

The Trans Lebanon Ultra 09

5 April 2009, Beirut (Lebanon) – This is the story of a truly epic journey, a once in a lifetime experience for two Brits to run across a Middle Eastern country, to stage a unique running event with the backing of a nation to bring support to a most noble humanitarian cause, the SOS Children's Villages. The ultimate success of what was grandly titled the Trans Lebanon Ultra 09 (TLU) project proved to be a master class in teamwork, an example of what can be achieved when a collective group of like minded individuals comes together with a single vision, with unwavering determination and endless enthusiasm to see the common goal achieved.



In The Beginning

Let's start at the beginning. November 2008, Jackson Griffith and long term running buddy John Tyszkiewicz travel out to Beirut for their annual visit to participate in the Beirut Marathon, an event that seems to grow in stature and participation with each passing year. John and Jackson often run Marathons and Ultra Marathons in their spare time, primarily for their own amusement but also to embark on what is quite simply an extreme form of tourism.

As well as participating in some serious and some not so serious ultra distance events, they've also had their minds set on finding a suitable location for their very own race, a run on their terms and at a location of their choice. So the seeds of the TLU project had already been sown prior to arriving in Beirut, John and Jackson had arranged to visit one of the five SOS Children's Villages in Lebanon during their short trip with a view to staging an ultra distance event in Lebanon in support of the charity's efforts.



The concept of the Trans Lebanon Ultra 09 project was simple, to run non-stop along the entire length of Lebanon, from the Syrian border in the north to the Israeli border in the south

What they discovered on that visit to the SOS Children's Villages was an organisation managed by some truly wonderful people, notably the surrogate mothers who dedicate at least 20 years of their lives, often more, to care for up to 10 orphaned or abandoned children at a time, offering them just as much, if not more care than a biological parent.

When they returned to the UK after their trip to Beirut in November 2008 the desire to stage a significant Ultra distance event in support of the SOS Children's Villages was burning strong. But that was just one piece of a rather complex jigsaw, the picture for which was clear in their minds, but how on earth do you go about staging a major running event in a distant country with a relatively complex culture and language ?

And here we introduce the folks at the Beirut Marathon Association (BMA) into the story. The BMA is the organisation behind the annual staging of the Beirut Marathon and various other running events across Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East. In recent years they have cultivated a wealth of experience in managing sporting events and during their recent visits to Beirut, Jackson and John were already good friends with BMA President **May El-Khalil**, the BMA Managing Director **Mark Dickinson**, and increasingly the Special Projects Manager at the BMA, **Abdallah Abdelnour**.

It then took just a few emails and a couple of chats with Mark Dickinson to secure the support of the BMA in managing the complex logistics of the project. From John & Jackson's experience of running Ultra Marathons in other parts of the world they had good experience of running non-stop up to distances of around 150 miles – which just happened to be the approximate length of Lebanon as a country. It took little imagination from there on to formulate the precise plan for the TLU run : the pair would aim to run non-stop along the full length of the country, starting in the north along the border with Syria, then heading due south mostly along the Mediterranean coastline until they reach the border with Israel in the south – estimated distance, 150 – 165 miles.

There was however just one small hurdle to overcome, both Jackson and John were injured prior to the event. It's only now with a successful TLU behind them they feel comfortable talking about the full details of what it took to get them to the start line relatively fit & healthy.



John and Jackson first visited the SOS Children's Villages in November 2008, travelling to the small hillside town of Bsharfeh.

There they encountered a wonderfully managed organisation but with facilities in desperate need of renovation.



For Jackson, a recurrence of various knee problems flared up in the weeks directly prior to the Lebanon run to the extent that during a training run just 10 days before the TLU he was forced to retreat back home after just 2 miles, limping with chronic knee pain. How was he to run 150 miles if he couldn't even manage 2! Jackson never ran again until the start of the TLU on Sunday 5th April. It is testament to the efforts of his long term physio **Jim Weatherburn** that he got to the TLU start line at all.

Worse still, John T severely damaged an iliolumbar ligament in the base of his back towards the end of 2008 and spent several months undergoing intensive treatment, rehab and prolotherapy injections just to be able to get him walking without pain. Again, a big mention goes to the medical team behind John's rehab, in particular Specialist Physio **Rosie Mew** and **Dr Kalpesh Parmar** at Pure Sports Medicine in London. The work it took to get both the guys to the start line would, if nothing else, prove to be an excellent training exercise in psychological perseverance that would serve them well in the TLU run itself ! From here, we let Jackson and John take over the telling of this amazing story ...

Pre-Race Nerves

Nerves are always a problem before a big ultra marathon, there are just too many variables to be able to plan with confidence. No two runs are ever the same, no piece of kit will perform consistently. The body can be resilient to changes in diet and extreme levels of activity on one run but rebel on the next. Will the weather be friend or foe? Will blisters, cramp or some other injury force retirement? Has training been adequate? Do we have the strength required to push ourselves to the limit on both the physical and mental side?



