HELLFIRE
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ROB MALLETT

THE ROAD TO THE WORLD TEAM CHAMPIONSHIPS

Chapter 1: From a New Year's Hangover to Backyard Ultras

How I somehow ended up heading for Vigo

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INSIDE 01

ONE RUNNER. HIS OWN WORDS.

THE ROAD TO THE WORLD TEAM CHAMPIONSHIPS

CHAPTER 1

ROB MALLETT

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ROB MALLETT

Story by Rob Mallett. Photos supplied by Rob Mallett, Hellfire Events and Steve Wood.

ROB'S STORY CONTINUES NEXT WEEK IN ISSUE 02.

THE ROAD TO THE WORLD TEAM CHAMPIONSHIPS

CHAPTER 1:

FROM A NEW YEAR'S HANGOVER TO BACKYARD ULTRAS

How I somehow ended up heading for Vigo

WORDS / ROB MALLETT

At the end of 2022, I wasn't a runner.

Not a bad runner. Not an occasional runner.

I just wasn't one.

Life was basically work and family. I run a removals company in Jersey, so work was already pretty physical. Outside of that, I'd moved away from a lot of the drinking and social life I'd had before.

Nothing was particularly wrong. I just felt like something was missing.

I was a bit bored. A bit lost. I needed something that challenged me and, probably more importantly, something that was mine.

I tried a few things.

At one point, I started Krav Maga. The theory was good: have something outside work and family, learn something new and maybe relieve a bit of stress.

The reality was me finishing work late, trying to sort family life and then racing across Jersey getting increasingly wound up because I was going to be late for the class that was supposed to make me less stressed.

It didn't really work.

Running seemed easier.

There was no timetable. Nobody waiting for me. If the only free hour I had was at nine o'clock at night, I could put my trainers on and go.

So I made a New Year's resolution.

January 1st 2023: start running.

Naturally, before I had actually done any running, I bought some running stuff.

A little vest, bottles and various bits and pieces.

I like preparation.

Or possibly I just like buying things that make me feel prepared.

New Year's Eve arrived and I got drunk.

New Year's Day arrived and I had a proper hangover.

I spent most of the day putting the run off. Eventually, at about eight o'clock that night, stubbornness won.

I'd said I was going to start on January 1st, so I was going to start on January 1st.

I needed a key from my work van, which was parked a few miles away, so I ran down through the park and roads to the van, collected the key and headed home along the Avenue.

I remember running past a couple of people as if I was in some sort of race.

Obviously, they had absolutely no idea they were racing me.

I got home completely destroyed and incredibly pleased with myself.

I thought I'd smashed it.

The following morning, I could barely walk downstairs.

I knew nothing about pacing, training, recovery or what happens when someone who doesn't run suddenly decides to run as hard as he can.

There was, however, one small problem.

Before I'd even completed that first run, I'd already entered some races.

While sitting in bed procrastinating earlier that day, I'd booked several Trail Monkey 5K trail races and the Jersey Marathon.

Apparently, going for a run first and seeing whether I actually liked it would have been far too sensible.

My thinking was simple.

If I booked something and told people I was doing it, I'd made it much harder for myself to back out.

That philosophy has caused me quite a few problems since.

FROM 5K TO "MAYBE I'LL RUN 20 MILES"

My first proper event was a Trail Monkey 5K at Sorel.

I turned up looking considerably more experienced than I actually was, probably wearing far too much kit.

Jaime, my girlfriend at the time and now my wife, came along to support me.

