

A LEGENDS TRAIL STORY

'The race that ate DNF's for breakfast, lunch and dinner'



It only takes a couple of sentences to tell what the result of the race was, but a lifetime to explain what led up to it. So, where do I begin?

This story may have started two years ago. Life was busy and I couldn't commit to any endurance race for about a year. I spent the whole summer on the bike. Long days outside. Not much else on my mind. My girlfriend and I had so much fun walking the 78th Airborne WWII Memorial Walk.

Afterwards, she immediately asked when the Great Escape long-distance walk was. She had been wanting to try that event ever since I ran the 50-miler. With only two weeks till start, we changed plans. Instead we went to Bello Gallico to stay in shape during the winter. And for her to try doubling her distance on more forgiving terrain.

Around that time, I caught myself thinking about Legends Trail again. I had already thought about lining up that February. But five months wasn't enough to prepare. Until then, the race had always felt out of reach. I don't think I even realized where this was going.

Winter has always been a bit of a struggle. I needed something to hold on to. Something to focus on. Training helped. Having a race ahead helped more. By then I couldn't get the idea of the Legends Trail out of my head anymore. Every time I met someone who had finished it, I couldn't stop myself from firing questions at them.

No crew, no marked course. Just 350 kilometres of self-navigation in the Ardennes during winter. It sounded simple when they said it.

That Legends Trail race weekend, I watched the dots move across the tracking site. Sometimes they moved slower than expected. Some slowed down. Some stopped for a while. Some didn't start moving again. I kept watching. A couple of weeks later, I entered. I was in.

Arriving in Liège two days before the start, I was exceptionally relaxed. My drop bag was packed and sorted. And I could sleep well, knowing I could only surrender to what lies ahead. I double-checked all my gear the day before the race. I felt calm and motivated by the lack of doubt. I was in the city with Sam Bracke, Jan Voorspoels and their friend Adrian Busolini. The night before the race, the three of us were going over the route one last time when Sam Bracke started laughing in a mix of hysteria and sarcasm. Sam finished on the podium the year before and is an exceptionally strong ultra runner with an impressive résumé. Seeing him react like that made me realize: this was going to be a seriously bizarre journey.

At 6 PM on Thursday, the blast of an air horn echoed across Bernardfagne College St. Roch. We set off. The race had begun. We would take a giant loop through the Ardennes, hoping to make it back to Bernardfagne within the 87-hour time limit.

A beautiful half-cloudy sunset sent us off into the darkness of the first night. Soon the colours faded, and the beam of our headlamps became the only light in the forest. In those first hours, I tried to settle into the race, shaking off the remaining adrenaline.



(Photo Berend-Jan Bel)

Somewhere in those early hours it finally sank in. I was actually running the Legends Trail. Holy shit. We passed a couple of runners with impressive résumés. “Any advice for a first-time Legends Trailer?” I asked Claire Ferguson.

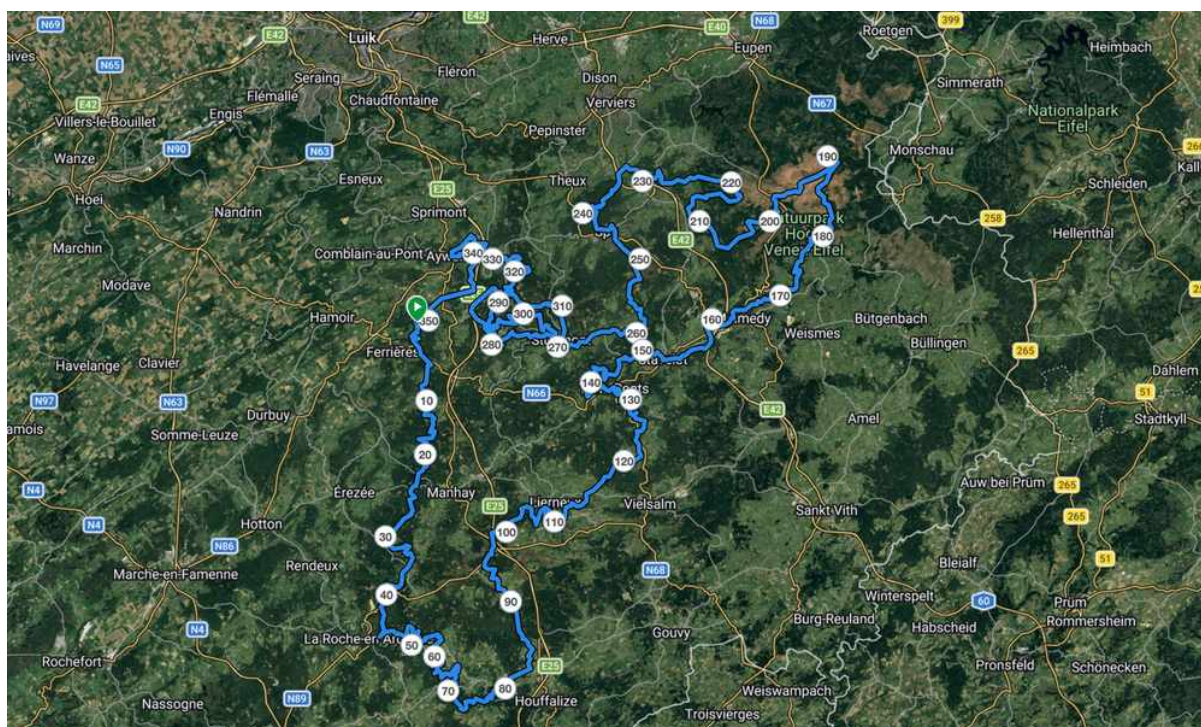
“Just focus on moving forward,” she replied.

I had asked many people about the race, and the response I got from all these personal heroes was heartwarming. I thought back on these conversations, their advice echoing through my mind in the first hours of the race. I kept thinking about it. Some advice felt super abstract. It didn’t mean much yet. I hadn’t lived it.

Kilometres flew by as the first section of the race was almost gentle. The course turned south toward the Ourthe. Running there, it’s hard not to think about how ancient this landscape is. Long before the Ardennes existed, this land was part of a vast mountain chain. Hundreds of millions of years of erosion wore it down to the hills we know today.