The BMA managed the complex logistics of the event.

As our idea of running the entire length of Lebanon has taken shape over the past six months, growing by the week from a daft idea dreamed up by two mates over a pint of beer into a high profile event, we grew increasingly concerned about our ability to deliver what we promised. Over £10,000 had been pledged – in fact three quarters of that amount was already paid – in sponsorship of our efforts. We tied up money and resources from an already stretched Beirut Marathon Association with a packed race schedule. We raised the hopes of a charity in a far flung land. We have regaled colleagues, friends and relatives with tales of past triumphs in Spartathlons, Desert Cups and quirky 50 – 150 mile races alongside canals (and sometimes, in them) in the dead of night, while, like a gambler too eager to forget his losses, we have glossed over our numerous failures.

Statistically, the numbers are against us. In a non stop race over 150 miles, one would usually expect to see only around one third of the field finish. Unfortunately in this event, there are only two of us, so someone is going to be disappointed – or indeed everybody, from the organisers, the charity, our sponsors and ourselves.

As we leave Heathrow we buy a couple of copies of the London Evening Standard – it features a bravado filled article on the run along with a photograph of us at the end of a Marathon in Marrakech. We're on page 29, next to a story about some Z-lister "star" flying to the USA for something or other, but it's amazing how many people see it and contact us with good luck messages. The pressure starts to build !

On the flight over we discuss tactics – we know we have to manage our bodies in order to survive the run. This will be a journey rather than a race as we do not have the logistics to support a field stretched out over many miles. In order to maintain the support we need we will have to stick together and to the timings agreed with Abdallah at the BMA – sometimes known simply as "The Fixer". Abdallah has coordinated the run from start to finish with an unerring eye for detail, nothing is left to chance and indeed the few holes in the programme are only there because we have failed ourselves to provide the relevant information. What we do not know, as we sit on the 'plane, is that everything that Abdallah has arranged will happen to plan, everybody and everything, from the checkpoints, to VIP meetings to the military police escort to contingency plans. All will tick over like clockwork. If we had known that of course, we would have been even more nervous than we already were !



John (right) and Jackson (centre) enjoy a mid run snack and a chat with "The Fixer", the BMA's Special Projects Manager Abdallah Abdelnour (left)

On landing at Beirut Airport we were met by Abdallah and fellow BMA colleagues **Rima** (Photography) and **Joseph** (Support Crew) despite our delayed flight from London landing at 0130 in the morning. They take us to the hotel where there is time for a traditional local beer night cap before we hit the sack for the night. We go to sleep thinking about the letter that Mark Dickinson, Managing Director of the BMA, had waiting for us on our arrival. An eloquently worded epistle offering encouragement and thanks from the nation of Lebanon for even considering taking this challenge on, it nevertheless heaps yet more pressure on us to finish. We were worried men.

Settling In

The following morning we head for the BMA offices to go through the programme. It's quickly apparent that there is very little if anything that we can add to Abdallah's planning. We talk about **Mahmood Edelbi**, a Palestinian runner who has asked to join us for the run. He is totally untested over this distance, in fact, very little is known about him other than the fact that he looks thin & fit, much more so in fact than ourselves. Mahmoud has a record of completing the Beirut Marathon in a modest 4hrs 30mins and joined a few legs of a 'North to South' run last year. The North to South was a different beast however, with daily 15 – 20 mile stages punctuated by talks, school visits etc spreading knowledge and awareness about cancer.

Mahmood apparently has very little equipment so we donate a few spare running shirts to the cause. We're delighted to have a third runner to take a bit of the pressure off us and it's great to have a local on board the project. Mahmood does not speak English or French and our Arabic is limited to a few words and some unrepeatable and colourful curses learned from a certain prominent Lebanese citizen. We're going to get along just fine, but it looks like there will not be much idle banter along the way!

After the pre race briefing with the BMA we're met by **Daoud Mustafa**, one of Lebanon's elite marathon runners and a man that we're proud to call our friend. He broke the longstanding Lebanese marathon record at the London Marathon two years previously after we worked hard with the BMA to bring him over to London to race. As soon as Daoud walks in, an easy grin on his face, we're reminded what "real" athletes look like. By comparison we're big fat lumps representing a comfortable British lifestyle. Just how on earth are we to haul our considerable bulks over 165 miles / 265kms in 30C / 86F ???



John T (right) presents the ever cheerful Daoud Mustafa (left) with a plaque to commemorate his run at the London Marathon 2007 where Daoud set a new Lebanese national record of 2:27:28.

Later that day we drive north to Daoud's village to stay with him, a few kilometres from the Syrian border so it's convenient for the start. Of course we go and visit his extended family who try and finish off what they started the last time John visited them, killing their guests with huge mounds of delicious home cooked Lebanese food. Thankfully we survive lunch at sister number one only to be broadsided by dinner at sister number two (with sister number three and the future in-laws in attendance) before being walloped by a delicious breakfast at sister number four. Never mind, plenty of time on the road to run it all off !

