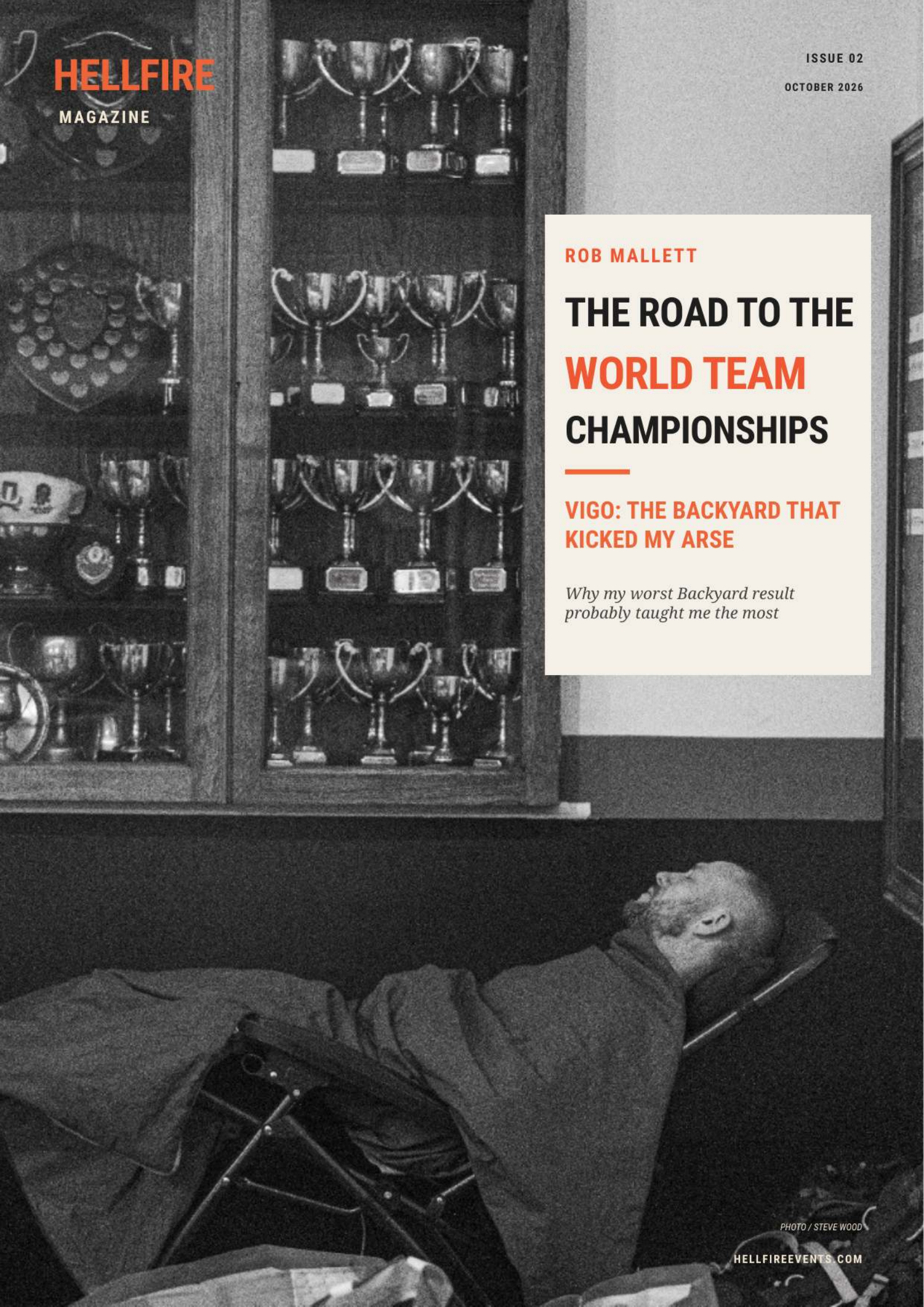
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ROB MALLETT