We made our way over fallen trees, steep climbs and rocky slopes above the river. Every step demanded my attention. One mistake. One sprained ankle here would end my whole Legends Slam.

Fourteen weeks earlier, during a night training along the Ourthe, I had sprained my ankle so badly it nearly cost me the Bello Gallico finish. To complete the Legends Slam, one needs to finish four races in ten months: The Great Escape (200 km, 7,500 m), Bello Gallico (200 km, 2,500 m), Legends Trail (350 km, 13,000 m), and Another One Bites the Dust (backyard format minimum DNF 34 hours).



Legends Trail 350-kilometre

Connect.Garmin.com

Looking back, every single race since I started running again two summers ago seemed to come with something holding me back. A recurring knee injury. Getting sick during a race. Then the calf injury. And then the ankle. I tried not to think about the ankle too much. Still, I was afraid it would cause trouble later in the race.

After an efficient stop at the first checkpoint, daylight began to break. Somewhere along the way I realised I had forgotten to pack the charging cable for both my watch and my phone. Not the smartest mistake. Luckily Ran had spare cables and let me borrow them.

My running partner, Ran Franken, and I formed a group of four together with Koen Karper and Mike Bruce. With the Ourthe, the trails turned wet. Ankle-deep mud became the new standard. The route sometimes just went straight through the length of a creek. And not just once. But a waist-deep crossing of the Ourthe never came. A small mercy.

I thought back to something Tim Weissbach told me: *radically accept whatever comes your way*. A lot easier said than done. I found the worst problems strangely entertaining and a little satisfying as well. I really just tried not to judge what came my way. The group had gone quiet. No one said much.

I was enjoying it. I texted Maarten Schon. His reply was short: *There will be a lot more. Save your energy. And take care of your feet.* With wet trails like this, your feet can be ruined long before halfway. For now, my waterproof socks were still doing their job.



The new standard.

Mike, Koen, Ran and I were having fun. Or at least, I was. The day progressed and after a deep snowy section the group wasn't keeping up. It felt like I could go a bit quicker. Ran and I talked and decided to stay together until the second night and CP3, where after about 37 hours awake we planned to take our first 1,5-hour nap. This was our only real plan for the race. After that, anything could happen. If I still felt good after that, I'd go alone. Not long after that the group began to stretch out. Koen stepped out of the race.

The second night came. Between 1 and 3 AM is where I got the most sleep deprived. We expected to reach CP3 around 3 AM, right in that window, so we had to bridge that gap. Then Mike Bruce let us go. He had been hanging off the back for a while. It made sense. It was just the two of us now. After one of these steep climbs Ran pulled out a classic: "Well, that was fun! Shall we go down and do it again?" A runner overheard him and looked at us as if we had completely lost our minds. He might not have been entirely wrong.

We passed through the centre of Trois-Ponts where people were out in a warm pub, laughing and enjoying their night. It was carnival. Looking inside the warm pub I wished I could join them, but there was still 214 kilometres between me and a cold beer.

After 134 km, we reached timing point 2.1, where volunteers handed out hot soup. Ran's father was waiting at the checkpoint again. He had been popping up along the course all day with their campervan. I remember thinking that must have been special for Ran.

At the top of a climb near Coo I saw a man in a green sweater without a light source jump behind a tree. Knowing what was to come, I kept my gaze close to the ground. Like a magic spell, the brown leaves on the ground swiftly swirled into small wooden furniture. After a dozen of those little white chairs, I realized they weren't real. Shit! Not what I was hoping for this early in the race. We had just passed Plopsaland Coo, a gnome-themed amusement park. In hindsight, the connection was hard to ignore.

Every branch hanging over the trail shifted shapes. I put on some punk music and looked elsewhere every time I saw something change shape. I grew more and more tired. It was hard to keep my eyes open. They kept dropping without me noticing. On straight trails I tried closing my eyes to rest them. But when I did, I accidentally allowed myself to drift, making it worse. I missed small turns. Ran had to call me back more than once. Luckily Ran did a great job in navigating us and keeping me upright as I zombie marched down the trail, swinging from side to side. At that point he was doing most of the thinking.

Checkpoint 3 couldn't have come soon enough. Ran was contemplating quitting as his feet were only getting worse. But a volunteer convinced him to take a nap first. A fresh pair of waterproof socks at every checkpoint kept my feet in good shape. After two full plates of food, I went outside to try and sleep in my bivy. Sleeping inside wasn't allowed. Then a volunteer asked if she could help me carry my gear and get set up. Stunned and humbled by her offer, we made our way outside.

I figured 1,5 hours would be enough for a full sleep cycle. As I closed my eyes, I could feel the 4 km per hour cut-off clock ticking time away before I fell into a deep sleep.

"Hey, it's time to wake up," a gentle voice said.

Completely disorientated and confused, I tried to make sense of the darkness around me. Once inside I heard that on the next section, the high plateau of the Hautes Fagnes was covered in snow and storming with heavy wind and rain. Feeling like I've been hit by a truck, this news barely registered. Should I put this warm jacket into my race-pack? I asked myself, holding it in my hand inside a zip-lock bag, ready to stashed away. Nah, my pack is already going to be super heavy from all the food. Another 600 grams is overkill as it's 72 kilometres to the next checkpoint. I put the jacket and heavy waterproof mittens back inside my drop bag.

To my surprise I saw Ran getting ready as well. I unwrapped my package for the next stretch and saw the bottle of Delta G ketones. My mind replayed the “nothing new on race day” rule. I took a small sip. The taste scorched my tongue instantly. It burned right through, triggering my gag reflex. I almost puked and quickly drank some water. Way worse than expected. Almost unbearable. Well, if the ketones won’t wake you up, the taste surely will. The vile bitterness still clung to my mouth as I stumbled out of the checkpoint.

The birds started singing as the dawn of Saturday morning slowly began to break. I was glad the night was over. We were nearing the high plateau, and the climbs were getting steeper and steeper. On the climbs I had to wait for Ran. He was frustrated he could not hold the same pace.

We looked at each other.

He knew. I knew.

