

Ultrabalaton

25th June 2011

by John Pares

I have been spending a lot of time working in Hungary in the last few years, and I have had my eye on the Ultrabalaton for some time. So when the 24 hour world championship was cancelled, I took the opportunity and entered the race immediately. Together with the Perth 100km in March, and the Basel 12 hour race in May, it would form part of the perfect build-up to the Commonwealth 24 hour championship in Llandudno in September.

As an adopted Welshman and representative of Wales (5 times at 100km, once at 24 hours) Hungary also has a particularly special status for me. The national poem, learned by heart by all school children, is called "A Walesi Bardok" – The Bards of Wales. "Why?" is a simple question but it's a long answer and I won't go into it here. The good news is that all Hungarians have heard of Wales.

The Ultrabalaton is 212km around the largest lake in Europe, mostly flat but with a few hills. 2011 would be only the 5th running of the event but it has already gained some status as a prestigious event. Having reviewed previous results, and this year's entry list, I had set my target as winning the race with a target time of around 19:30. This would also be equivalent to PB pace for a 24 hour race and would give me a good marker for Llandudno.

Training had gone well leading up to the event, including a win with 137km (85 miles) at the Basel 12 hour race. I had also completed many long training runs,

Lake Balaton

Photo by Linda Sika Tettey



including a 50 miler from my home in Zurich, along the river Glatt to the Rhine, besides the Rhine for a few miles and then up the River Töss to Winterthur before the final leg home. A nice run and completed in 7.30, including stops to feed and replenish water and isotonic bottles. It had all gone very well indeed.

My crew for the event was Simon Saunders, a British friend from Budapest, who had completed the Marathon des Sables and wanted to help in order to get a bit more insight into Ultrarunning. Simon is also a personal trainer and advises several of his clients on marathon, triathlon and ultra training. He was to cycle with me for the full race distance carrying essential supplies and spare clothing.

The event started at 6am on Saturday 25th June in the small holiday village of Tihany. I was feeling very relaxed about this one and sauntered up to the start just 10 minutes beforehand. I was immediately confronted by some of my work colleagues, Julia, Zita, Tamas, Arpad and Linda from southern Hungary, who had travelled just to support me. They wished me luck and promised to see me at several points around the course. On the line itself I met the other two Brits in the race, Mark Woolley and Robert Pinnington.

I had been a bit confused by the chip that I had been given in my race pack and noticed that no-one else at the start had tied it to their shoes as I had. In fact



Late afternoon/evening

Photo by Linda Sika Tettey

most people had used the elastic it came with to fasten it to their index finger. I decided that every single other person in the field could not be wrong and quickly knelt down, untied my laces and transferred the chip to my finger (still at a loss quite how to use it). Oh well, I was sure that I would soon find out.

The race started and quite a few people went off at an excessive pace so I hung back as usual. This was not a sprint but a...marathon...actually just a smidgen over five marathons but the important point was not to blow up early in the race. Most of the leading group were Hungarians and included the two pre-race favourites, János Bogár, a previous winner, and Béla Mazur the reigning national 24 hour champion. At the first check point I was in 18th position and just ahead of schedule – an uneventful start, just how I liked it.

At the second check-point I found out how the chip worked. One of the marshals held out a plastic electronic box to me. When I looked puzzled she grabbed my hand and showed me how to insert the chip, like a key into a lock. It went ‘beep’, I withdrew it and was on my way. This would have been very tricky if I’d left it tied to my laces! The downside of this novel method of chip timing was that it meant stopping at every single checkpoint to carry out this procedure (47 of them). This negated some of the benefit of having a crew and was disruptive for maintaining a rhythm. However, I took advantage by taking a cup of isotonic and an occasional ‘nibble’ from the feed station to supplement my own food.

I’d tried to keep my own food simpler than for a 24 hour race – this was pretty essential as Simon had to carry it on the bike. A lot of it was instant energy in the form of energy/isotonic drinks and sugary snacks – power bars, Mars bars, honey, rice crispie squares, jelly sweets but I also took on some soya milkshakes for protein. In hindsight I was missing some salty/ savoury items and would probably have benefited from some more protein. I also think my calorie intake was a bit low overall. It was very useful having Simon there as he cycled ahead to the aid stations and mixed drinks and got food ready on request.