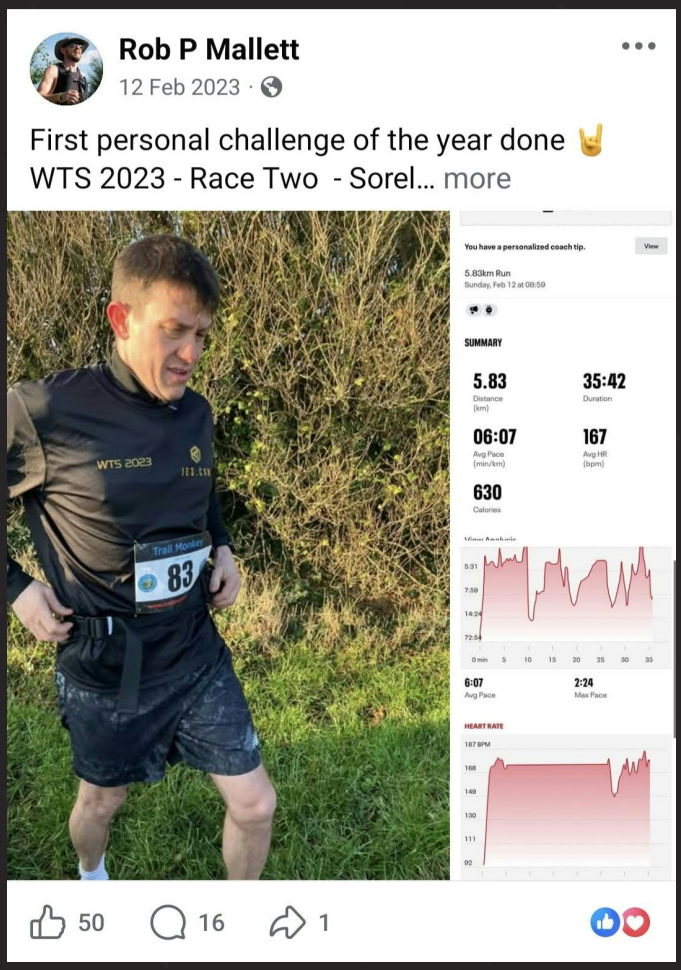
I finished the race and came towards the line expecting her to be standing there witnessing this historic moment in my sporting career.

Jaime was nowhere to be seen.

I eventually walked back towards the car and found her sitting inside playing some sort of game on her phone.

She'd completely missed my first race.

I still remind her occasionally.



The first race, saved in Rob's own race post.

From there, things escalated pretty quickly.

By May 6th 2023, four months after I started running, I was standing on the start line of the Trail Monkey Double Top 20-mile race.

It covered just under 32 kilometres with over 1,000 metres of climbing.

My knee started playing up after about 10 kilometres and the rest became, as I described it on Strava at the time, a "lovely hobble."

Most people might have taken that as a sign to build up more gradually.

Thirteen days later, I went out by myself and ran another 20 miles.

5K SOREL / TRAIL MONKEY

The Strava title for that one was

"Impromptu 20 mile 🙂"

It was followed by:

"Got carried away but good fun! Going to hurt tomorrow."

That probably sums up my early running career quite well.

A few weeks later, I ran the Canaccord Genuity Half Marathon. I caught the 1:45 pacer halfway around and decided I'd simply follow him to a 1:45 finish.

Unfortunately, I hadn't considered that he was a very good runner who maintained his pace going uphill as well.

I didn't.

I lost him on the final hill but still came away with another PB.

I was becoming completely hooked.

A SMALL PROBLEM IN MY GROIN

On June 24th 2023, I went out for a late-night trail run testing a new head torch.

It was one of those runs you remember for random reasons.

I saw two hedgehogs and an owl eating a vole, and at one point I collided with a rabbit coming the other way which somehow ran straight between my legs.

Somewhere during that run, I also felt something strange in my groin.

That turned out to be an inguinal hernia.

It would pop out and I eventually learned how to gently work it back in. As it became more troublesome, I bought an inguinal hernia support: basically a belt with a pressure pad over the groin and a strap underneath to help keep everything where it was supposed to be.

The sensible response would probably have been to take things easy.

Instead, I spent much of the following year training and racing with it.

MY FIRST ULTRA... SORT OF

52.73 KM / 24 NOVEMBER 2023

During 2023, I started hearing more and more about ultramarathons through the Trail Monkey community.

The idea fascinated me.

People were voluntarily running further than marathons.

Sometimes much further.

Trail Monkey had three longer events in Jersey and completing the shorter version of all three formed the Mini Grand Slam.

So obviously I wanted the little award.

The final one was connected to the CI50/CI100 winter event.

Bad weather and low numbers meant the official race was cancelled, but a few of us decided to run it anyway.

There was a WhatsApp group for people keeping an eye on us, and Trail Monkey race director Paul Burrows helped pull it together.

Paul didn't just help organise it either. He came out and ran it with us.

Everybody understood it wasn't an official race. We weren't entering some organised event with all the usual support around us.

We were simply going out and doing it anyway.

On November 24th 2023, I headed off into the darkness.