Then Ran said: “Just go to the next checkpoint. Your girlfriend will be there, so you will definitely start that leg. And once you start that one, you’ll make it to CP5. From there it’s only 45 kilometres to the finish. You’ll just push through to the finish from there.” That sentence put everything into perspective for me. The whole thing had started to feel endlessly long. I felt sorry for him and a little terrified to go on without a partner. “I’m only holding you up,” he said. “You’re strong, I can see. This is not going to work. Just go.”

I gave him a hug. Then turned and walked on. The trail dropped next to a big pipeline.



(Photo Berend-Jan Bel)

Leaving Ran behind didn't sit well. Not long after I read in the group chat that he had ended his race somewhere around 175 kilometres. Pff. I had just lost the last member of my alliance. From here on, it's my race.

With daylight I could finally see the Ardennes again. It was breathtaking. I remember thinking I should come back here. I picked up the pace a bit, feeling a quiet sense of relief. The Ardennes are as beautiful as they are brutal. It started raining as the steep climbs kept coming. I was glad for it. As it cooled me down a bit. In the Legends Trail, if you don't know which trail to take, it's usually a safe bet to go up the steepest climb. Then the moment came when I started laughing out loud. What looked like a dried-out mudslide off a cliff from a distance was actually the climb. My legs felt powerful, my mindset was steady, and I felt confident in my navigation. For a moment, everything clicked.

The trail climbed and climbed. Snow started to appear in the forest. As the trees thinned out, the ground turned white. Small swamp pools formed along the trail. We were nearing the Hautes Fagnes. By then it had started raining heavily.

At the edge of the forest the wind hit me hard. The cold cut straight through me. An immense open field unfolded. The swamp stretched almost as far as the eye could see. There was nowhere to hide. I stopped to put on my rain jacket and trousers, but it was still too cold.

Wind and rain slammed across the plateau, pushing and howling in my ears, a constant noise that started to crawl inside my head. I pulled my hood over my head. This place was nothing like the last time I had been here. Nowhere to hide. No way to stop. The rain melted the snow, turning the trail into a mix of water and ice. Every step slipped into the icy slush. Everywhere you looked: swamps, water and snow.

The trail turned alongside the open field. I had a good stride as I moved across it. In the distance I saw a mud pit. I had been told to use my poles before stepping to test the ground. Having found a rhythm, I kept my stride.

On the first step, I went straight through. My entire leg sank into ice-cold mud. Stuck. I pushed my other leg down in the mud to pull myself out. Both legs now buried. Then my foot slipped out of my shoe. *Fuck, if I lose my shoe here... I need to get out!*

The cold shot up my leg as I sank deeper, almost waist-deep in the mud. I forced my foot back into the shoe and bent over, almost horizontal, lying fully in the cold mud. I pulled out my leg, heel first.

I crawled out of the mud. Got up and immediately started running, not looking back.

I felt my hands starting to cramp. I stopped and put on my gloves and buff; the only warm spare layer I had. The gloves quickly became soaked. Too late for waterproof mittens. Even my warmest Sealskinz socks were soaked. My feet started to hurt. Ice-cold. The cold crept up my legs, sending chills down my entire spine. I knew this feeling. This wasn't good. The only thing keeping me warm, just barely, was running.



(Photo Berend-Jan Bel)

The wind pushed the rain horizontally over a snow-covered field. The cold cut through my jacket like it was nothing. I looked around. Grey sky. Water and snow everywhere. And then, suddenly, it was quiet. The constant stream of thoughts in my head had fallen silent. Just the sound of the wind and the rain hitting my face. Something about it felt calm. Almost beautiful.

And at the same time, I was getting colder. It became harder to keep moving. My body started to shut down. I knew, this might be the end of my race.

After a while I passed Berend-Jan, the photographer. “Hi Berend-Jan, I’m cold. I need to go.” “Yeah, go!” At times I had no idea how to get to the other side. Swimming seemed logical. I tried not to fall into the water, but I also had to keep moving fast enough to not get colder.

I felt lightheaded, losing my conviction to keep moving. I felt an urge to stop and lie down on the trail. As I got through it, ate an emergency gel (a quick shot of sugar for when things go south) and pushed my body to its limit to get warm. At the final stretch over a long wooden deck it became hard not to slip off into the water.

My girlfriend and parents waited for me in the parking lot and took me inside the restaurant. I felt the eyes of the restaurant visitors boring into my back as I stood there, soaking wet and uncontrollably shaking from the afterdrop, the cold still creeping deeper inside, even in front of the fireplace. She said, "I've never seen you shake like that from the cold." Inside the safety team tent, they gave me hot soup and a blanket. The volunteer offered me dry gloves, and I changed into dry waterproof socks and liners. I was somewhat warm again.

Well, that was fun, I told myself.

Two more hours till sunset. Ten kilometres to the end of the swamp. Let's get the hell out of here.

The trail ran along a cliff. Then suddenly the route pointed straight down. There seemed to be nothing there. At the edge, a narrow, steep trail dropped straight down. One wrong step here would have been enough. That ended the Hautes Fagnes.

From here on, my deluded brain can't reproduce the events in chronological order anymore. But just when you think you had been through the worst, other sections show up. Segments I have no words or pictures for. An absolute mess. Depending on who you ask.

Knee height waterproof socks only get you so far. When the trail went over a river and alongside flooded banks. It never seemed to end. Water, water, more water.

I just kept moving. Don't stop. Don't think.

Knee-deep mud, holes, roots, river crossings. Endless.

Nothing seemed to change.

I kept looking for a way around it. There was no way around it.

This was it.

It took hours. maybe more.

It was getting dark again. The third evening. Somewhere past the 200-kilometre mark I decided: *this is where my race starts. This is where it's going to happen.* I needed to push the pace. Otherwise I wasn't going to make it to the finish. The trail followed a loud

flowing river over technical rocky terrain. By then we had seen so much water the sound of running water was creeping under my skin, driving me insane.