The pre race ritual here could not be more perfect. It's a glorious morning in the foothills of the Lebanese mountains – 1 hour before the run is due to start we're perched on a veranda overlooking a lush, fertile valley surrounding Daoud's village. We have a breakfast laid out for us in the gleaming sunshine, all local delicacies made with local ingredients ; fruit and vegetables from nearby fields, orange juice from nearby orchards, eggs from the chickens in the yard, the fragrance of citrus blossoms wafting around as they dry in the morning sun. It strikes an immediate contrast in our mind between this immensely pleasant scene before us and the extreme onslaught about to commence.

The Start

We could have stayed on that veranda all day, but before too long the time comes to say goodbye to this quiet haven in the hills. We take a short drive to the start line at the small town of Arida on the Lebanese border with Syria. We meet Mahmood Edelbi for the first time, he makes Daoud look fat! He does indeed look very fit and is obviously a seasoned runner and raring to go. Mahmood is a Palestinian in his late 40s who has lived his entire life in Lebanon going from one refugee camp to the next. He has lost many family members in the troubles and appears to have visibly suffered a few scrapes himself, but despite everything he enjoys his sport, running and walking wherever he can. Mahmood has never run an ultra marathon however and his Marathon times suggest modest ability, but he is clearly chomping at the bit to get on the road.

It's 11:30 on the morning of Sunday 5th April 2009. There are around 30 people surrounding us on the start line of the Trans Lebanon Ultra and all of them are anxious for one reason or another. There are three among them that are more anxious than the others, however, as there are only three of them who have the intention of running the entire length of the country !



**The TLU crew on the start line at the remote town of Arida, Northern Lebanon, Sunday 5th April 2009.
A few curious local lads turned up to check out the commotion and see us off.**

Arida is a desolate place, minor pieces of construction suggests this is being developed as a more official border control for greater use in the future, but for the time being there is little here to speak of. A few local street kids are here to meet us, fascinated by all the fuss in this, their usual quiet little spot of the world. We gaze north to view across the Syrian border to see more open rolling countryside and hills, a gleaming Mediterranean sea greets us to the west and a clear blue sky overhead with barely a cloud in sight.

We turn our view south, the road ahead is long, very straight, seemingly endless & starting to get very hot as midday sun approaches. It's difficult to comprehend the enormity of the entire challenge of distance ahead along that road, hard to visualise 165 miles when you stare at the open desolate road ahead, harder still to even entertain a single thought of the finish line. The thoughts in our minds turn to the many people watching both in Lebanon and around the world. A few moments for photographs, handshakes and some final words, and off we go. No time to delay, we're all anxious to get this amazing journey started.

Arida to Tripoli – 22 Miles / 35 Kilometres

We set off, trying as always at the start of an ultra, to keep a lid on the pace, to break the race up into chunks that can be easily digested by the conscious mind. We start by running as a small group, the core three runners, Jackson, John, Mahmoud and some welcome company from staff at the BMA, including Managing Director Mark Dickinson. Within a few hundred yards even this starts to split up, the pace that Mahmoud wants to go at is too fast and the pace that some of those intending to accompany us for the first 10km or so is too slow for our stride.

Pretty soon we settle into a comfortable trot and enjoy a bright day, the sea glitters azure to our right as we trot along, chatting as we go. Mahmood, it turns out, understands a few words of English, which is great news. He soon teaches a few words of Arabic “kaleb”- dog, “bahar” – sea and very importantly “yalla” – let’s go, plus a few other words. All very relevant to what we’re seeing along the way, plenty of sea and plenty of stray dogs ! It’s going to take until at least Tyr until we can knit that little lot into a meaningful phrase, but time is one thing we have plenty of.



The official Trans Lebanon support van would drive on ahead and meet the runners every 10kms or so for re-supplies.

The support van we have leaps on ahead 5-10kms at a time and it looks just great emblazoned with a TLU logo on all sides. Driven for this first leg by Joseph, we soon get to know the back of the van as home, where all our kit is kept along with a plentiful supply of sports drinks, energy snacks and gels as well as our own personal boxes of supplies. ‘Real’ food is represented by some pasta and a large assortment of pot noodles, as well as tea and coffee. The supplies will be supplemented as required on the road as the van will drive ahead to set up checkpoints.

The first major checkpoint that we’re aiming for is the Tripoli corniche, about 35kms into the run. Tripoli was once a popular seaside tourist destination but the recent troubles and relative lawlessness of the north of the country have long put paid to that – the town now boasts just one significant hotel.