After this point we went into the most picturesque part of the race, past one of the National Parks, and also the hilliest section with a small amount of off-road. Emerging from this section I was now slightly behind schedule but still OK. I found myself with Pero Hyppölä, of Finland, for a short while and we had a brief chat. However, our pacing strategies seemed to be different and I moved ahead as we headed south west towards the bottom end of the lake. Much of this section was away from the lake itself and we went through some very pretty villages with some very expensive holiday homes. Many of the registration plates, of the cars in the drives, were either German or Austrian. It was clear where the tourists (and the money) were coming from.



*Running well in the heat. Simon Saunders (Support Crew) on the bike
Photo by Linda Sika Tettey*

I moved steadily through the field, passing those people who had gone off way too fast, and went through the first marathon in about 3:34. When we joined the lake cycle path at Balatonederics (53.8km) I was up into 7th and about 4 minutes behind my schedule. I hadn’t been pushing hard and was feeling relaxed and happy with progress. I now ended up running on my own for the remaining 158km of the race! Although, of course, Simon did keep me company.

The next section of the race went very well for me as I did the second marathon in about 3:47, got back ahead of schedule and moved up into 4th place. I was quite surprised at making such good progress as the sun came out and it was very hot through the middle part of the race. At this point I was confident of a podium finish and still hoped to win overall as I was convinced the leaders had gone off way too fast. I was then surprised at Balatonmárfiafűrdő when a runner in a green top with a Hungarian flag on the sleeve came flying past me and dropped me back into 5th place. I only found out afterwards that this was Béla Mazur. I must have passed him without realising and then he came back at me. He was clearly running a much more evenly-paced race than I had thought and now looked very strong.

I had now rounded the bottom end of the lake and was heading back North East along the south shore. I was hugely disappointed to discover that this side of the lake was like the seaside in the UK – mile after mile of hotels, restaurants, camp sites, water parks etc- I knew that this was a popular tourist destination but thought, naïvely, that they were all here to visit the national park. In fact it was “Kleine Deutschland” with lots of ‘Zimmer Frei’ and ‘Zu Vermieten’ signs. As this was now the middle of the afternoon, on a June weekend, it was very busy and did not make for easy or enjoyable running. Some clouds had now come over and a head-wind had picked up. At least it was a bit cooler but not any easier.

Continued ...



The combination of the wind and the tedium seemed to knock me off schedule. I was eating and drinking quite well and my energy levels were good, but I wasn't making the progress I wanted. I have had my best races in the 12 and 24 hour format. There I have been able to get into a good rhythm and also work off the spectators, other runners and the lap-counters. Here there was little or no support and the kerbs, tree roots and uneven paths made it very difficult to maintain a constant and efficient stride. However, in hindsight, the biggest problem was mental – I think I had just 'gone off the boil' and lost concentration. As a result my third marathon took 4:08 and, at this point (Balatonszárszó), I was 16 minutes behind schedule.

The highlight of the afternoon was, without doubt, the parade of what appeared to be the Hungarian branch of the Lada owners club. There must have been 50 cars, many fabulously decorated and two containing a brass band (half the band in each car). It was hilarious. They were moving at about 10 miles an hour and I just laughed and laughed all the way through. They waved and cheered and tooted – it was great and really lifted my spirits. Then they were gone and I wondered if I'd imagined it – maybe hallucinating like I'd done in the Basel 24 hour race in 2009!

Immediately at the start of the fourth marathon I passed Attila Vozár for 4th place. He was clearly suffering and moving very slowly. What was very strange was his support crew following in a van with rave music blaring out. It was horrific and I don't see how it could have

been helping him. I gave him a few words of encouragement and moved ahead quite rapidly. My supporters from work must have seen Attila because they reappeared and then followed me for a section in the car with AC/DC at full volume. Now that's decent music. Up to now Simon had only had partial success clearing the tourists off the path with his bicycle bell and the occasional shout. We now found out that Zita's AC/DC was far more effective – they just scattered! However, it didn't last long as I now turned off the road onto a trail through the woods and had to wave 'goodbye'. I couldn't see how Attila could possibly reach the finish from that point and from the results I saw that he did drop out shortly afterwards.

The fourth section included the transition to night-time running. I started to feel the cold much sooner than expected and put on a long-sleeve top while the sun was still up. We'd arranged to meet Simon's wife just before sunset with

some more overnight gear. As I was already wearing the long-sleeve top, all this meant was attaching flashing lights front and back and taking my head torch. This is always a slightly strange part of the race as it seems to become quieter, as well as darker. We also moved away from the main tourist strip into a more residential area that also had some empty sections. This area, towards the top of the lake, also had a few hills. They felt like mountains at this stage of the race and my pace took another ratchet downwards.