If you can't beat it, then join it, I thought. So I stopped fighting and surrendered to the endless water, mud, and river crossings. I felt sharp. Somehow, the difficult trail was starting to feel intuitive. Most of the time I didn't need my watch. I found my way naturally. Almost with primal instinct I was moving quicker and quicker. Instead of fighting the terrain I felt like I was dancing with it. Over boulders, tree roots, rocky slopes, and mud. Just keep moving forward.

A line I once read came to mind. *"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us most."*

At 23:10 on Saturday, I walked into checkpoint 4 to loud applause. My girlfriend was there, volunteering at the aid station. She told me I wasn't far behind the front pack anymore and Mike Bruce was still in the race. He was running in front of the cut-offs. When she placed a plate of food in front of me, I suddenly felt a lump in my throat. A well-prepared plate of food almost brought me to tears. I told Florianne I was behind on my time goal, and I still needed to sleep. Once inside my bivy tent in the pouring rain, I could not relax. I lied down with one hand on my stomach: breathe in deeply for four seconds, pause, exhale for six, pause, and I was gone.

'Honey, it's time to wake up. Come back inside with me'. It felt like less than two minutes had passed. Inside, she fired question after question while I drifted in and out of blackouts, slipping into microsleeps I barely noticed. "Honey, I don't know," was all I could answer. Together with volunteer Hans, they got me back on my feet and out of the checkpoint 18 minutes after waking up.

It took a while before I felt sane again. The next checkpoint was 72 kilometres or almost a full day away. To break it into smaller chunks, I worked my way from night to morning, then into afternoon. My recovery hike was still good, earning minutes off the cut-off. But the last checkpoint had cost me time. I started passing runners. Closing the gap to the front pack. I shared some fun kilometres with Onno Overes and Tim Weissbach. eventually passed them, but they left a lasting impression. Both men are exceptionally strong runners. I needed to push forward if I wanted to sleep at CP5.



Tim Weissbach crossing a creek

Eventually the darkness faded, the sky lit up. Sunday morning arrived. I felt like I could hold this pace. And then it hit me. The chance of finishing this beast of a race had become real. Emotions took over. From Thursday evening to Sunday morning, pushing forward in uncertainty had finally led to a real chance of finishing. Waves of emotions rolled through me. I couldn't stop the tears. I kept moving, but everything felt different. Lighter, almost. I wiped my face, but they kept coming. I tried to focus on the trail, on my footing, but my thoughts drifted. For the first time, finishing felt close. Not certain but close enough.

Time slipped by. On the phone with Florianne I realised I was hours away from Chez Ingo. Far longer than I thought. Confused and frustrated, I sat down on the side of a stone bridge. Fine. I'll just make my own checkpoint. I sat there for a moment, letting the tension drain from my legs, and ate the pancakes and a cold Unox rookworst I had brought for this stretch. Not my best meal, but it worked. After a while, I got back on my feet and kept moving.

Progress was slow. Mentally exhausted, my energy started dipping. After 250 kilometres my feet felt quite fatigued. After a while it felt like I was walking barefoot on the gravel trail. Every step hurt. All this amplified negativity inside my mind. I knew a negative

mindset might set me up for bigger problems. In preparation for Legends Trail I tried to elevate my pain threshold with ice baths. Not a pretty process, but what I learned was this: I had to disconnect my reaction to pain from the observation of pain. In simple terms: I stop reacting to pain. Then a small window appears. A space where my thoughts can be clear. For the remaining pain, the only thing I could do was observe it, like I had done many times during retreats or meditation practice. Keeping the pain separate from my train of thoughts. Until the moment came when I could compartmentalize it, letting the observation of the pain fade to the background while my thoughts moved back to the centre.

At Chez Ingo, Gabrielle, my parents, my girlfriend and my brother came to cheer me on as I ate a couple of croque monsieurs. Thijs asked if I wanted to set off again together, but with a full belly and a little rest I wasn't looking forward to babysitting anyone. I could see he had taken a beating. I wanted to build a bigger buffer to sleep at CP5. With more runners coming in, I left him there, hoping someone would take his offer. I stepped back outside.

It's strange how the perception of time seems to bend during these long trail races. These distances are so hard to grasp. At times, it almost feels like you're stuck in something that doesn't move. A bit like a blackhole. Covering distance starts to feel endless. You stop keeping track. Time just... disappears.

Only later do you realise how much has actually happened. It feels like you've lived a lifetime of highs and lows in just a couple of days. Time is relative. It felt that way.

Kilometres flew by as I yo-yoed for some time with Matej Arnus who told stories about Tor Des Glaciers. On the flats I was faster, but on the technical downhill trails he showed incredible skill. After a while I reached a perfect tarmac stretch to loosen up the legs. As we passed through Naze, I saw the safety team in the distance. Waving and yelling as I came closer. Laughing and joking, I high fived all of them. They were exactly the boost I needed. They told me I still looked good. Although I didn't feel that way.

The trail went up. From a distance I saw someone walking bent to one side. I ran towards him, hoping to cheer him up. It was Olav Sammelius. "Olav, what happened to you?" He told me he had fallen into cold water. Others had to pull him out. His back hurt so much he couldn't walk straight anymore. I didn't know what to say. I said goodbye and continued. By this time even the strong runners were dropping. The race was eating DNF's for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.



Rolling with the punches.

(Photo by Berend-Jan Bel)

It suddenly struck me, I felt lonely. I had been alone since I left Ran behind. I remembered how I had defined loneliness before the race: an inability to connect. Out here, that thought felt heavier. I came here with a reason. To find a why. Why do I do this? Why do I choose this kind of suffering? In daily life, I often ask myself the same question. What am I supposed to do here? There are moments I don't know what I'm supposed to do here.

The trail kept climbing as the forest slowly closed in around me, the scent of pine trees and the ground covered in deep green moss. And still, that question lingered. Without really knowing why, I thought of my mother. I lost her to cancer eight years ago, when I was 23. Losing her changed the course of my life. As I looked around the forest once more, I couldn't understand why the feeling stayed. Life was everywhere. And still, something in me kept reaching for her. I knew death is an inevitable part of life. I had told myself that many times. But it never changed anything. A part of me never quite felt the same.

In that moment, I just wished she could see me now.