THE ROAD TO THE WORLD TEAM CHAMPIONSHIPS

VIGO: THE BACKYARD THAT KICKED MY ARSE

Why my worst Backyard result probably taught me the most

PHOTO / STEVE WOOD

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ROB MALLETT

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VIGO: THE BACKYARD THAT KICKED MY ARSE

Why my worst Backyard result probably taught me the most

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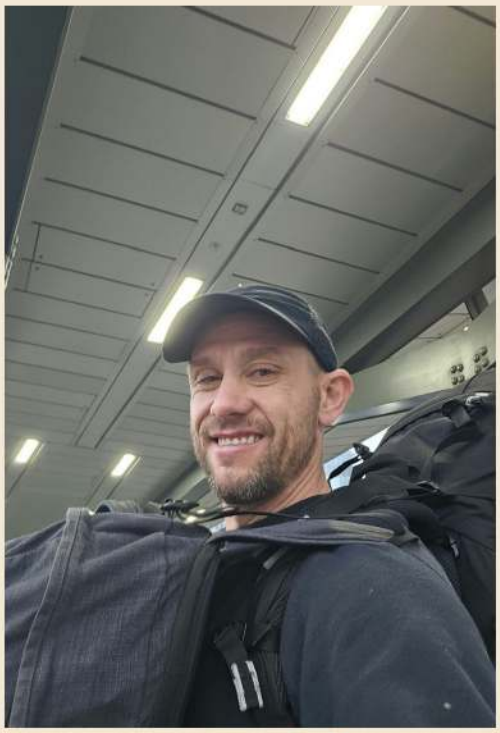
I arrived at Vigo thinking I was pretty good at Backyard Ultras.
Possibly a little too good.
I was coming off the back of my first win at Breakheart and then a 31-yard PB at Loop Till You Drop, also my first Assist, where I'd helped Dom get to his own PB of 32 yards.
Looking back, though, that 31-yard result already contained a warning sign.
Once I'd reached my PB, I started counting down towards Dom's.
He needed 32.
How far can I go?
I'd accidentally given myself another finish line.
Once Dom reached his PB, I had an out.
My feet hurt. I needed to sort myself out for getting back to the airport. I had no crew. I was in new territory. All perfectly plausible reasons.

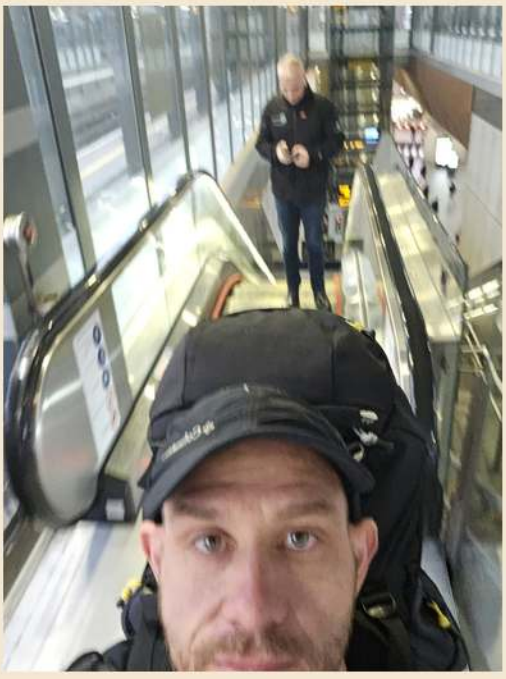
But looking back at the videos afterwards, physically I still looked good.
I'd stopped with more left in the tank.
That was a head decision, not a body decision.
I knew I'd made mistakes, but rather than denting my confidence, somehow I convinced myself I'd learned enough to put everything right at the next one.
And Vigo looked perfect.
It had a night loop and a day loop.
Excellent.
That would break things up.
It started at 9pm.
Even better.
I'd get the first night out of the way immediately, then I'd have a whole day before going into the second night.
And obviously one of the two loops was bound to be easier than the other.
I'd got this all worked out.
What could possibly go wrong?
Quite a lot, as it turned out.