The cornice today remains a popular place for a Sunday afternoon stroll for the good citizens of Tripoli and we’re looking forward to seeing the children from the SOS Villages there. A few miles outside of the town we run past some people living in makeshift shelters on the beach. We wave hello to some children but they just pick up stones from the beach and hurl them towards us. Thankfully we’re out of range and their missiles clatter harmlessly into the beach wall. We wave again, using a different gesture to our earlier friendly greeting and quicken our pace slightly, glancing behind to check that our police escort is still with us. As it transpires, this is the only moment we’re made to feel anything other than totally welcome and it comes courtesy of some children living under salvaged tarpaulin on a beach – we can get more abuse running though Hackney during our regular morning runs from Tottenham Hale to the City of London !



A view into the back of the TLU support van – piles of clothing, food, drinks and medical equipment !

The day starts to heat up as the sun breaks through the few clouds there are and we see Tripoli in the distance. Too late do we realise that we're way ahead of schedule. We arrive on the corniche to find the support van and crew ready for us, but no sign of the SOS children. It turns out that they are an hour or so away and, not wanting to disappoint a minibus full of 8 to 15 year olds heading for the coast to meet us we elect to have a decent feed and rest our legs up on the sea wall. The children arrive and show such an interest in what we're doing that it is worth the stiff legs ten times over. We take a few photographs, have a chat and then head off at a slow jog with some of the children along the corniche.

Tripoli to Batroun – 44 Miles / 71 Kilometres

Soon the couples strolling along hand in hand and families out en masse for some fresh air on a Sunday afternoon are replaced by empty pavement and the odd barking dog - "kaleb" we proudly gesture to Mahmoud! We leave Tripoli in the distance as evening falls and head out past Balamand University towards Batroun, our next designated checkpoint some 22miles / 35kms on from Tripoli. We've run a Marathon now but we're not really checking the watches too much, we're guessing it was around about a 5 hour pace but with the major checkpoint stops and meets & greets planned along the way, it soon becomes clear that this run is not about speed, it's not about the final destination, it's about the symbolism of the journey.



The runners were greeted by a large group of children and supporters from the SOS Villages at the first major stop at Tripoli, 22 miles into the run.

Word reaches us that there are two runners up ahead who have asked to join us for a while, which is great, all company on this run is most certainly welcome. We're at about 35miles / 56kms by this stage and getting used to sore legs and tired feet, the early hot spot signals of pending blisters are starting to emerge and our digestive systems are becoming unsettled. This is where you need to almost disassociate your mind from your body, to allow time to pass you by at a different speed but by the same token, you need to keep a firm concentration on the basics – hydration, nutrition, physical management, personal admin etc.

As we approach the Balamand University turn off we meet the two runners, they've driven up from Beirut to do their Sunday training run on our route and soon we're chatting as we go along. In fact, they end up running with us into the night as they cannot remember where they have left their car and eventually have to be rescued by friends, but that's another story ! Their natural running pace was a little slower than ours so we leapfrog each other from time to time as we periodically stop at the supply van so it's a nice distraction to have.

As dusk falls we climb a long hill towards Batroun leading us up and around a headland and at the crest, through a long tunnel that we reach at around 2300hrs. We have been on the go for 10 hours and we're only around 60km from Beirut, the halfway point. There's a stiff breeze blowing now which cools us a little too rapidly if we stop, John and Mahmoud are climbing the long ascent strongly but Jackson is not moving as fast, he tails off the back of the pack but keeps close contact. All three runners are feeling relatively good – sure, we know that we have been on the road a long time now but no warning lights have come on and all gauges are looking normal. So far, so good.



Jackson (left) and John (right) waste neither time nor pleasantries in re-fuelling for the miles ahead, on this occasion making short work of a pot noodle during the pit stop at Tripoli !

We hit the outskirts of Batroun just before midnight and at this stage the run has been quite remote, with the small breaks in the pack, the runners have also become a little isolated for the last hour or so. Time and distance have become vague as the surroundings are now pitch black with no street lights for company. Head torches are out in full use as the run starts to descend to the coast, it's a welcome relief from the previous long climb. And then a most welcome surprise as we emerge from the desolate roads and approach a few houses, we hear an unexpected cheer, flags and candles some 100 yards away emerging from the darkness.

It's a big shock to the senses, a massive emotional shift from the last few hours of slog since we left the afternoon sunshine of Tripoli. Around fifteen of the older children from the SOS village of Kfarhay with burning candles are standing by the roadside cheering and waving as they catch glimpse of our head torches emerging from the darkness up ahead. They run towards us and our response is to up our speed significantly – it feels like a finishing sprint, effortless, adrenaline fuelled. We all run together, high fives all around, it's an amazing scene as the crowds thicken and now around 30 children run the last few hundred metres into town with us where the next major checkpoint awaits. There we refuel with tea, pot noodles and whatever else is at hand, then start to focus on the kick on towards Beirut, now some 25miles / 40kms away and more significantly, the symbolic halfway mark of the run.



Mahmoud (left), Jackson (centre) and John (right) make their way out of Tripoli along the corniche promenade and move beyond the limits of the Marathon distance

The long road ahead – the meandering route along the coast stretches far into the distance and beyond the horizon ...