I kept looking around, as if the forest might hold an answer. The same trees, the same trail, and yet something felt different. I couldn't quite place it. The air felt heavier, or maybe it was something in me. I slowed for a moment, listening, noticing, as if I had missed something that had been there all along.

I looked around again. The forest felt different. For a moment I just stood there. And then I felt it, in the life around me, in the trees, in the moss, in the air I was breathing. She was there, holding me. For a moment, everything softened. Tears came, and without thinking, I started running uphill. The trail kept rising, endlessly, it seemed. I ran harder, a storm of emotion burning inside me as I pushed upward.

And at the top, I caught a glimpse of the why I had been searching for. Through all the hurt and heartache I carry, it had been there all along. Nothing loved is ever lost.

It stayed with me. I kept running.

I reached the 300-kilometre point. Only five kilometres to go until CP5. After that, just 45 more kilometres to the finish. Yet with that thought also came a quiet disappointment that it would soon be over. After such a beautiful moment, I almost wished it would last longer.

I would have liked to do another 100 kilometres, just to give it more space. I looked back on everything it took to get here. I felt strong. Stronger than at any point in the race.

Strange, I felt good. This couldn't be it. Is there more to it?

I reached CP5 on Sunday at 17:34 with more time than I expected. To my surprise, Bart Schreuter was there. He told me he had quit. He was proud of what he had done.

My drop bag was a total mess, inside and out. I stood there for a second, staring at it. I used the cheapest 2-euro duffel-bag I could think of to save weight. The zipper was duct-taped shut. The handles too. My girlfriend and the volunteers had tried to patch everything back together. Without them, I would have had an even bigger problem. But why bother fixing it now? This was the last time I could use it anyway. Stuff was everywhere. Wet clothes, zip-lock bags open, stuff spilling out. Stuff floating around the bag. I couldn't find anything. My inflatable sleeping mat had already started leaking at the last checkpoint. I was lucky Fernando Nijhuis let me borrow his mat.

After three plates of pasta and almost a whole bottle of the best Coca-Cola I ever drank, I went into my bivy. Only to find what I already knew. No sleep. Maybe my brain just doesn't sleep this early. Or maybe it was the coke. Disappointed I turned back inside. A fourth night without any sleep will get messy.

Either way I still felt strong. I was going to push myself to the limits in the next section. Leaving it all on the Ninglinspo. I set out on a warpath, turning my speaker to max volume. Either I break the Ninglinspo, or it breaks me.

And in the back of my head I knew. A fourth night without sleep could get really bad. A rabbit hole.

I briefly spoke to Addie van der Vleuten on the phone. He told me the next 21 kilometres were real shit. He had to work together with Merijn Geerts. He crossed the Ninglinspo river a few times after he missed a bridge. He didn't feel safe. "It's slippery. The water is cold. Be safe out there, Frank," he said.

I set off into the dark forest. It had started raining. Then harder. With the downpour, my headtorch lost its reach. The beam just bounced back at me. My vision cut short. This night felt a lot darker than the ones before.

The forest was covered in snow as we reached a swamp section. A runner waited and wanted to work together. Another joined. Maybe it wasn't a bad idea. But they walked a lot. The pace dropped instantly. I waited for someone to pass us so I could move on.

Two runners took us over, so I followed them. They were actually running pretty fast. But I noticed one of them was tired, almost slipping on the rocks.

At the sight of the Chefna river we stopped. It was raging, thundering through the rocks. It looked nothing like the river I had seen during my reconnaissance a few months ago. The water was so loud I couldn't even hear the stereo speaker. Do we need to cross this at some point? That would be insane.

Sometimes I was unsure if we were sent off trail deliberately or if we had gone wrong. But we missed a bridge a couple of times and had to turn back. My watch was set to multiband – all satellites – but it was still off by at least 20 meters. Useless. The pace was high and the trail difficult. We were missing bridges, and even with the three of us, navigation started to slip. The chaos started closing in.

As we descended the first guy slipped on his back. Then the other guy fell. As I descend, I slipped but I managed to break my fall leaning fully on my pole. Still standing. They started clapping and we laughed.

We were led up a steep trail. As we climbed, I saw three headlamps to the right of me and a couple to the left. These runners seemed to have missed the trail, working their way out of the wilderness and following me on the climb. When I looked behind, I saw a parade of about seven or eight runners.

As I neared the top of the climb, the trail faded into a freshly cut pine forest. Climbing over fallen trees off trail and branches sticking out of the ground, I felt pine needles inside my shoes, itching against my ankles and feet. It drove me crazy. Trying to mentally block the urge to scratch, I made it to the top.

On the climb I recovered. Looking back, the train of runners couldn't keep up. I found a challenge in keeping them as far behind me as I could. And continued on my own.



Sam Bracke crossing the pine section during daylight

(photo Berend-Jan Bel)

I descended into the Ninglinspo valley. The route ran along the river, then after a bridge there was no trail. Is this right? I didn't recognize any of it. I reached another bridge and followed the river. Or at least I thought I did. Still no trail. I turned back, crossed the bridge again, and followed the river on the other side. Still nothing. This can't be it. I pushed to a trail higher up the valley and spotted a bridge. I dropped down off trail and crossed it. The trail seemed to lead nowhere. On this side there was a small stream. Huh? This seemed to make no sense. Did I need to be on the other side? Or was this the same bridge again? I muscled up a steep climb and lit my headtorch to full power. Nothing. No trail. No bridge. I looked down. A ridge hanging almost vertical over the river. I descended to it, turning my headtorch to full power. Still nothing. No trace of a bridge. Did I miss it?

Fuck.

Shall I... cross the river?

I stopped for a moment and decided to call the safety team.

"Hello, I can't find the bridge. I want to cross the river. "

"Okay, I'll stay on the line."

I looked over the edge of the ridge into the river. Dark brown water roared past me. It seemed the river made a tight corner, and then I saw it. A boulder the size of a dinner table rolling over.

I pick up the phone again. The river is too dangerous to cross.

"There should always be a bridge. Frank, I just got an update from your tracker. If you go back a few hundred meters, you'll find a bridge."

Pff. A few hundred meters back?! Fuck, I think to myself. Thank you.

