

Vango Eagle Isle Ultra 2009



The inaugural Vango Eagle Isle Ultra was always set to be a tough, uncompromising challenge. Strength sapping trails, steep mountain climbs, river crossings, ridge and forest running promised to make this a tough one for even the most seasoned of ultra athletes. Combine this with periods of zero visibility, driving rain throughout the first two days and wet, testing underfoot conditions and you have a challenge worthy of the hardest of athletes.

On 3rd September the athletes began to gather in the beautiful and scenic grounds of Duart Castle for pre-race briefings and registration. After a rousing speech from Sir Lachlan Maclean, chief of Clan Maclean and owner of Duart Castle an aerial flyover of the route was covered on the big screen and safety briefings concluded. Norwegian flasks were then cracked open and Scotch Broth and Pasta served. Meanwhile, outside the wind began to howl and the rain thundered onto the ancient castle roof. Harsh weather was a certainty for the following day.

While the runners slept through the small hours of 4th September a team of mountain marshals made for the mountain ridge to the west of the castle to lay out the course for the day ahead. Conditions on the tops were tough with driving rain and extremely low visibility but the course was deemed good to go and at 0815 the Eagle Isle Ultra exploded into life. Across the fluttering Vango banners the athletes charged, along the narrow coastal tracks toward the start of the ascent of the hills. An early lead was taken by Paul Murgatroyd who charged confidently into the hill mist closely followed by a small group keen to keep pace. Behind them the pack spread evenly across the mountain ridge with all seemingly undaunted by the harsh conditions facing them. At the back of the field Stuart Hamilton was struggling with bad cramp and resultantly reduced his pace. Stuart is an avid mountain man and had viewed day one being his strongest. Despite obvious pain he trudges through the checkpoints making steady progress. As he dose a call is received from the seasoned and much respected athlete Jo Kilkenny reporting that she has gone off course and sitting tight in line with athlete loss procedure. While a safety team began its search the rest of the field began to trickle off the mountain, through the forest and back to level ground. They now have a short 8km of off road terrain until camp.

Late in the day Stuart decides to call it a day with 4km to go to camp. With dusk approaching and his cramps showing no sign of abating he is retired from the event. Meanwhile Jo has been located and put on the right track. After an arduous additional 10km stretch of mountain side, bog and forest Jo is pointed in the right direction and duly sprints off for camp.

It's been a tough day all round with many now accepting how tough the remaining days are likely to be. Day two is the long one – 65km.

Day 2 of Vango Eagle Isle Ultra was always set to be a tough one. The start was easy enough with a pleasant loch side run along the shores of Loch Ba but what would follow thereafter was a tough mountain section made even more difficult by torrential rain. The final section of the day would feature a long, undulating section of track and road before heading back over the mountains to camp. At 0800hrs the event kicked into life again with the athletes heading off into the mist. While they did, water levels on the hills rose steadily turning picturesque streams and rivers into deep, fast flowing obstacles to progress. As the pack fought their way up the mountain side they came to the first of these rivers which was now flowing fiercely. Linking arms and watched closely by Karen Liddell the safety marshal the pack crossed and continued on. Soon they began to appear on the other side of the Glen with Paul Murgatroyd, Eoghan Carton and Michael Bach Neilsen leading. The rest of the day was spent negotiating boggy glens, rivers, tracks and hilly road with the athletes finishing on a 10km stretch into heavy, and very wet, winds! Full credit to all as conditions were very testing! Sadly we had lost seasoned and ever popular athlete Howard Cook during the day but everyone else made it in in various states of fatigue.

Day 3 was to be a pleasant 39km forest and coastal run into the finish line at Tobermory. Finally the sun put in an appearance and the day turned out to be a cracker. With all athletes running well and conditions favourable the hardy souls who had made it this far raced off for the forests to the north of Mull, passing some of the finest scenery on the island. Everyone pushed on well and soon the first of the athletes began to appear in Tobermory. First through was Paul Murgatroyd who had commanded the lead from day one in a very impressive and modest fashion. Next was Irelands Eoghan Carton. Eoghan won the Gobi challenge 2008 team award and now did so again with his Irish team. Third place went to Denmarks Michael Bach Neilsen who battled hard throughout the event and thoroughly deserved a quality finish. Over the course of the afternoon the rest of the pack came in to medals, cheers and the full respect of athletes. Support team and passers by.

Thoughts....

Raw, unyielding and remote 'expedition' style events like Eagle Isle Ultra attract the highest calibre of participant and this year was no exception. Over the three days we were together the support team and I witnessed such incredible feats of athletic ability and mental toughness we felt thoroughly proud of each and every one of the athletes involved. Maximum respect to you all!!