Batroun to Beirut (Corniche) – 80 Miles / 129 Kilometres



Approaching the first night fall, dusk closing in around the runners with their faithful military police escort following behind.

The toughest part of the night to run through is always the 2-4 am shift. Your body just wants to shut down, your eyes just want to close and the brain is sluggish, it's also typically the coldest time of the day, just before dawn. We chat as we run along, occasionally walking a few hundred metres before breaking into a run again at a prearranged signal, typically a resounding “yalla” in unison with Mahmoud. We eat steadily from the supply van as we tick through the miles and before long we can sense the light changing as dawn is not far away. The ancient town of Byblos comes and goes, it's night life still in full swing and our surroundings become neater and better kept. We pass through familiar territory at last, past the “Casino du Liban” and the curiously named ‘super night clubs’ and on through Jounieh and the familiar surroundings of **Maxime Chaya**'s house where we've previously visited and taken a training swim in the sea.



The runners arrive in Beirut at dawn on Monday 6th April, the strain of effort starting to show on their faces and very grateful at this stage for company on the road from British Ambassador Frances Guy (2nd right) and BMA Managing Director Mark Dickinson (right)

As the sun slowly comes up, we're joined on the road as planned by Her Excellency **Frances Guy**, the British Ambassador to Lebanon. Frances is an accomplished marathon runner and we're a little embarrassed at our lack of pace – it has been a long night and we're looking forward to the major checkpoint we know awaits us on the Beirut corniche. After ten miles or so, Frances peels off towards the embassy to begin her day's work with her close protection unit in tow while we continue towards a breakfast of pot noodles and a warm welcome by the children of SOS Bhersaf village.



Beirut at last ! John (left) and Jackson (right) make it to the half way stage after more than 20 hours running, captured here taking a break with one of their support van drivers, Francois Oueid (centre).

Abdallah has worked his magic again – not only are there parking spaces for all the support vehicles and the SOS bus on the corniche (an almost unheard of luxury), but two physiotherapists are on hand to massage and sooth aching muscles. We each receive a good rubdown and a hamstring stretch from the physiotherapists and then we start the hobble off south towards Saadiyat.

Beirut to Saida – 109 Miles / 175 Kilometres

By this stage John has developed some decent blisters under his heels, but otherwise the feet are in fairly good shape. Other than general fatigue there are no other significant aches and pains. Mahmood has changed his shoes numerous times – it transpires that his running shoes, donated by a friend, are not quite the right size and are giving him problems.

As we depart Beirut and the full midday sun reaches its zenith we're presented with an awesome headwind. Gusting 45mph / 75kph it rakes all manner of sand, dirt and dust from the surroundings and blows it all straight at us. With the temperature climbing beyond 30C / 86F our heads are now down, faces covered as we trudge and walk for a while, trying to loosen up stiffening, sore legs and shield eyes from the weather. We have a great entourage of brave support runners at this stage including Mark Dickinson, a few of the SOS children and many others. We push on towards the perimeter of Beirut airport though streets crowded with traffic, vendors pushing carts and general bustling Beirut life. We're joined by a 71 year old Lebanese runner who has apparently recently completed a 60km race and walked 2 hours to join us on the road today – he moves fairly easily and with enthusiastic determination giving us no reason to doubt his story.

As we exit a tunnel that passes beneath the airport runways, the wind starts to blow harder and harder. Soon the wind is now steady at 45mph / 75kph, blowing straight at us. All thoughts of running against that go out of our heads, this continues for what seems like an eternity with the foaming crests of turbulent waves crashing into the ever-present coastline to our right.

Ever so gradually we approach a predefined stopping point of the house of the Lebanese Minister for Youth and Sport – he is away on business in Syria, but his wife, the Emira (Princess) **Zeina Arslan** has kindly offered to meet us. We arrive outside the gates of her house with the children from SOS and all enter the courtyard as gun wielding guards look on. We're invited inside but we stop short of entering, we've been running for around 26 hours and are painfully aware that we do not smell that fresh. Princess Zeina comes out and we explain that we cannot come in, we smell like proverbial "kalebs" and we're hot, sweaty and covered in sandblasted dirt ! In fact, we're certain that we would not invite ourselves into our own homes in this state, so we're not going to impose on anyone else's like this !

A Right Royal Reception

It is however difficult to refuse such an insistent royal invitation and we're soon in the air conditioned splendour of an elegant reception room. Delicious, ice cold, home made lemonade with orange blossom floating amongst the ice cubes is served, little chocolate nibbles are produced from nowhere along with Lebanese coffee in ornate china cups. May El Khalil, the president of the BMA and its inspirational founder is there to greet us. May rather unwisely gives us a hug, an action she surely must have immediately regretted. We're presented with a Ministerial trophy recognising what we're doing for Lebanese youth and flashguns go off by the dozen.