So the fourth marathon passed in about 4:20. I was still in 4th and now 39 minutes behind schedule. I desperately wanted to get the third place and got some positive news that the next runner was only a few minutes ahead. I wasn't getting any feedback on the first and second runners, probably because they were so far ahead that Simon thought it might be counter-productive.

The last fifth of the race was true nighttime, from just before 10pm to the finish just before 3am. The top end of the lake had some more empty sections, which was quite nice as I could just run with my own thoughts. At one point Simon said, "You're like a metronome." He was referring to the sound of my feet on the tarmac and the regular rhythm. It took me back to my coach at Buckley Runners when I lived in North Wales – he always called me "The Metronome" and I think that regular beat helps keep me moving at a steady and efficient pace.



Earlier I had been taking occasional short walking breaks. I now got to the point where I was walking longer, and more frequently. I was feeling a bit sleepy and finding it very hard to keep going. This was the point where I had to give myself a bit of a talking to and start to draw on those deep resources of stamina and will power. I reminded myself of all the training I had done and how much I wanted that podium place. It seemed to work, at least partially, as I passed János Bogár for that important 3rd place. He was struggling and dropped down the field to 8th place by the finish.

It was also at this time that the relay runners came through and some of them were really motoring. I couldn't believe the time for the winning team of five – 12:22 and they were only 10 minutes ahead of second. That's an average of less than 2:30 per marathon which is an incredible set of 10 marathon runners that they found from somewhere.

As I rounded the end of the lake and into the home stretch I entered another phase of life at the Balaton holiday resorts – the nightlife. It's always funny on events like this as the bars and clubs disgorge their contents onto the sidewalk. And some of those people also disgorge their contents onto the sidewalk... Anyway, I moved from the quiet of the night to the noisy clubland – drunks staggering, girls crying, lads showing off, girls in impossibly high heels. Inevitably someone breaks into a run and starts talking in Hungarian. "Sorry, nem Magyar – Angol?" "Heh, you're English, what are you doing?" "Running around the lake" "How many days will that take" ...etc.

Coming into Balatonfüred the end was near but the mind and body were suffering. It was good to see my supporters for the last time before the finish. I then disappeared back into the dark for the final 8km. It was easy now, the pace wasn't great but I was just flowing along. Simon was quiet – it had been a long day for him as well. We turned onto the Tihany peninsular and the final climb to the finish. The hill wasn't too big, but you know how it feels after nearly 21 hours...

The organisers did the finish well with a personal finishing tape with my name on. I ran through it and got a big hug from all my supporters. With a finishing time of 20:55:24 which gave me 5:06 for the last marathon (+ 1km) – ouch. Afterwards I noticed that everyone else got a great photo with the tape raised over their heads – as usual I completely failed and just got one bent over

with my hands on my knees. The finish place refreshments were water-melon and beer – just what I fancied after 212km at 3am...not. I declined. As I was recovering I saw Pero Hyppölä arrive just 12 minutes behind me so he'd also had a good race. I thanked my supporters and headed off to the hotel with Simon. We just had the energy to shower, have a quick bite, and reflect on a job well done.

The prize giving was at 2pm the next day so I had a good sleep, a good breakfast and a good lunch before getting there. As I was eating lunch a Swedish runner (Sven Welleman) came in, still in his race kit. I had to smile as he said to the waiter, "I don't want to sit down, I smell too bad, can I have a takeaway?" I had a brief chat with him before he left with a cheeseburger and a beer. As I arrived for the prizes the last finishers were coming in – I'm always impressed by these guys staying out there for so long – 36 hours. The prizegiving was really good and, after the main event, they got all of the individual finishers up on to the stage – I thought this was a great touch to acknowledge everybody. It also highlighted the different nationalities – 18 countries represented altogether.

The drive back to Budapest was occupied with thoughts of, "What could I do to win it next year..." Some things never change! In the meantime, I was considering how long to recover before ramping up my Llanudno training. Incidentally, on checking back over my goals for the year, from my running log, I noted that back in January I had put down 21 hours as my estimated finishing time – maybe that 19:30 had been too ambitious but, heh, you have to aim high.

Ultrabalaton 2011 Results

Men:			
1st	Boris Ivanovič	Slovenia	19:37:56
2nd	Béla Mazur	Hungary	19:54:47
3rd	John Pares	Great Britain	20:55:37
27th	Mark Woolley	Great Britain	26:36:13
83rd	Robert Pinnington	Great Britain	31:28:30
Women:			
1st	Szilvia Lubics	Hungary	24:30:24
2nd	Viktória Makai	Hungary	26:44:14
3rd	Antell Tarja	Finland	28:22:56