I hung up the phone. Frustrated, I ran back. My feet slipped out under me. I grabbed a bush and stopped myself just in time, just enough to keep me from going over the edge of the ridge.

I got up and made my way to the bridge.

I followed the trail as one mouse after another seemed to jump away from me. It felt like a parade of mice shooting across the trail. When I saw one disappear into my shoe, I thought, *aha, probably hallucinations*. About thirty mice ran into rocks, trees, and into my shoes. I started to think of them as my new friends, something my brain had made up to keep me company.

The trail ran alongside a rock wall with steel cables. Waist-deep in the water, I saw a group of runners behind me catching up. For a while I kept them behind me, but I had to admit I was getting demoralized by the chaos of navigating on my own.

No matter how hard I pushed, the route won. I joined them.

A bit later I realized I was going in the wrong direction. I step aside and let the group pass. As they went by, I told them it was the other way. I didn't want them to pass me, giving away my lead. Only later did I see they were all in rough shape. Their position in the race was the least of their concerns.

On one descent, everyone fell. Underneath the leaf deck was a mudslide. I fell hard. Three times. At one point the group started sliding down while sitting, impossible to stay on their feet.

Unable to find the next bridge, I took the opportunity to switch batteries in my headtorch. Thijs came over and asked if I could shine some light, as he also wanted to change his batteries. Out of his race-pack came a pile of headlamps and cables. He tried one. Dead. Then another. Also dead. He tried to find the button to swap the batteries. I asked if he wanted my spare. I quickly pulled it out, turned it on, and handed it to him.

I told them if we were going to cross the river, we should stay close together so that when one of us went down, the others could pull him out quickly. As I stepped into the river, I could feel the water pulling at my legs. We made our way across quickly.

On the climb out of the valley, I looked back. Thijs had tied my spare headtorch to his running pole. It took me a second to realise why, and I almost started laughing out loud. I asked if I could put the torch on his head. He replied, "Oh, would you do that for me?" Almost as if I had offered him a massage, burgers, and steak.

I gave him two caffeine pills, but in the state he was in, they probably wouldn't do anything. As we went up a steep hill, I looked at him again. He had two different kinds of poles, and one of them was broken in half. A strange look on his face, covered in mud. He looked horrible.

I started walking beside him, talking, when I did the most unorthodox thing someone could do in an ultramarathon. I lit a cigarette.

For Thijs, this was the missing piece. How could someone still be this fast, awake, not struggling, and even smoking on a steep ascent? This was impossible. None of this made any sense. He lost the plot. He thought I was sent by the organisation to check if they were doing it right and not taking shortcuts, to see if the group supported each other enough. He didn't trust a word I said after that. It was all a conspiracy. He thought he was being punished for not sleeping and for keeping drinks for himself, given a different route file and forced to cover extra distance.

We reached the timing point 5.1. Nick was there with two young French guys. He asked when we wanted to leave. I told him ten minutes. The rest of the group looked nowhere near ready. Completely spent. Nick seemed amused by the situation and questions they

asked. The whole scene started to look funny to me too. It took almost shouting at them that time was up and we had to go. After crossing the street, I looked back. Werner and Thijs were struggling to walk. On the climb, I left them. The four of them worked together, just enough to keep moving.

I tried to run, but on one of the falls I pulled something in my shin. I couldn't run anymore. It made me furious. If I had just been more patient, more careful, I should have been able to run it in. Hiking 20 kilometres to the finish would take forever. I thought: *I tried to fight the Ninglinspo, muscle my way through it. But the Ninglinspo won.* I recognized this area which made navigation a lot easier. I hiked as fast as I could, but I could feel myself falling asleep on my feet.

I suddenly heard people screaming in the distance. I couldn't quite make out what they're saying. It kind of reminded me of a soccer field. I looked around. Nothing but fields and forest. Strange. *Who plays soccer at 2 in the morning?* Then I heard a nightclub. Then I knew wasn't real. It felt odd.

Everything started to look very strange. The trail was glowing as white flashes shoot into the darkness. I felt the darkness was swallowing me. I felt intensely tired. My eyes kept closing. What is real and what is hallucinated isn't clear anymore.

The substrate of consciousness is falling apart. Everything felt strange. Maybe I'm depersonalizing, starting to peek into psychosis, or maybe I've reached primordial consciousness. Hard to tell what is what. Maybe, at the edge of my performance, it's not the moment to decide whether I'm reaching enlightenment or gone mental.

I needed to try something, anything, I remembered I had put the last bottle of Delta G ketones into my hip belt. My girlfriend thought it was a complete waste of money. Forty dollars per bottle, I could hardly disagree.

Getting the simple plastic lid off the bottle felt almost impossible. I downed it in one go.

Within minutes I intensely smelled the grass, the mud, then my sweat, and the sports drink in my bottle. I looked around, then at my watch, checking the battery and started calculating my time of arrival and whether I could finish on the remaining battery life.

I opened my phone and started the explorer app in case my watch died sooner. Looking at the route, I tried to memorize it. Then I turned my headtorch brighter to wake myself up. Mentally back in the race, it occurred to me. The ketones actually work.

Hallucinations disappeared, but my mind turned dark and negative. These last few hours of the race felt like a decade passing. I got fed up I couldn't run anymore. Only anger and frustration pushing me forward. My thoughts became parasites, sucking out the good and spreading negativity through my mind. Knowing I would finish, I didn't feel the need

for helping myself anymore. Sliding down deeper into darkness, in a seemingly hopeless state of mind, it happened.

In the distance I can make out Bernardfagne College St. The sky lights up and I hear the birds start singing. Monday morning. I am there. Unbelievable. A volunteer is waiting for me. I try to hold my tongue from a purge of curse words and try to react like a normal human being.

Passing by the courtyard, I vaguely remember flashes from the start of the race. It felt like distant memory from a lifetime ago. Any notion of days passing was gone; it felt like one big blur. This was one very, very long race.