At the 90 mile point of the run, the runners receive a ministerial award for their efforts from the Emira (Princess) Zeina Arslan.

It all feels a bit like a victory parade, an immediate overload of pleasant sensations in contrast to the physical battle we have raging outside on the roads. We also know that we have yet to do the really hard yards and get through another night and a further 50miles / 80kms to the finish. The children from SOS are loving it – there are at least forty people in a most beautiful reception room, a party atmosphere almost, but we know that we have to drag ourselves away.

We take some quiet reflection away from the crowds in a courtyard of the Emira's gardens and eat a chicken pitta in the shade of a tree, then head back out into the wind which shows no sign of abating. Jackson's lower leg is starting to swell with the onset of a significant problem, one of John's blisters has burst in his shoe and another is not far behind. We're quietly aware that this is where the battle really begins, all the effort gone before is merely a prologue. As we leave the house we switch to more light hearted thoughts, suggesting to each other that the cushions we've just sat on are that very moment being gathered up for dry cleaning and the room is being fumigated.

Mahmood looks OK but he has not muttered much Arabic for a while and we worry that he might not make it through the night ahead. We stop to tape Jackson's leg up, more for psychological reasons than medical. The swelling is gradually getting worse as is the pain, indicating an acute injury of some sort. We have maybe 35miles / 60kms still to go. A quick consultation with Abdallah confirms the plan from here : we will take a more direct route to the southern border to finish at the less picturesque town of Al Naqoura on the edge of a UN base, rather than battle to climb into the hills and finish at Maroun El Ras, a quiet village overlooking Israel.

Mahmood goes on ahead to the next checkpoint, he badly needs to sleep for a few minutes to recharge his batteries and there is a taxi shelter up ahead. When we eventually reach it he is already flat out and we stop to have a 20 minute power nap. Woken by a cup of tea, we head out from under the corrugated iron shack and back into the wind which thankfully is slowly weakening as the night draws in. Mahmood looks like he has recharged his batteries, but Jackson's leg is worsening. It is now badly swollen and very painful, but with 50kms or so he cannot rely on painkillers to get him through – he will overdose before we get there. We decide that he will just have to grit his teeth and get through it. Our time is not important, what is important is to complete the journey.



An example of the stunning coastline views enjoyed by the runners during their epic journey.

We hobble on, making very slow progress at maybe 5km per hour. It's going to be a long day at the office. We keep a fairly steady pace though and in our minds we chop up the remaining distance into digestible 5km sections, at an hour each including a resupply effort from the support van at the end of each. We're now very tired, approaching exhaustion with almost 40 hours on the road. In races such as the Spartathlon, run over a similar distance but on harsher terrain, we would normally expect to finish in around 34 hours – that is, if we finish at all, since every year two thirds of the field fall by the wayside ! At least we're all still in the TLU and we're convinced that we will all see the finish line, eventually.

Saida to Tyr (Sour) – 133 Miles / 214 Kilometres

We plan to have a couple of strategic power naps – these give us something to look forward to and also of course recharge our batteries. While John T manages to drop off to sleep in seconds, Jackson cannot get comfortable and while he closes his eyes, he cannot sleep for the pain. Mahmood seems to have grasped the concept of the power nap, and, hat pulled down over his eyes is soon sparked out. Abdallah, Joseph or Francois wakes us after 20 minutes or so and the game begins again: crank out another few 5km segments, grab some food whenever we can and have a 20 minute sleep here and there when the sleep deprivation gets too much. At this stage of the game you can literally feel yourself falling asleep as you're moving along the road !

Somehow the kilometres go by and we enter the town of Saadiyat. Here we're met by some more SOS children, this time from the teenagers home in the SOS Sferai village. Again they are all fascinated by what we're doing – why Lebanon? Why SOS? How can we run so far? Abdallah goes ahead to find us some "real" food and soon we're tucking into a plate of roasted chicken pieces and chips – never has chicken tasted so good! We grab a power nap just off the main road but Jackson is in pain and gets no rest. John is out like a light, as is Mahmood. Woken by a cup of tea after 20 minutes we hobble on southwards toward Tyr.

The 5km sections now seem to be getting longer, but somehow we manage to cover the ground in more or less the same time as before – 1 hour including a supply stop. Only those stops are taking longer as fatigue catches up with us.

We realise that we will be way over our target finish time but the support and excitement of the SOS Children, whenever we see them, spurs us on – it is only we who are concerned with the time, no one else seems to notice. At one point around 0430am, we stop in a deserted street for a 20 minute sleep. We have the luxury of some lounge cushions that Mark Dickinson has conjured up from somewhere and we have no trouble shutting down. After a short 20 minutes Francois wakes us and we struggle to our feet to find that we're outside a small bakery. The first loaves of the day have just been taken out of the oven and the smell of freshly baked bread is divine.

