

A Cosmic, a Swede and Four Deeside Ladies do the PSR

Three Letters

PSR. Three Letters. Without context, they could mean anything. Up until a few weeks ago they stood simply for Pyrenees Stage Run, an event in Spain I was going to do. There are many ultra races referred to only by their initials – I’ve done a few myself – and so there was no reason to think the significance of these three letters would change much over the course of a week.

But something unexpected did occur. For me, and I suspect anyone who ran or volunteered, what occurred over those 7 days has given the letters PSR a near-spiritual significance. Just hearing them will transport you back to that week with a wistful look in your eyes and an involuntary half-smile. I know this is supposed to be a race report, but it would doing the event a huge disservice not to discuss this aspect of the week. I don’t get evangelical about much, but for PSR I can’t help but do so.



A tough but beautiful course; competitive racing; good food; a daily beer; days that were tough but not *too* tough; a comfy bed each night; and an opportunity to properly relax each with the other runners. So, with only a small amount of shame I discovered a love for ‘luxury’ stage racing.

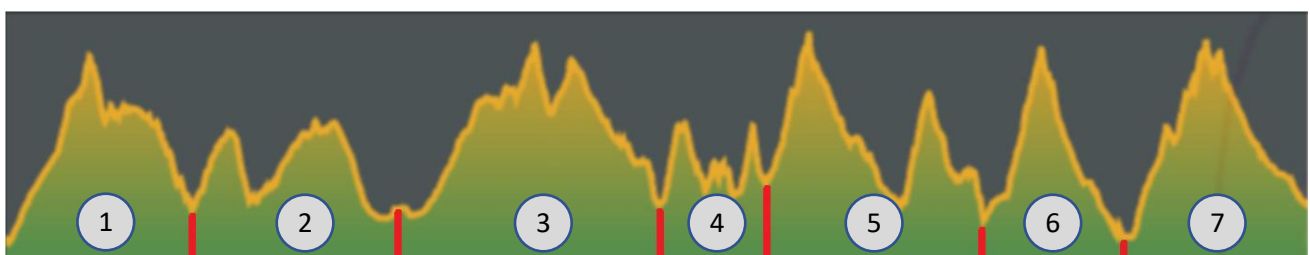
After UTMR it then became a hunt for a similar type of race in 2019. The PSR quickly became the obvious choice as it seemed like it would tick all the necessary boxes. The one difference was that you needed at least one team mate. Luckily for me, Robin was equally taken by UTMR and so we

readily agreed to enter as a pair. I would tell you how Robin (a Swede) and I know each other, but such was the frequency we were asked this over the week that I’m beginning to doubt how it happened, or whether we actually had met before....

To backup a bit, PSR is a 7-day stage race covering 240km in the Pyrenees. You traverse from Ribes de Freser to Salardu – both in Spain – taking in Andorra and a total of 15,000m of climb on the way. The race has ~120 participants in teams of two and three and is the brainchild of Jordi and Tomas, who also organise a 3-day race in Costa Brava.

The Random Swede

So how did I end up here? In recent ultras I had discovered that while I could generally finish what I’d started, I was having to endure more than enjoy and so a different approach was needed. On a whim I did the UTMR 4-stage race last year and discovered a way to enjoy (almost) all of a long ultra. The secret ingredients?



PSR Elevation Profile Over 240km

Day One - Acclimatisation

As we gathered at the start line on the Sunday morning we met the two Deeside ladies teams – Katie & Sam and Ros & Sarah – most of whom I knew already and had been at UTMR last year. None of us knew exactly what to expect at that stage, but the weather was looking good and spirits were high in the field.

The first day was 34km with 2,200m of climb, about average for the week. Although the start wasn't too brutal it was all uphill and it felt like hard work from the off. When we'd climbed above the treeline we were met with what felt like Pyrenean foothills – large grassy slopes and rolling terrain. It was good to be in the mountains.

Just after the highest point of the day and finding out we were 6th we made our first route error of the week. It turns out they weren't kidding when they said the course was sparsely marked as we missed a small marker taking you off a major path onto a grassy slope, losing 3-4 minutes before we realised. That was a lesson that would come in handy quite a few times during the week. Although we lost one place due to the error, being off-path and on British-style terrain was both fantastic and wholly unexpected – the prospects for this race were all looking good.

What followed was a stunning traverse on a rugged mountain-side path - slow going but immersive and full of character. By the time we got to the top of the final descent Robin was struggling with sciatica, but since I wasn't feeling that great either we were content to trot



Pyrenean foothills

home in a relaxed manner, finishing 7th for the day in 5:29.