THE RACE STARTED A WEEK BEFORE I REALISED IT HAD

THREE AND A HALF HOURS' SLEEP.

My confidence was peaking.
My preparation wasn't.
I run a removals company, and the week before Vigo I took on a large pack-and-move job which ended up becoming much more demanding than I'd expected.
I was doing 11- and 12-hour days.
I wasn't training properly.
I wasn't sleeping properly.
I wasn't eating particularly well.
I was doing hard physical work all day and stressing about getting the job finished.
Looking back, it was almost the exact opposite of what you should probably do before an endurance event.
But I still thought I'd be fine.
I was going to finish work at about five o'clock on the Thursday, get home, spend some time with the kids, take the younger ones to karate, then calmly pack my bags ready for the early flight.
Simple.
Except I didn't finish at five.
I finished at about eight.
By the time I'd dropped everyone off, swapped vehicles and got home, it was getting on for nine o'clock.
Jaime had already had to sort karate and dinner without me.
She really is my rock and a total legend. I felt guilty that I hadn't seen much of the kids, so rather than disappearing straight off to pack, I spent some time with them.
By the time they were asleep it was gone ten.
And, being Last Minute Rob, naturally I still hadn't packed.
So I ate, sorted all my gear and eventually got into bed at around midnight.
My alarm was set for half past three.
Three and a half hours' sleep.
Perfect preparation for a Backyard Ultra.





PERFECT PREPARATION FOR A BACKYARD ULTRA.

TWENTY KILOS OF COMPLETELY NECESSARY STUFF





At Loop Till You Drop I'd flown over with hand luggage only.
That had worked surprisingly well.
But Vigo was winter.
Wet.
Mud.
Cold.
Obviously this meant I now needed everything.
Multiple pairs of trainers.
Extra clothing.
Extra socks.
Various bits of kit that I'd convinced myself were essential.
So this time travelling light had gone completely out of the window.
I had a large backpack on my back, another large rucksack which I ended up wearing on my front, plus bags of shopping and supplies.
Looking back at the photos, I looked less like somebody travelling to a running event and more like I was attempting to relocate there.
And it was heavy.
Very heavy.
Then came trains, stations, escalators, rain and generally hauling this ridiculous amount of stuff around southern England.

I still had a plan though.
Somewhere on the journey I would find a cheap Premier Inn or Travelodge, pay about £40 for a room for a few hours and get four or five hours' sleep.
That would fix everything.
Eventually I reached Stone Crossing.
There was a hotel nearby, so I thought I'd finally cracked it.
They did have a room.
A family room.
About £145.
For the sake of a couple of hours' sleep I couldn't bring myself to do it.
So after dragging half my possessions to Stone Crossing in search of some much-needed sleep...
I went to Burger King instead.
Another elite preparation decision.

COSTA: MY PRE-RACE ACCOMMODATION



After eating, I spoke to Jaime and headed back towards the station.
Then I realised the trains were a nightmare.
I'd have to go backwards, change somewhere else and generally take a ridiculous route to get to Vigo.
That was when Uber came to the rescue.
It cost me somewhere around £18 and dropped me in Vigo.
Problem solved.
Except I was now about four hours too early to actually go to the event.
I wandered around looking for somewhere to sit and found a Costa.
So Costa became my temporary hotel.
I had two large cappuccinos.
I drink a lot of coffee anyway, but at some point I apparently became concerned that perhaps more caffeine wasn't the answer.

Unfortunately I still had hours to kill and needed to keep buying something if I was going to sit there.
So I started drinking decaf.
I never drink decaf.
To me it's a bit like zero per cent beer.
What's the point?
But there I sat, charging my electronics from a plug socket, drinking coffee I didn't want and trying to get comfortable in a little tub chair.
Eventually, around five o'clock, I got another Uber to the event.

SURELY I CAN SLEEP IN A CHAIR?