I covered 52.73 kilometres with nearly 1,400 metres of climbing.

I also got lost a few times.

My Strava activity was appropriately titled

"Not the C.I.50."

Several of the runners doing the full 100 km reached the 50 km point before me, then turned around and headed back out for their return 50 km. Of those of us finishing at the 50 km distance, though, I was the first solo male back, which meant I completed the Mini Grand Slam as the male winner.

Technically, it wasn't an official race, but it was my first time beyond 50 kilometres.

Something had definitely changed.

I wasn't somebody experimenting with running anymore.

I WAS BECOMING A RUNNER.

THEN I FOUND BACKYARD ULTRA

A month before that, something had already appeared on Facebook which had completely caught my attention.

Big's Backyard Ultra.

On October 25th 2023, I shared an update showing eight runners heading out on yard 96.

My comment on social media was

"Absolute madness!!! Serious grit and determination happening atm."

I couldn't stop watching it.

Every hour they had to start again.

4.167 MILES.

Back before the hour was up.

Then do it again.

And again.

And again.

Into the night.

Into the next day.

And eventually into another night.

It was beautifully simple and completely ridiculous.

I loved it.

That was the spark.

I started researching Backyard Ultras.

Things were moving quickly.

Early in 2024, I travelled off-island for my first proper organised ultra, the Jurassic Coast Ultra Challenge 40-miler.

On March 23rd 2024, I covered 66.93 kilometres in 7:38:55.

Eight days later, I was back racing a Trail Monkey 5K in Jersey and managed my first outright 5K victory.

I would later win the 2024 Trail Monkey male 5K series overall, including two individual race wins.

The funny thing is that while I was still making all sorts of novice mistakes, I was also beginning to get some decent results.

The Double Top showed that perfectly.

In May 2023, I'd attempted the 20-mile version, hurt my knee early and hobbled much of the way home.

On May 4th 2024, almost exactly a year later, I went back for the full 40-mile ultra.

This time I covered 64.74 kilometres with 2,161 metres of climbing in 7:57:16.

DOUBLE TOP / 4 MAY 2024

3RD

I FINISHED THIRD.

64.74 KM

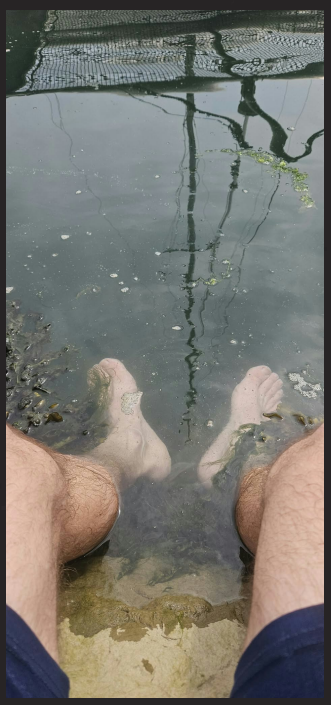
2,161 metres of climbing / 7:57:16

GU36

Fifteen days later, I was in Guernsey running the GU36 Ultra, finishing 57.29 kilometres in 6:00:58.

Guernsey GU36 Ultra

Back at the harbour



When that one finished, I put my feet in the sea for about ten minutes, collected my bag, jumped in a taxi and went straight to the airport because I had a flight home.

THAT PROBABLY GIVES A FAIRLY ACCURATE PICTURE OF HOW RUNNING FITS INTO MY LIFE.

RUNNING IS THE EXTRA BIT

Before Rob's first road marathon

During Rob's first road marathon

I've never arranged my whole life around running.

I've generally added running on top of everything that was already there.

I own a removals company, so my normal working day is already physical.

A really big workday can be close to 30,000 steps, with a lot of those involving stairs, furniture and heavy carrying.

Between work and running, my average has often sat around 19,000 steps a day, although obviously that moves around depending on the week.

In some ways, my job is my strength and conditioning.

It just doesn't appear on Strava.

Recovery has been similar.

I haven't always been good at giving myself much of it.

"IT JUST DOESN'T APPEAR ON STRAVA."

AFTER DARK

Running fitted around family life.

Night runs with the boys.

After my first road marathon, my legs were absolutely destroyed.

That afternoon, I went swimming with the kids.

The following morning, I went straight into a huge 12-hour removals job.

I've always tried to make the running fit without taking away from family or work.