We didn't realise it at the time but the two teams ahead of us would become an integral part of our week in terms of competition, which really added to the week for me. Filip & Michiel, aka 'the Belgians', were 5th and Gerald and Uwe, aka 'the Germans', were 6th, 20 and 3 minutes ahead of us respectively. The four teams ahead of us all were sufficiently far ahead to effectively be in a different race to us, so never even assigned them team names.

The Deeside ladies showed they meant business by filling the top two steps of the female podium, with Katie & Sam in 1st and Ros & Sarah in 2nd. Was this Cosmic going to sit back and allow the club to be outshone by their local rivals? (Spoiler alert – yes he would. Every single day.)

Day Two - Runnable

The map we had for each day categorised the terrain into colours based on the technicality, going from easy Green (road & forestry track) through Blue (hiking trails), Red (single track) and finally to Black (pathless and rough). At this stage the Black was talked about almost mythically as we wouldn't come across any till day 5. Although the Green parts were objectively the easiest, since it was often the least interesting terrain and allowed for fast running it was also viewed with some suspicion as the week went on.

Day one had seen a mix of green, blue and red, but day two promised to be a lot more runnable with less technical terrain, even if there was still plenty of climb



The long traverse



Post-stage beers

and descent. On the first climb we were in sight of the Belgians and the Spaniards (who would be 8th most days), with the Germans a few minutes ahead. The second climb was annoyingly runnable and Robin set a tough pace that took everything I had to match. Since the Belgians and Spaniards weren't far behind they were also forced to try and match our pace – Robin certainly made a lot of people suffer on that climb!

The final descent was highly runnable and so not quite to our liking, and then there was a tough ~4km on roads to the finish, which allowed the Belgians to sneak ahead meaning we finished 7th again in 5:00, but not far behind 5th and 6th. The Deeside ladies showed Day 1 was no fluke by taking the same positions again.

Happy to finish, we enjoyed an ice-massage and a cold beer in the sun with our 'taps off' – which had already become part of the daily ritual that would go on all week.

Day Three – The Big Day

At 47.5km with 2600m of climb, this was the biggest day of the week and seen by most as a big psychological hurdle to completing the event. It started with ~5km of almost flat tarmac (which was already not much fun) followed by a steady climb with runnable sections. The Belgians were out of sight at this stage but we were right behind The Germans. About half-way up the first big climb Robin decided to test the Germans by passing them and seeing if they could keep up. Little did he know he was actually testing me. Before the final

climb up to the first col at 2700m, we gained a few minutes only because they went wrong in a pathless forested.

My pace slowed dramatically as we neared the top – purely a function of my fitness – and Robin inadvertently captured one of the pictures of the week, with him smiling and me crouched over dragging myself up the climb. A good analogy for much of the week and anyone who saw it seemed to enjoy the contrast between us. The Germans caught me just near the top and seemed to be enjoying my suffering in a good natured way. At the col we got a marshall to take a picture of the four of us, a photo that has more significance now than it did at the time.

The Germans trotted off ahead of us on the descent and I was struggling to get any rhythm or pace, so 7th place seemed to be the best we could hope for that day. The second climb went a bit better but it wasn't until the descent that I started to enjoy it as the rocky, technical terrain re-energised me. There was still a long way to go though with some less interesting terrain so I was feeling pretty beaten up as we neared the end while Robin seemed pretty fresh. We had to work hard the last 10 minutes to keep our 7th place for the day, which felt like a minor victory. I was pretty broken at the finish but surprised the Germans had only put 8 minutes into us that day.



Robin smiling while I grind

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A brief truce with the Germans

It was that evening I first realised something special was happening in this race and that I'd be sad when it was over. I could see, and feel, that the race was collectively turning into a community, particularly during the nightly prize giving and seeing the photos & video of the day. It was becoming clear this was no accident and that Jordi & Tomas had put a lot of effort into devising a truly immersive race experience.

Day Four - Andorra

Day four was the Adventure day (no course markings) and was entirely in Andorra. After the long day 3 it was shortest day of the week, a mere 20km but still packing 1900m over a series of climbs.

When the Germans passed me the previous day they'd asked why I hadn't been using poles like most runners, especially as I was so clearly struggling to keep up with Robin. While I routinely use poles in mountain events, Robin has a personal #nopoles policy and I naively thought we'd be evenly matched if I also went without.



The daily ice massage was great

After day three's struggles it was clear I needed them and we had a laugh with the Germans as if they were some sort of secret weapon.

Before each stage began the same song – Ara! By Doctor Prats – was blared out to the runners and by day four it had reached anthemic status. It had gone from a mere song to a call to arms for a day of mountain running and another essential part of the race.