For once I'd actually been organised about one thing.
I'd ordered a camping chair online and had it delivered to Ryan's house so he could bring it to Vigo for me.
What a legend!
This was the start of a trend. I currently have reclining camping chairs spread around different locations in the UK.
My latest plan was:
Get to the event.
Set everything up.
Sleep in the chair for a couple of hours.
Wake up refreshed.
Go and put on my Backyard masterclass.
Again, fantastic theory.
The problem was that when I arrived, it was good to see everyone.
Ryan was there.
The Hellfire crew were there.
Philly, Will and some of the others I'd met previously at The Governor.
I also met Steve, the camera guy, for the first time.
He's not only a brilliant photographer but a genuinely nice bloke and a proper character.
He'd end up becoming another friend and familiar face throughout the Kent Backyard Ultra Series.
There were people arriving, kit being sorted, conversations happening.
I laid out all the essentials and extra crap I'd been carrying around all day and actually felt quite organised for once.
Then I tried to sleep.
Not a chance.
The place was too busy and I was too wired.
So by the time the race briefing started, I'd had around three and a half hours' sleep since Friday morning, done a week of brutal removals work, dragged far too much luggage across England, spent hours sitting in cafes and failed completely at my master plan of sleeping anywhere before the start.
Naturally, I still thought I was going to have a great race.
The music started.
The flares went off.
The rain had finally stopped.
At 9pm, we headed into Vigo Woods.

MEETING THE COMPETITION



Vigo was also where some people who would later become important parts of my Backyard story really started appearing.

Ryan had already put me in contact with Josh Woods, and Vigo was where we properly got to spend some time together in person.

We ran together for a while during the night. Straight away I liked him.

He's a brilliant runner, but more importantly he's a good bloke, a great dad and someone whose values seemed pretty similar to mine.

Of course, that created a slight problem. I wanted him to do well. But I also wanted to beat him.

That friend-rival relationship would become a recurring theme later in the series.

During Vigo I did a bit of run-walk on the hills with Josh, something I sometimes use on climbs and when fatigue starts creeping in: one minute running, one minute walking.

Nothing revolutionary.

Just a simple structure that stops you thinking too far ahead.

Run for one. Walk for one. Repeat.

He jumped onto it for a while and, as far as I remember, continued using something similar after I was gone.

On the daybreak yard, Josh was first male back and won a Fenix headtorch. Fenix were sponsoring the event. At the time it was just a nice prize.

That headtorch would become something of a running joke later in the series.

Josh eventually had a considerably better Vigo than I did. He took the Assist.

HE'S A BRILLIANT RUNNER, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY HE'S A GOOD BLOKE, A GREAT DAD AND SOMEONE WHOSE VALUES SEEMED PRETTY SIMILAR TO MINE.

PERSPECTIVE IS A WONDERFUL THING.



Another runner I was excited to be around was Andy Imms.
Andy was probably one of the first established names in Backyard running that I personally recognised.
During the event we ended up talking about Backyard running and aspirations around making the British team.

There I was, bumbling around the course talking about future GB ambitions.
Meanwhile Vigo was in the process of handing me my worst Backyard result ever.
Andy would go on to win the event.
Josh assisted him.
I finished on 19 yards.
Perspective is a wonderful thing.
I also met Jacques, a South African runner who would crop up again later in the story.
There were loads of good people there, too many to list, and that is one of the things I've come to love about Hellfire Events.
You arrive to race people.
Then somehow you end up becoming mates with half of them.

YOU ARRIVE TO RACE PEOPLE. THEN SOMEHOW YOU END UP BECOMING MATES WITH HALF OF THEM.



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JUST GET TO DAYLIGHT



GET TO DAYLIGHT.
JUST GET TO SUNRISE.

PHOTO / STEVE WOOD

At first I was still full of confidence.
But the sleep deprivation caught up with me frighteningly early.
Around six hours in, somewhere around three o'clock in the morning, I was struggling badly.
My eyes were closing while I was moving.
I was literally falling asleep on my feet.
This wasn't 30 hours into a Backyard.
It wasn't even 20.
I was six hours in and already fighting to stay awake.
Coffee.
Sweets.
Food.
Music.
Singing to myself.
Counting steps.
I was trying anything I could think of to keep my brain switched on.