We go in to the shop, selecting three warm rolls – deliciously light dough with a cheesy filling. The baker refuses payment and in fact grows quite excitable with us when we try and insist on paying. He wants us to get back on the road and finish the run, he knows all about us. It's not every day that he will find a couple of Brits asleep on the pavement outside his shop accompanied by the military police and a support vehicle.



Approaching the final few hours and the trio struggle forward, injured, hobbling but always moving one step closer towards the finish line.

"You don't have to be a fantastic hero to do certain things ... you can be just an ordinary chap, sufficiently motivated to reach challenging goals".

Sir Edmund Percival Hilary (1919 – 2008)

Tyr (Sour) to Al Naqoura – 150 Miles / 241 Kilometres

The sun slowly rises as we approach Tyr. The road is incredibly busy with heavy traffic and we're grateful for the protection offered by our escorts. Getting hit by an HGV at this stage would really ruin our day! We spend little time in the town of Tyr and spend a few moments longer at the supply van than usual before pushing onwards to the finish line.



The second support van driver of the TLU team, the enduring Joseph, pauses for a moment waiting for the runners at the final checkpoint just 5kms from the finish

The children from SOS are back with us, cheerfully accompanying us along this busy road through a multitude of military checkpoints and on towards our goal. We're only 18 miles / 30kms out now, less than a marathon distance and just a few of our painfully slow slots of 5kms. But we're so close now all semblance of structure to the effort has broken down. We're just battling on, we know we have the finish in the bag, it's just a grind now to the end, time to enjoy the achievement in quiet contemplation, but it's still hard work.

Every ounce of energy and adrenaline is spent, each kilometre feels like five as the midday sun rises again to full height. We hit a long strip of brand new road which stretches interminably into the distance, a heat haze shimmering on the horizon, doing its best to conceal a series of false crests that will test our psychological resolve.

We can see some low lying hills up ahead and we know that beyond them lies the border with Israel. We hit the final military checkpoint and begin the long climb along the coast towards the final few kilometres. As we crest the hill, Mark Dickinson joins us, he has made the journey from Beirut by car in record time to travel the last two kilometres of our journey with us.



Approaching the finish line after 50 hours on the road, the trio find a rare burst of speed !

We up the pace for the first time in around 60kms and raise our arms as we cross the line. We have been on the go for 50 hours and 40minutes and have covered what we approximate to be 150 miles. The SOS party is jubilant and offer congratulations all round. As usual after an event of this nature it is the runners who feel deflated, solemn and emotionally spent. Our immediate thoughts are that we have let ourselves and the BMA down by posting such a slow time. We felt certain before the event that we would be able to cover the distance in under 36 hours. Mark snaps us out of our lethargy with his typically upbeat mood and we grudgingly begin to accept that we might actually have achieved something. We can't take much credit for it though, aside from putting one foot in front of the other and raising some money, 100% of the effort has come from the BMA support team, who have performed flawlessly.

Recovery

Ultra events can be as hard, if not harder, on the crew than they are on the runners – once the runner has started the event, he can disappear into his own world and has only to concentrate on the job in hand. He can become as selfish as he likes – it is the crew who have to deal with all manner of problems, from traffic, to map reading, communications, all while ensuring that the runner is fed and watered and each of his requests, no matter how unreasonable, are satisfied. Most runners would not dream of setting out on a journey as arduous as the TLU without an extremely experienced crew or at the very least a crew chief. The fact that the BMA crew, with precisely zero ultra distance running experience between them, managed to deliver such a high standard of service, is nothing short of remarkable. Their good humour, flexibility, planning, use of initiative and reliability were exemplary.



It's a team game ! The core of the TLU team celebrates a fantastic finish to a marvellous project.

After a quick rinse off at the finish we set off in convoy to drive right up to the border fence. We had gone as far as we could on foot, the area close to the border being tightly controlled by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

After a much needed night's sleep, aided by a fine bottle of Chateau Mussar we rise early the next morning to put on our suits and squeeze blistered, swollen feet into black leather shoes. We have an appointment with the Lebanese Chief of State no less and it's at this point we feel glad we all finished the run. It would have been extremely embarrassing to face the President to explain how we dropped out because of a simple few pains in our leg !

A Presidential Debrief

If we were excited and apprehensive at the prospect of meeting a Chief of State we could not imagine what our dear Palestinian running friend Mahmood was going through. We meet him that morning resplendent in a fine suit and tie at the BMA offices. His pride in what he has achieved is palpable and quite rightly so. He has come far, both figuratively and literally.



A proud moment for all at the Presidential Palace the day after the run.