Sometimes that means running late at night once everything else is done.

Sometimes it has meant taking the boys out with me (their idea).

And sometimes it means starting a training run when I'm already tired.

I deliberately do some of that, not because I think every run should be difficult (I've learned more about the value of recovery since), but because Backyard Ultras eventually require you to perform when you're tired and uncomfortable, and when your brain is providing plenty of perfectly reasonable excuses to stop.

I want some of those feelings to be familiar.

My philosophy has always been fairly simple:

IF YOU WANT TO BE A RUNNER, RUN.
IF YOU WANT TO LEARN TO DO HARD STUFF, DO HARD STUFF.

MY FIRST BACKYARD

Breakheart / Rob's first Backyard

BREAKHEART / 2024

"THERE WAS JUST ONE SMALL ISSUE."

In 2024, I finally entered my first Backyard Ultra at Breakheart.
I'd been running for roughly 18 months, and I felt brilliant.

I actually looked pretty strong.

There was just one small issue.

I'd never really used gels before and apparently decided that a potential 24-hour-plus endurance event would be the ideal time to experiment.

It wasn't.

There was a steep climb on the course which I eventually christened Gel Hill.

Rob's first Backyard Ultra.

After eight or nine yards, my stomach started rebelling.

For yard after yard, I'd finish the loop, head straight for the toilet and hope something would happen.

Eventually, something did.

Spectacularly.

By around yard 21, I'd been sick and finally managed to go to the toilet after hours of trying.

I stood, ready to go again, feeling like there was a very realistic chance I was going to shit myself.

So I stopped without telling Jaime first.

I knew that if I discussed it with her, she would probably try to persuade me to carry on.

That race taught me two important lessons.

Firstly, don't test your race nutrition during your race.

Secondly, decisions made entirely inside your own exhausted head aren't necessarily very good decisions.

There was also another problem.

Jaime had made me a T-shirt with pictures of the kids on it and the words

"RUN DADDY RUN & BACKYARD 2024".

I had decided I was going to put it on for yard 24.

Except I hadn't made yard 24.

There was only one obvious solution: enter another Backyard.

THE GOVERNOR AND THE 24-YARD CLUB

The Governor / 19 October 2024

24

100 MILES / 24 HOURS

That next one was The Governor Backyard Ultra in Dover, organised by Ryan Castle of Hellfire Events.

On October 19th 2024, I finally got my 24 yards.

That meant 100 miles in 24 hours.

More importantly, I finally got to wear the T-shirt.

My Strava title afterwards was

“New PB 24 yards and longest run. Awesome event but I’m broken.”

Accurate.

The journey home then became an event of its own.

There had been major traffic chaos and roads were gridlocked. I was trying to work out alternative ferries and somehow I missed the turning for Portsmouth.

About 15 miles later, the van died on the motorway.

The turbo had gone.

Luckily, I had just spent 24 hours at a Backyard Ultra, so I had a camping chair, blankets and enough random kit to establish a reasonably comfortable roadside camp while I waited for recovery.

Eventually, I managed to get the van back to Portsmouth, onto the ferry and, with very little power and a slight oil leak, back home to Jersey.

Backyard number two completed.

SURGERY, 250 MILES AND MORE QUESTIONABLE DECISIONS

The hernia had now become difficult enough that in December 2024 I finally had it repaired by keyhole surgery.

I was supposed to take a decent amount of time off.

10 days later, I was in Holland with the family for New Year, walking around Efteling and pushing Jaime in a wheelchair because she was unwell.

Not exactly complete rest.

This also meant my preparation for something I had already entered for April 2025 wasn't ideal.

The Thames Ring 250.

I'd seen the event online and remember thinking,

"Look at these lunatics. They're running 250 miles."

It was a number I couldn't even comprehend.

A lot of people don't want to drive 250 miles.

Naturally, my next thought was

"I wonder what you have to do to qualify for that?"

The answer turned out to be "basically nothing".

If you had the belief and were willing to enter, you could have a go.

So I did.

My longest point-to-point run at that stage was around 48 miles.

I made it roughly 160.

It was a painful education in chafing, equipment, body mechanics, fatigue and logistics.

When I finally stopped, getting myself home with my enormous bags became such a nightmare that by the time I reached the hotel, I realised continuing the race might actually have been easier.

THE NEXT DAY, I BOOKED IT AGAIN.

