaii Ironman in the few years after that.



Alex Bamford

Namibia Ultra Completed 33km
Jungle Marathon 9th

Competing in these ultra-endurance events has clearly demonstrated to me the mind-blowing capabilities of the human body. I think for most people ultra-running is about finding your own limits: pushing yourself to that point where you think your body simply cannot go on, where you're reduced to tears, and then pushing through that. The main problem is that redefining your limits can become addictive – after each event you begin looking for a new challenge. But the most important lesson I've learned is when to stop. This can sometimes be the difference between coming home in one piece and the kind of life-changing experience you don't want.



Steve Tidball

Namibia Ultra Completed 100km

This year has been epic, intense and painful. There's stuff I'll never forget: crossing the finishing line with Nick in Namibia, watching Darren hobble across the line in Chamonix after two days in the mountains – the man is an inspiration. Also trying to run an ultra with fractured feet. I know my future's definitely in triathlons and cycling rather than ultras.



Team MF is sponsored by Berghaus
Thanks to Dogtag (dogtag.co.uk) for providing their extreme travel insurance.



The finish brings no triumph for Alex – only relief at surviving

moving – it was a bizarre experience. Then I got to the beach, where there were no glowsticks and you couldn't see the route in the dark.

Alex: On the beach, you'd turn your headtorch on and instantly be swarmed by thousands of insects, so it was hard to see where you were going. We had to retrace our steps a couple of times.

Darren: That was a very long stage. Alex got in at 10pm, I got in at 11.45pm, the lead runner had got in six hours before us, and we were still in the top 12. Not surprisingly, there was barely anyone at the finish to welcome us – after the longest day yet! Unbelievable. I'd gone through three checkpoints that day and one of them didn't have water, and a couple didn't have medical kit. We carried our own so we were OK, but it's still a no-no. Still, a lot had been asked of all the medics. They weren't being paid as far as we know and they did a stunning job in the circumstances.

Alex: I showed one of the medics my feet and she started injecting Friar's Balsam [a skin-healing tincture] straight into them – I think I woke up a few people at that point! She was putting the needle right into the flesh of my toes. It was absolute unbelievable agony, like somebody was branding my feet.

Darren: The last runner didn't come in until 2am the next morning, so we had 20-odd hours to rest. We saw casualty after casualty – the field had been destroyed. But the bravery from some of the guys... there was one guy who had what you could only call bedsores between his arsecheeks. He went out for the final day in a skirt, because everything else chafed him. Incredible.

Day Six Aramanai to Alter do Chão, 33km

Darren: Alex and I did the final stage in 3 hours and 45 minutes – that's nigh-on marathon pace, but we just wanted to get it over with. And Nick got a nice cold beer in for me after the race. We got these little ceramic medals from the local children. And then the lack of organisation continued when our bags were dumped in the middle of the street, and we went to a hotel that barely had any running water.

Nick: Alex had a shower and we heard this little scream, 'Lads, lads, I've got a tick on my balls!' It was halfway in by the time he spotted it.

Darren: I removed it – that's teamwork. Then came the finishers' party, which was amazing. There was a huge buffet, and tables where four women would massage you. It was like stepping out of hell and into heaven.

Nick: But it was a bit sick, because the race director referred to all the problems as 'a couple of hiccups', and I was thinking about the guys who really suffered. It felt wrong. I only enjoyed the party because I knew I'd never have to do it again and because I was alive.

Alex: After I finished I didn't feel that great. I was exhausted, I felt like I hadn't really achieved very much, and I questioned what it was all about. Overwhelmingly, I was just grateful still to be alive. In the days that followed, what I had achieved began to make more sense and a warm feeling of satisfaction started sinking in. Suddenly other things in life seem to come a bit easier. ☑