**From L to R ; Mark Dickinson, Jackson Griffith, John Tyszkiewicz,
Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, Mahmoud Edelbi, Abdallah Abdelnour**

A fleet of luxury cars arrives to ferry the TLU party into the presidential Palace compound where we have the honour of being received by the Lebanese President, His Excellency **Michel Suleiman**. After some introductory speeches from the President and May El Khalil, we're given the opportunity to speak. John privately wishing that he was more eloquent, spoke on behalf of the group and said something along these lines:

"Mr President. It has been an honour to traverse your country from north to south. We would like to thank the Beirut Marathon Association for their unwavering support and patience as we planned this event and the services of the Police who did a fantastic job escorting us. Over the past two days we have marvelled at the extraordinary level of support that has been shown to us by ordinary citizens throughout Lebanon. Without exception, traders, restaurateurs and shopkeepers alike refused our money – a refreshing change from what we're used to back home.

We were lucky to have Mahmood Edelbi as a companion and grateful that he had the courage to put himself forward for such a challenge – Mahmood could not come from a more different background than Jackson and I. We speak only a few words of each other's languages and our lives are worlds apart in so many ways. Nevertheless we managed to communicate and travelled the entire length of Lebanon together, which proved a rewarding and enriching experience for all of us. We achieved what we did through sport and we hope that this helps to demonstrate what sport, and in particular events such as the Beirut Marathon, can contribute to society."

It was a perfectly pitched address that could not have been any better delivered. President Michel Suleiman seemed genuinely interested in not only the practicalities of running for 50 hours non stop, but also as to why we had chosen Lebanon. Knowing that he was a keen runner himself the first part is easy to explain and we also take the opportunity to highlight the work that SOS Villages have done for 40 years in Lebanon, and continue to do.

After the meeting we adjourn to the hall of the Presidential Palace to sign the visitor's book – not that we suppose anyone reads these things – no doubt there is a great stash of them in some archive somewhere, but writing a few words seems to be a good way of signing off. And with that we rejoin our convoy of SUVs and exit the various military checkpoints that guard the presidential palace and its compound.

Farewell to the Children and to Lebanon

After a quick change into more comfortable clothing back at our hotel we head off down south to the SOS Village of Sferai to visit the children and have lunch with the staff. We're met by a large group of SOS mothers and some tables groaning under the weight of the most fabulous lunch, all home made food from the village.

Before we sit down, BMA President May El Khalil takes the opportunity to say a few words and we're presented with some gifts made through one of the SOS schemes to empower women in impoverished areas with employment through cottage industry. Again, it falls upon our designated spokesman John T to say a few words in reply, all acutely aware that our stomachs are rumbling as the delicious smell of the food and fresh baked bread wafts over from the tables. John tries to keep it brief and to the point:

"You have told us that what we have just done here in Lebanon is extraordinary, and you have treated us as heroes for what we have done. We thank you for your kind words but ask that you do not forget this. Jackson and I are here by choice, indulging ourselves by pursuing the hobby that we love. Tomorrow we will be back in England where we have relatively easy lives, good jobs as well as loving and supportive families.

Unlike you, we have never known hunger, fear, poverty or war. The real work and the real heroes are here in the SOS Villages of Lebanon. This is where you, the mothers and staff of SOS Children's Villages work tirelessly, day after day, to provide selflessly for children abandoned or orphaned by the troubles. These children are the future of Lebanon and it is you that Jackson and I humbly salute."



Teams of supporters and children from the SOS Villages provided heart warming support at key points along the route.

Much shaking of heads follows from the SOS mothers. They seem genuinely bewildered that anyone should consider that dedicating your life to caring for others should be considered out of the ordinary. We sit down to a most glorious lunch prepared by the SOS mothers who I think approved of the amount of food we eat between us. What they do not know is that we have opted for maximum sleep and therefore missed breakfast. We do not eat like that every day – only after running 150 miles!

The SOS Children's village in Sferai exemplifies what can be achieved despite the whole world going mad around you. At the height of the troubles there was a permanent and well fortified gun emplacement on the crest of the hill directly above the village, which was regularly attacked from the valley below. While the combatants knew that the village was full of children and respected it by not targeting it directly, there was, needless to say, a significant amount of "collateral damage" and of course an ever present danger to those that were there. Since there was nowhere else for the children to go they had no choice but to remain in the village. All the staff stayed at their posts and managed, somehow, to cope, providing an oasis of calm, care and love amidst a sea of hate and violence.



Jackson, John and Mahmoud celebrate at the finish line of a truly epic journey, some 50 hours after they left the Syrian border post.

This final meeting of the schedule was a perfect conclusion to a most amazing journey. Within 24 hours we would be back home in the relative comfort of our homes and our families. As we write, the fundraising total is set to exceed \$15,000, the latest progress can be found here at www.justgiving.com/tlu165. This amazing total is beyond our initial hopes, all those many months ago when 2 Brits first sat over a beer and conjured up an idea to run across Lebanon, just for their own amusement. It's at this point that we run dry of wise words, leaving the closing remarks to others more able ...

"Sport above all means respect for yourself and for others. It implies the capacity to recognise your own limits and to learn to go beyond them through work and commitment. It is an encounter with others, a way of relating to them that goes beyond differences or discrimination. It is friendship and it is solidarity."

John Bryant, from The Marathon Makers