Eventually the whole night became about one thing:
Get to daylight.
Just get to sunrise.
Once the sun comes up, everything will be different.
That became my little promise to myself.
And somehow I got there.
The sky started changing.
Daylight appeared.
And for a brief moment I got exactly what I'd been waiting for.
That lovely little sunrise euphoria.
Yes.
I've made it.
Here we go.
I think it lasted about one yard.
Because then I discovered the day loop.



WELCOME TO THE MOON FIELD

Remember my clever theory that having two loops would make Vigo easier?
Turns out the second loop can also be worse.
The night loop had already contained a hill I wasn't particularly fond of.
Steep.
Slippery.
One of those climbs where you spend half your time trying not to slide backwards, or at least that's how it seemed to me in my slightly sub-par state.
In my imagination the day loop was going to remove that unpleasantness.
It didn't.
The hill was still there.
The only difference was that now you had to do more work before you reached it.
The day loop dropped us further down into a field at the bottom.
That field was something else.
Thick, sticky, cloggy mud.
I called it the moon field, because by the time you crossed it your trainers had accumulated so much mud that your feet felt enormous.
It genuinely felt like kilos of mud stuck underneath each shoe.
When you reached the gate at the other side you'd have to kick and scrape it off before starting the climb back up.
First came a long, more gradual ascent.
Then, after all that, you still got the horrible steep slippery hill from the night loop anyway.
Excellent.
Another assumption destroyed.



Vigo Woods, photographed the following morning.

THE BRAVADO FINALLY RAN OUT

There were plenty of opportunities to quit.

I could have stopped during the night when I was falling asleep on my feet.

I could have stopped when daylight arrived and I discovered that the day loop was even less appealing than I'd imagined.

But I kept going.
The bravado was still there.
I'll be all right.
I can do this.
Keep moving.
And I did.

Until the daylight started disappearing again.

The thought of getting the headtorch back out and going through another night tipped me over the edge.

I was exhausted.
I wasn't thinking particularly clearly.

And, most importantly, the willingness to continue had gone.

At 19 yards, I pulled the plug.
It remains my lowest Backyard total.
And I was angry with myself.

Because just like at Loop Till You Drop, I didn't feel like my body had absolutely forced me out.
My head had forced me out.

AT 19 YARDS, I PULLED THE PLUG.



PHOTO / STEVE WOOD

DEAD TO THE WORLD





PHOTOS / STEVE WOOD

After stopping, I did the medal photos with Ryan and then pretty much collapsed into my chair.

There's a photograph of me asleep underneath the trophy cabinet.

It looks less like somebody having a nap and more like someone waiting to be collected by an undertaker.

Proper coffin sleep.

There were people from the club sitting around watching sport and drinking at the bar.

Apparently some of them came over to check I was still breathing.

Fair enough.

I was gone.

Completely dead to the world.

After a few hours, I woke up and started becoming vaguely human again.

There were still runners going.

I was awake to see people heading towards their 24th yard.

Jacques was still in, but his watch had died, so I lent him one of my spare watches.

That little favour ended up being repaid a little while later.

When Jacques's wife came to collect him, they gave me a lift to somewhere I could finally sleep properly.



IMAGE / SUPPLIED BY ROB MALLETT

THE BACKYARD COMMUNITY COMES THROUGH AGAIN

Another runner had been there with his sister crewing him.

They'd travelled quite a long way and she had booked a small chalet nearby for after the race.

Things hadn't gone to their original plan either, and they decided to drive home instead.

Rather than let the accommodation go unused, she gave Ryan the details and code and told him that if anyone needed somewhere to stay, they could use it.

I definitely needed somewhere.
I hadn't booked anything.
That was deliberate.