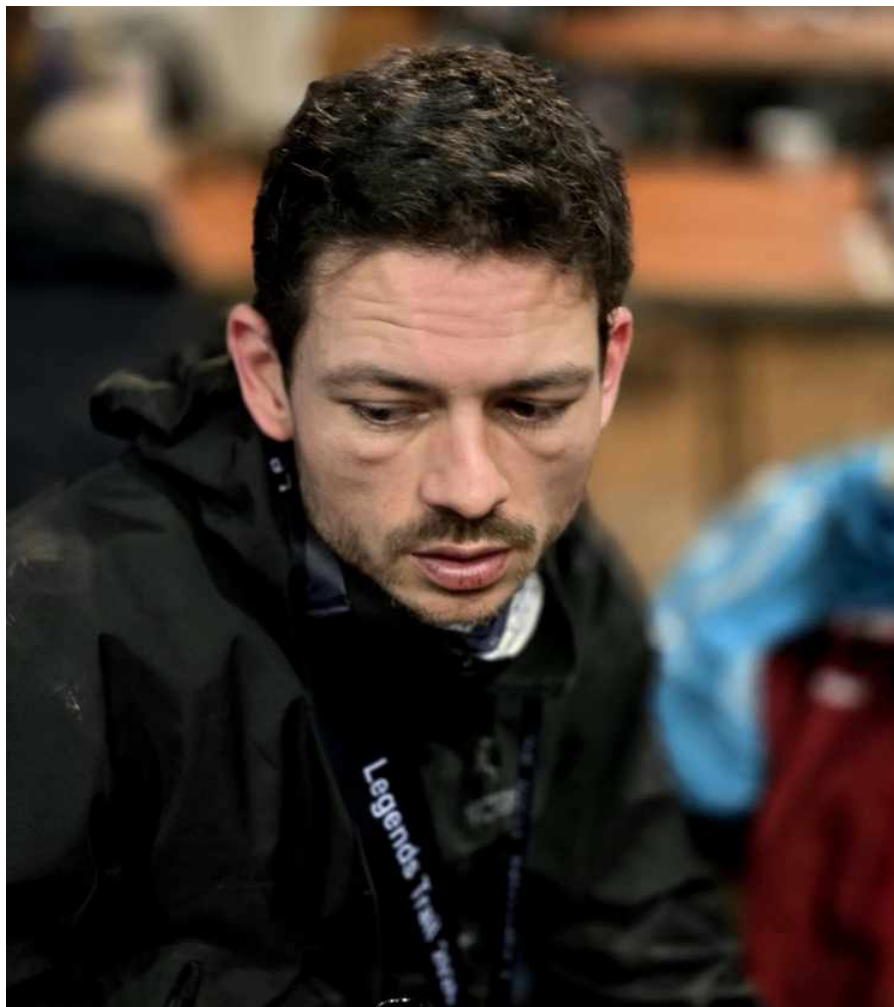
I kissed my girlfriend. Florianne told me many of my friends were still there. I was really proud I finished two hours before the cut-off. I ran up to the finish. Applause from volunteers and friends. I shook Tim De Vriendt's hand. He asked me if I had taken a wrong turn in the last part. I don't recall any wrong turns in the last part, but I knew I took many at the Ninglinspo. He just said "Either way, you made it." And gave me a medal and a case of Kerel beer. Phew! Lucky me.

Once inside I sat down. It was done. The warmth of the cosy headquarters came over me like a blanket. Any urge to sleep had strangely disappeared. My mind still in race mode. Answering simple questions, like whether I wanted soda or a beer and which beer, seemed difficult.



Tim De Vriendt making a man out of a boy

Jan took my socks off of and washed my feet. The best! He had DNF'ed because he drank water from a creek without a filter and got sick. People came up to congratulate me. I couldn't really be happy yet. It took a while to wash off the darkness inside my mind. But the time to rejoice had finally come.



"Finished..."

Sam asked, "Do you know which position you finished in, Frank?"

"No," I replied.

"Eleventh place."

"Oh, great," I said. It didn't really land.

Out of 111 people who started the race, only 20 other people completed the course. A little more than 80% did not finish.

It took me 85 hours and 10 minutes to cover 352 kilometres and 13,000 metres of elevation. In those 85 hours, we spent 52 hours in the dark, roughly three-fifths of the time. 34 people finished the Great Escape and Bello Gallico and started the legends trail hoping to complete a SLAM, only 7 people made it to the finish of all 3 races.

In total from Thursday morning till Monday afternoon I was awake for 102 hours and slept for 2 hours and 45 minutes in total.

I don't think there is a race director in the world who dares to make a course this wet, difficult and rough, with such a tight cut-off, like Legends Trail director Tim De Vriendt.

Looking back on the race a couple of weeks later, my heart aches. Like a holiday romance you didn't want to end. I keep thinking about it as life slowly returns to normal, though it doesn't feel the same. It's truly life changing. So far this was my best ultra finish. Also the toughest race I've ever done. Maybe I'll return next year. But will it ever get this beautiful again? Or is it just not meant to?

It felt like in this race everyone is treated equally. What you do in daily life doesn't really matter. The contrast with daily life is so strong. It feels like two completely different lives are running side by side. Out there, for those 85 hours everything else fell away.

Going in, I couldn't imagine how sleep deprivation would cause so much trouble. And looking back, I didn't know I could be this determined to push through so many rough patches. But still, somehow, it feels like I've only just scratched the surface.

Thank you for making it to the end. I hope you enjoyed it as much I did writing it. On to the last SLAM race, Another One Bites the Dust Backyard backyard ultra!



(Photo Berend-Jan Bel)



(All photo's on this page made by Tom Avontuur)



(Photo Tom Avontuur)



(All photo's on this page except from top left and bottom right made by Barend-Jan Bel)



(Photo Tom Avontuur)



(Photo Tom Avontuur)



(Photo Tom Avontuur)



(Photo Tom Avontuur)



(Photo Tom Avontuur)



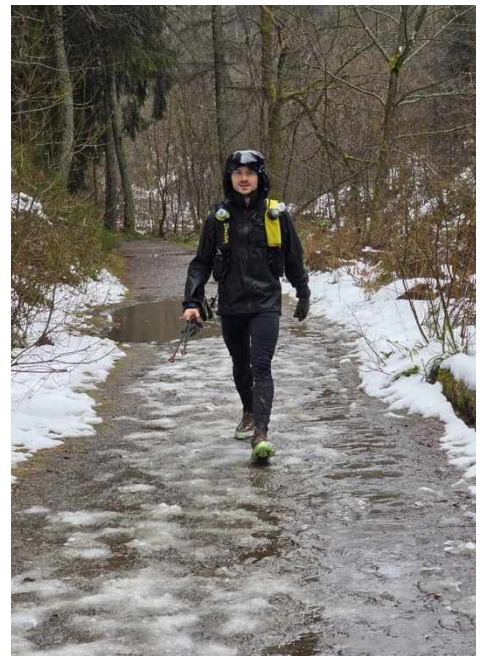
(Photo Tom Avontuur)



Right to left Ran, Koen and Mike.