250

THE THAMES RING

Event distance / miles

48

PREVIOUS LONGEST RUN

Point-to-point / miles

160

ROUGHLY REACHED

Miles covered

PRESSURE, FUN AND MY FIRST BACKYARD WIN

SUFFOLK / THE EXPECTATION

Suffolk Backyard Ultra / third Backyard

A new PB, but too much pressure.

One of the biggest Backyard lessons came shortly afterwards from two races only 12 days apart.

First came Suffolk Backyard Ultra.

I went into it taking myself far too seriously.

I had expectations and numbers in my head. I was thinking about what I should be able to do and what other people might expect me to do.

I still ran a new PB, but I didn't particularly enjoy myself.

Looking back, I'd put too much pressure on it.

NEXT / BREAKHEART / TWELVE DAYS LATER

TWELVE DAYS LATER

Twelve days later, Jaime and I went back to Breakheart.

This was where my first Backyard had ended with the infamous Gel Hill stomach disaster.

This time the whole attitude was different.

We liked the event. We liked the people.

I wasn't going there trying to prove anything.

It was during a heatwave. I ran 26 yards and I won.

My first Backyard victory.

There was something slightly ridiculous about it.

I had gone further at Suffolk while putting pressure on myself.

Twelve days later, I went somewhere simply intending to enjoy myself and came away with the win.

That taught me something I still believe now:

I PERFORM BETTER WHEN I'M HAVING FUN.

BREAKHEART / 2025

26

YARDS

MY FIRST BACKYARD VICTORY.

Breakheart / first Backyard win

Loop Till You Drop

31

YARDS

NO CREW.

VERY LITTLE KIT.

THIRTY-ONE YARDS WITH HAND LUGGAGE

Later came Loop Till You Drop.

This time I decided to see how cheaply and simply I could travel to a Backyard.

I flew over with hand luggage only.

I arrived without a chair and borrowed one.

No crew.

Very little kit.

I ended up running 31 yards.

For about 12 hours, I'd been running alongside another competitor, Dom.

Once I reached my own PB, the focus became getting him to his.

He needed 32.

I counted him down towards it, and once he got there, something in my brain simply decided the job was done.

So I stopped at 31.

Looking back at the videos afterwards, physically I was still moving well.

There was probably more there.

Mentally, I had checked out.

Another lesson.

MY MATE, MY RIVAL... MY NEMESIS

Josh Woods

Somewhere around this point, Ryan made an introduction that would turn out to be pretty important.

He put me in touch with Josh Woods.

We started talking about Backyard Ultras and I offered whatever little advice I'd picked up from my own experiences so far.

Eventually, we met in person.

We pretty quickly became Backyard buddies.

There was just one slight complication: Josh is a brilliant runner, which also made him competition.

It's a funny situation.

He's my mate. I genuinely want to see him do well and I'll help him however I can.

At exactly the same time, he's also one of the people I want to beat.

So somewhere along the way, Josh became both my Backyard buddy and my nemesis.

Neither of us probably realised then quite how much that relationship would become part of the story.

"HE'S MY MATE. I GENUINELY WANT TO SEE HIM DO WELL AND I'LL HELP HIM HOWEVER I CAN."

AND THEN CAME VIGO

My next plan was actually to travel north and run God's Own Backyard Ultra.

It was an event I really wanted to do.

Then Ryan announced the first Kent Backyard Ultra Series.

I'd already had a great experience with Hellfire at The Governor. I was part of the Hellfire Strava community, and I wanted to support what Ryan and the team were building.

So I sold my place at God's Own and entered the first race in the new series instead.

Vigo.

At that point, I genuinely intended to do just one race in the series, but there was also another factor: by now, my confidence was getting pretty high.

I'd gone from my first run on New Year's Day 2023 to winning a trail series, taking an ultra podium, getting deep into a 250-mile race, completing multiple Backyards, running beyond 30 yards and winning one.

Somewhere along the way, my ego had started whispering that maybe I had this Backyard thing figured out.

By the time Vigo arrived, I had a picture in my head of turning up and putting on a bit of a masterclass.

I thought I knew what I was doing.

VIGO WAS ABOUT TO TEACH ME OTHERWISE.

NEXT WEEK IN

ISSUE 02

HELLFIRE MAGAZINE

Rob's story continues.

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