Although we were fairly content with 7th place and had no reason to believe we could go any higher, we still decided to attempt some tactics for the first time just to shake things up. They weren't very sophisticated, but on the basis it was the shortest day (and we'd be in amongst trees most of the day so the views were limited) we thought we'd just go out hard and fast and see what happened. It certainly made my day

Most of the day would be spent below the tree-line so there was no need to worry about taking the views. Robin set a tough pace on the first climb, with the Belgians ahead but in sight and the Germans behind. We passed the Belgians on the first descent (with the help of some 'secret' discussions in Swedish) and kept pushing.

At the bottom of the final climb the Germans and Belgians were together, less than 2 minutes behind us. What followed was one of the toughest 500m climbs I've done, working as hard as I could to keep a gap as Robin seemingly sauntered ahead. After what seemed like forever we crested the top with maybe a minute gap and pushed on down the steep descent before sprinting through the town to take 5th place for the day. The gaps weren't big so at that stage we didn't see it as particularly meaningful in the context of the overall standings, but we enjoyed some good natured joking with The Germans about the impact of the poles.

As it was the shortest day a bus was laid on for us to go into Andorra La Vella for a few hours. After the charming towns we'd been staying in though it actually felt out of character and this was the only part of the week I wouldn't repeat.



Post-stage cool down

For the only time this week there was a change in the ladies results, with Ros & Sarah just ahead of Katie & Sam, though they actually ran together all day so they were really joint 1st for the day. They'd propelled themselves up the final climb with some music and singing, I wish I'd thought of that.



Robin congratulates the Deeside ladies

Day Five – Getting Stronger

The main excitement around day five was that it would mark the first appearance of some Black terrain. Would we be running through lava, a snake-infested valley or perhaps a field of stinging nettles? Even though nettles were a minor hazard through the week and at least one snake was spotted (no lava though as far as I'm aware),

the Black terrain today was a steep scree run off the main col, which sounded like something I'd enjoy. Bring it on!

The day started with a couple of kilometres of uphill but runnable tarmac, before settling in to a long sustained 1400m climb. As usual, we were close to the Belgians and Germans but behind them all, until we passed the Belgians towards the top. It turned out that Michiel was suffering from with a very painful blister, which was to impact the rest of their week.



Long climb, with the Germans just ahead

The week had been filled with beautiful views and a great mix of trails, but today was the wildest so far as it felt like we were in big mountains for the first time. We passed a beautiful remote lake near the col just before we got to the scree slope. A proper scree-running descent ensued, which is almost as much fun as you can have running. The Germans were just ahead but when we hit a flatter section of boulders they shot off. I reckon I'm pretty handy on the rough stuff but they quickly distanced us with some amazing technique using their poles.

After passing each other a couple of times we were together again at the aid station at the bottom of the second climb of the day, about 950m in height. Setting off together, Gerald said to me 'take it easy Colin' as if he sensed I was ready to push on. Robin let me set the pace and to my amazement we actually started to open up a gap, which was a huge turnaround from earlier in the week. We kept a steady, but sustained pace up the climb and when the top did come we pushed on in an attempt to get out of sight. Having achieved that, we pushed on the descent and another traverse with Robin setting the pace (as always) but eventually the finish came and we were 5th for the second day in a row.



Big mountain terrain

We watched the clock tick by and after they came in were still 7th overall but only 7 minutes from 5th, we had a great target for the final two days.

That night we were in a beautiful large apartment overlooking the final descent to the finish and were joined by amongst others the Deeside ladies. It was a place I'd happily go back to and Robin even thought it would work as a base for a Team Nordic Trail tour.

I don't need to mention how the Deeside ladies got on, they were in great spirits and it was another relaxing and enjoyable dinner and briefing. Why did this holiday have to end?



Another day, another podium for the Deeside ladies

Day Six – Seize the Initiative

The start line of each day was becoming increasingly party-like as the finish drew closer and the feeling of community strengthened, by now the majority of the runners were joining the pre-race dance.

Knowing the day six trail quickly became narrow we had our most aggressive start of any day, both to avoid congestion and make it clear we were going to fight for 5th place. Our start was so fast that we could see some of the top four teams for ages before they disappeared, perhaps a whole 4 or 5 minutes! We then settled into a steady ascent of the single long

climb of the day, with the Germans and Belgians giving chase.

Once over the top we were met with a series of stunning lakes and largely pathless terrain that made for great running. We'd been warned that this area was home to a rare species of salamander so we were asked to watch out for them – for their welfare not ours.