At Loop Till You Drop, one of the excuses I'd given myself for stopping was that I needed to start sorting out hotels, transport and getting back for my flight.

I'd recognised afterwards that I'd created another plausible reason to stop.

So this time I'd deliberately left myself without that little escape route.

The downside was that after dropping at 19 yards I genuinely had nowhere to sleep.

Thanks to a stranger's generosity, Ryan passing on the details, and Jacques and his wife giving me a lift, I suddenly had a chalet.

That is another thing about Backyards.
Yes, technically everyone is competing against each other.
But the amount of help people give one another is ridiculous, and it's something I adore about this mad sport.

THE RECOVERY RUN

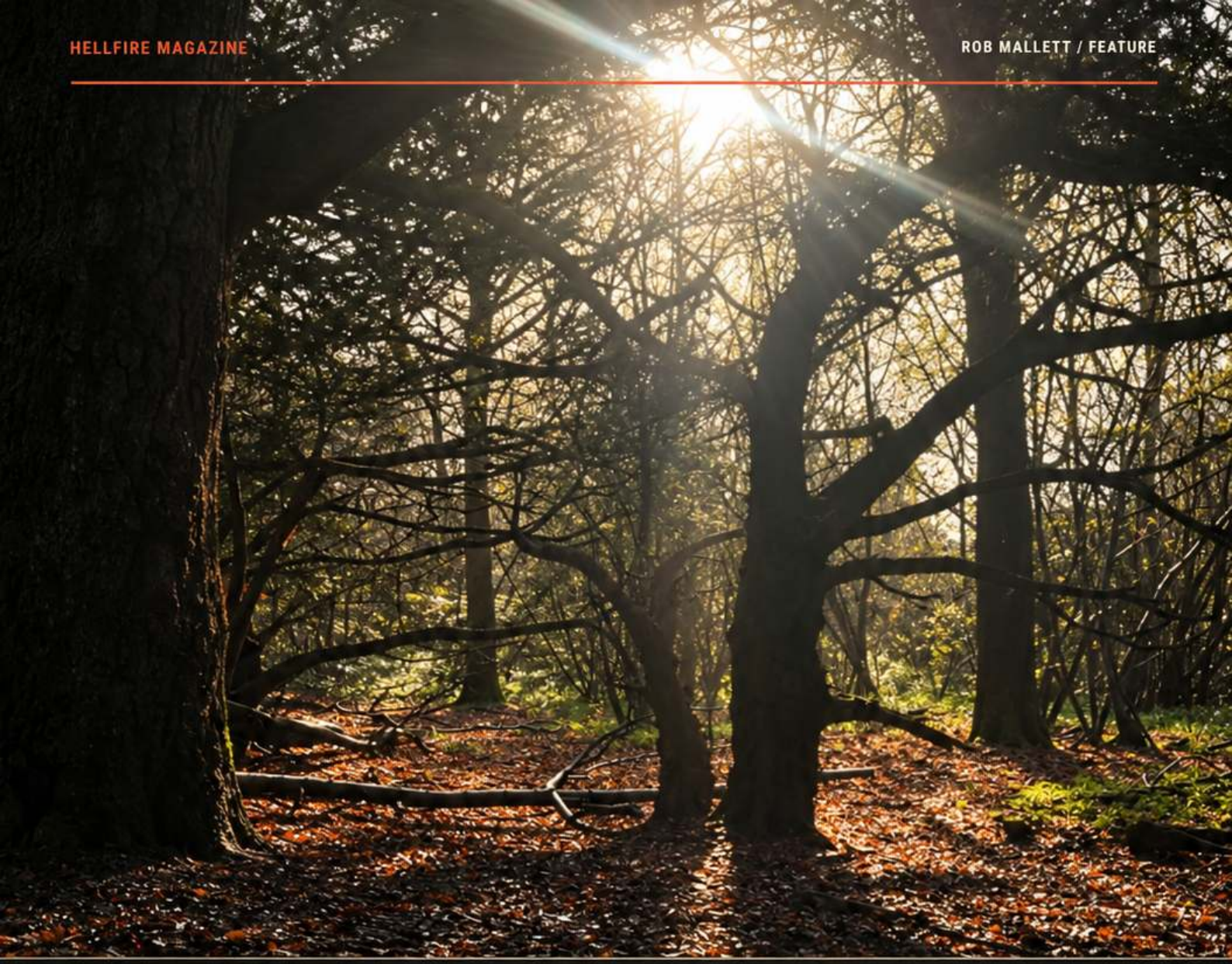




IMAGES / SUPPLIED BY ROB MALLETT

The next morning I woke up feeling considerably better.
I changed my flight and realised I still had a few hours before I needed to get to the airport.
So I did what any sensible person would do the morning after dropping out of a Backyard.
I went for a run.
What I hadn't realised during the night was that the chalet was close to the same woods I'd spent the previous day hating.
So I ended up back in Vigo Woods.
Except this time there was daylight.
No pressure.
No race.
No sleep deprivation.
And I loved it.
I ran through the woods looking at all the things I hadn't really noticed during the event.
Sculptures.
Information boards.
Ruins and little features hidden around the forest.
It was a completely different place.
And physically?
I felt fine.
That recovery run probably taught me more than anything else that weekend.

NO PRESSURE. NO RACE. NO SLEEP DEPRIVATION. AND I LOVED IT.



LESSONS LEARNED

THE BIGGEST LESSON VIGO TAUGHT ME

Vigo hadn't exposed some huge physical limitation.
It had exposed my preparation.
I'd gone into a Backyard off the back of a brutal working week, hardly any specific training, poor sleep, stress, rushed packing, a stupidly early flight, a day dragging heavy luggage around and then no meaningful rest before a 9pm start.