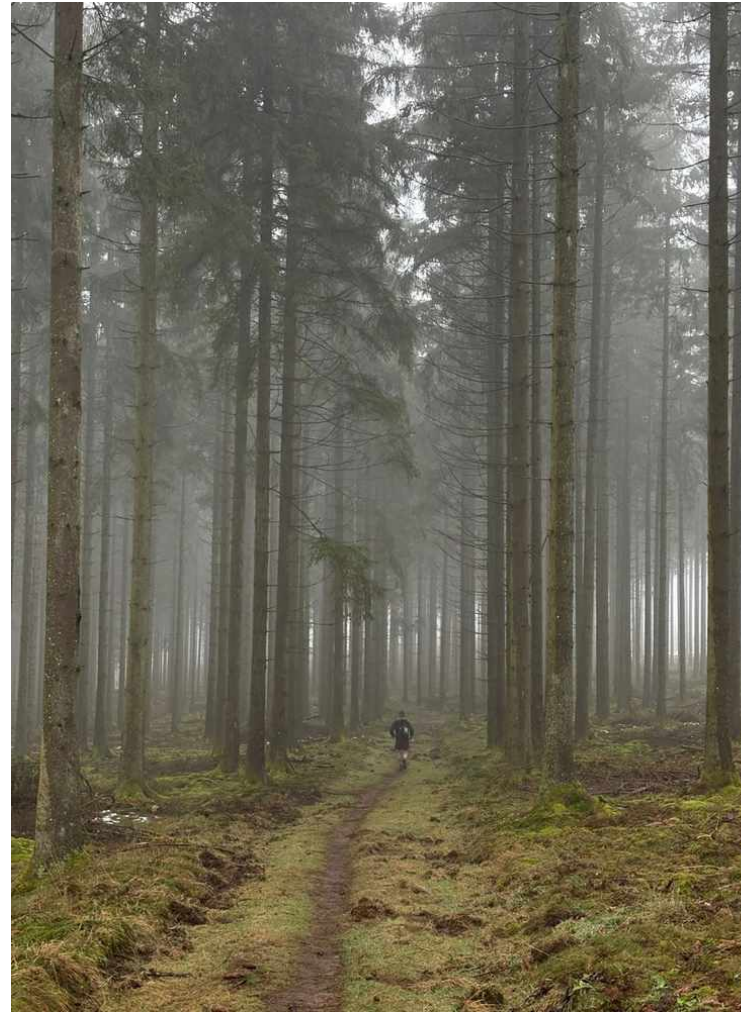
Koen Karper.



(Photo Berend-Jan Bel)



(Photo Tom Avontuur)



(Photo Tom Avontuur)





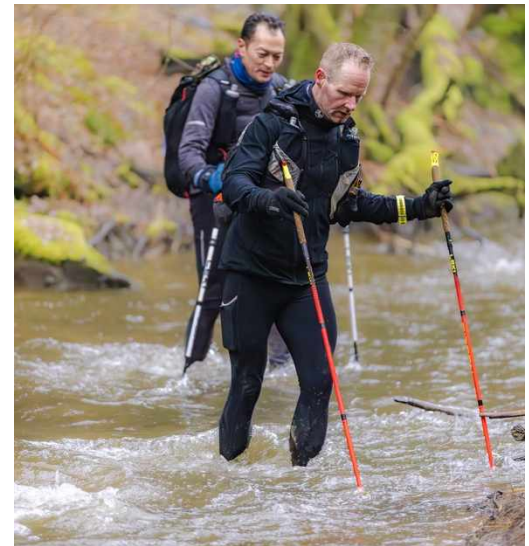
(Photo Tom Avontuur)



Belgium sunshine



(Photo Berend-Jan Bel)



(Photo Berend-Jan Bel)



Sam Bracke

(Photo Berend-Jan Bel)



(Photo Tom Avontuur)



(Photo Berend-Jan Bel)



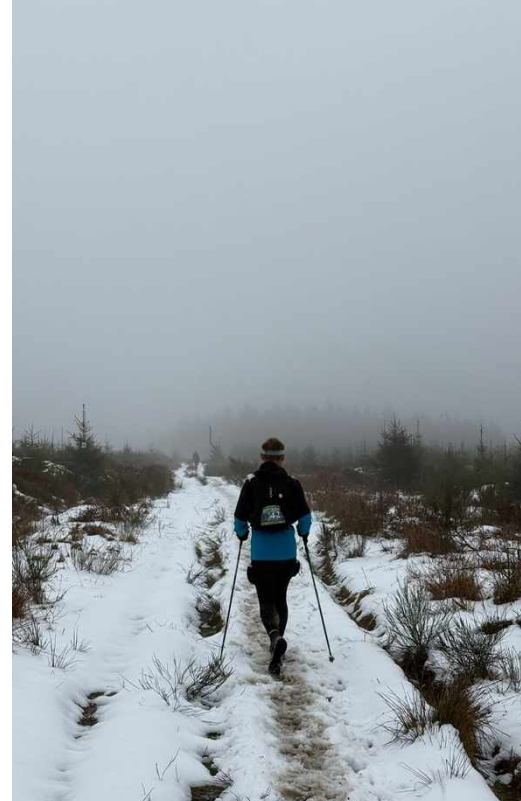
Olav (Photo Berend-Jan Bel)



Big smile at Chez Ingo



(Photo Tom Avontuur)



(Photo Tom Avontuur)



(Photo Berend-Jan Bel)



(Photo Tom Avontuur)