Pre-stage smiles

After a steep descent on a good trail we hit some downhill forestry track that we'd be on for most of the final 12km to the finish and made for fast running. Although not as much fun as the mountain terrain, we knew it worked to our advantage over the nearby teams so we pushed hard to the finish to finally take 5th position overall by 15 minutes from The Germans. We now knew



Spot any salamanders?

that 5th position was in our own control and felt confident we could defend it on the final day. Now is as probably a good time to mention that we had 20 years (each) on Uwe and Gerald, so while we were faster overall, they won the moral battle and I can only dream of being that fast at their age.

By now life outside PSR had become quite fuzzy as I, and mostly everyone else, was now into the rhythm of what it took to run (and recover) each day. Normal evening conversation covered very PSR-specific topics, such as on the ripeness of the aid station oranges or the how big a climb was on our altimeter.

Although we would talk to a range of people each day, Robin and I built a strong rapport with the Deeside ladies, who we often ate with in the evenings. Each day we were increasingly pleased to see them cement their top two positions and I think I also speak on behalf of Robin they made a huge contribution to our experience.



The Pyrenees did not disappoint

Day Seven – Does It Have to End?

We were promised something special on day seven, and it didn't disappoint. The map showed a near 2000m climb, a long section of black terrain and a fast finish amongst other things. I wasn't ready to finish the race, but at least it finished with a bang and one of the most beautiful days running I've experienced.

The second half of the climb took us into some stunning big-mountain territory – beautiful lakes, cliffs, boulder hopping and generally pathless terrain. The altitude, steepness and roughness made it slow going at times, but it was impossible not to smile at the beauty of your surroundings.

Despite us both having niggles during the week I think we both felt better on day seven than day one, which is certainly a nice feeling. We were comfortably in 5th position for the day and able to really relax from that perspective. When we hit the final track with 10km we unconsciously started time-trialling it. Although it brought the race to an end even more quickly it felt fantastic to be running so well after 7 days and nearly 38 hours of running. Looking at the splits for the day we actually registered the fastest final 4km of the whole field. I am sure this is because we were getting fitter and

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Finished!

definitely not because the front four teams coasted in at the end 😊.

At the finish we were applauded over the finish line and given our medals, which was emotional in itself, but that was only the beginning of a special afternoon and evening. As each subsequent team approached the finish the cheers got louder as the crowd got bigger, and there



One last finish line beer

were lots of emotions on display at the finish from many teams (perhaps even some of the Deeside ladies?). This continued to the race sweepers coming through and before long there was music, dancing and Jordi and



Finish line party

Tomas getting thrown in the air, all before the official celebration.

Final Celebration

There was no avoiding that the end was coming, but they put on one last fantastic evening, where all the winners got their engraved trophies. Huge congratulations to Katie & Sam and Ros & Sarah for 1st and 2nd woman's teams respectively, which is a fantastic achievement, especially to do it in style and run from the front every day.

There were standing ovations for the volunteers, all the runners got a PSR jacket and then most people went to



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the pub where we conga'd to the PSR playlist until ~5am. What a week!

PSR Postscript

Although Robin and I were both delighted with 5th place and the feeling we'd gotten stronger through the week, when I reflect back on PSR the performance is almost the last thing I think about. The experience as a whole was far greater than the sum of its parts.

One of the aspects of the race I completely neglected was the team element. Apart from mountain marathons I've almost exclusively done solo events, even if at multi-day events I've always enjoyed the social aspect each evening. The only reason I was in a team here was because you had to be, otherwise I'm sure I'd have entered solo.

I knew Robin and I would be fairly compatible in all the important areas (fitness, speed over mixed terrain,

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temperament, attitude to poles) so I was pretty relaxed in the lead-up to the event. Even if I did suffer quite a bit more than Robin during the week, the overall fitness gap was actually quite small. Our partnership worked really well during the event, but what I didn't expect beforehand was just how meaningful it was to *share* that experience with someone. I would have loved it as a solo adventure, but knowing someone has shared almost the exact same experience as you elevates it to another level. Many of you are probably thinking, well of course it does, but it's a new insight to me and also more evidence of how well crafted this event is.

Being part of a team made it more special, but the community that developed during the week, including the runners and volunteers, added another significant

layer of depth. It's no exaggeration to say that adjusting back to 'civilian' life after PSR has been challenging as it really was a different, in many ways simpler, world. Having already looked for similar races I've come to the conclusion there may not be a better race out there, at least for me. So while I'm extremely grateful to have had the experience, and in particular to Jordi and Tomas for creating the event, a little bit of me is sad that I don't expect anything to reach those heights again.

It goes without saying that this report acts as the strongest possible recommendation to find a team mate (or two) and do this race. Entries open in early November and it will fill up fast. And if you do ask me about the PSR, please allow a few moments for me to smile and reminisce before I say anything.