And I'd still expected myself to perform because I'd convinced myself I was good enough.
That was arrogance.
Or at least naivety.
Probably a bit of both.
The biggest lesson Vigo taught me was simple:
A Backyard doesn't start when the bell goes.
It starts in the days before it.
Sleep matters.
Stress matters.
Workload matters.
Preparation matters.
Your head matters.
You cannot spend a week digging a hole and then expect race-day bravado to magically fill it back in.

WHY VIGO?



PHOTO / STEVE WOOD

Strangely, despite Vigo absolutely kicking my arse, I'd recommend it.

Maybe partly because it kicked my arse.

It is a proper Backyard course.
Mud.
Hills.
Day and night loops.
Darkness.
Weather.
A field that tries to steal your shoes.

It tests you.

But the thing I remember most isn't actually the suffering.
It's the people.

Ryan and the Hellfire crew.
The runners I already knew.
Meeting Josh properly.
Running with Andy.
Meeting Jacques.
Meeting Steve and the characters around the series.

People lending things, helping each other, sorting lifts and even handing over unused accommodation to somebody they didn't really know.

That mixture is what makes Backyard Ultras strange.
They can be absolutely savage.
But they can also be incredibly friendly.

THEY CAN BE ABSOLUTELY SAVAGE.

BUT THEY CAN ALSO BE INCREDIBLY FRIENDLY.



PHOTO / STEVE WOOD

PUTTING IT RIGHT

I left Vigo with my tail between my legs a little.
My confidence had taken a knock.
Probably one I needed.
I'd arrived expecting to show people what I could do.
Instead, Vigo showed me how much I still didn't know.
But once I'd got home, the disappointment started changing into something more useful.
I didn't want to forget about Vigo.
I wanted to fix what Vigo had exposed.
Train better.
Prepare better.
Respect the event.
Arrive rested.
Stop relying purely on stubbornness and bravado to rescue bad decisions.
And there was another Hellfire Backyard coming.
Dover.
January.
I signed up.
This time, I intended to arrive differently.

I'D ARRIVED EXPECTING TO SHOW PEOPLE WHAT I COULD DO.
INSTEAD, VIGO SHOWED ME HOW MUCH I STILL DIDN'T KNOW.

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