

The Björkliden Arctic Mountain Marathon (BAMM)

Race Report by Francis Blunt and Chris Burn

Arrival and Day 1 by Chris

Having coming 2nd in the LAMM Elite in June, Francis and I found ourselves with the unexpected prize of a trip to compete in the BAMM, way up in the North of Sweden at the tiny ski resort village of Björkliden. We'd left behind a London bursting with Olympic spirit; would we be able to do Team GB justice and bring home another gold?! We thought maybe not with Francis speaking of being undertrained and me having recently done a good job of straining my achilles tendon, but we were certainly looking forward to having fun in a race around some new hills.



We're here!

Arriving in Björkliden things were initially very confusing; the event centre was in a hotel and when we were directed to our accommodation that we were to share with Team Silva and friends, we found a rather swanky chalet complete with own sauna and hot tub. This all felt like a long way from the more familiar LAMM event centre field with slit trenches, but I could definitely get used to it!

Race day started with more differences: unlike in the LAMM where you collect your maps on your way to the start we were able to pick them up 1.5 hours before the start, pre-marked with our course checkpoints, so we were able to pour over these while getting lots of food in. This was very useful as the maps would take some getting used to: 20metre contours, very few grid lines and marked features meant we were in for some challenging map reading compared to what we were used to using back home. Thankfully route choice decisions looked easy without too many hard choices to make...or so we thought.

From the mass start at 9am the race was on, quite literally to the first checkpoint as there was a good prize for the first team there. We didn't quite know what to expect so didn't really go for this, but got there quite respectably in around 4th or 5th place. The early dash had the advantage of gaining some rapid height, opening up the view into more mountains and getting us in the mood for a good pace for the rest of the day, or as Francis put it, "we've met our beast."

From checkpoint 1 we set off quickly for number 2, worryingly in the opposite direction to the other leading teams! We stuck with our original route decision; confident it couldn't be any slower than the other obvious route...this was when the mistakes started. Firstly my rucksack unzipped itself depositing my jacket, resulting in 10minutes wasted finding it again, then it became evident that a steep descent on our route choice wasn't the easiest to find: "I think that looks too steep on the map"... "lets go over there"... "oh no those crags don't show up

with these contours"...lets go over there"...oh it's actually fine on our original route because all those other people are going that way"...another 10 minutes or so wasted. What amateurs!

From check point 2 to 3 and then 4 we were quickly learning from these mistakes treating the map with more caution, passing other teams and actually finding quite a quick route across the now very high, rocky and steep-at-times mountains. Check point 4 was staffed and we were pleasantly surprised to be told we were in 3rd place. Confidence restored.



Getting going again just after check point 2

Route choice from here was initially even easier because we had to follow a marked track around the crevasses on the Kårsajokeln glacier. This was initially very exciting – you definitely don't get this in races in the UK – especially when a few reindeer ran past, but quickly the novelty wore off for me as my uncovered eyes tired of squinting against the bright snow and I rapidly gained a headache and started to feel ill. Luckily Francis had had the foresight to bring sunglasses so swapped them around and continued moving quickly-as-we could to the last of the high checkpoints at the western most side of the course. Some quite slow contouring around rocky alpine terrain (another lesson learnt – stay on the tops) and big views across to what I guess were Norwegian mountains was followed by some fast running down snowfields and then a long slog across grassy terrain to the penultimate checkpoint.



Following the marked path up the glacier

The final steep descent to the mid-camp – initially worrying as we still weren't quite sure how to read these 20m contours but turned out fine – passed by quickly with a quick scramble, dash down a moraine ridge, splash across the river and to the finish. A lot more relaxed than the usual day 1 finish for me, maybe because we hadn't seen another team for so long, but probably because we'd had such a fun day! We'd made plenty of mistakes, had not gone as fast as we'd probably have liked, but learnt quickly, got to see lots of big new mountains and covered all sorts of terrain: bogs, tussocky grass, endless rock-fields, many snowfields and even a glacier. It had definitely been one of my best days ever running in the mountains.

Crossing the finish line we were slightly disappointed to be just over an hour behind Team Silva who finished the day in 1st place, but this was quickly tempered when a cinnamon swirl was put in our hands – this couldn't have been more welcome! The mid-camp location was suitably stunning: a beautiful clear lake to have a wash in and plenty of soft ground to camp on. I always thought the friendly mid-camp atmosphere of the LAMM was unique to the LAMM, but it turns out it's exactly the same in Sweden: we spent the evening relaxing, eating lots of food, chatting to new Swedish friends, chatting to new English friends and enjoying the long lazy evening light that you get above the arctic circle.



Final descent to the mid-camp

Day 2 by Francis

Day 2 started with a cloud base hovering around 1000m and there had been a little rain overnight. We forced down copious quantities of tea, energy powder and muesli, visited the very civilized camping loos and got organised for the mass start at 8am. Despite lying in third we were still over an hour behind the two leading teams so missed the chasing start which was confusingly 15minutes later than the mass start.

Back across the river up to our thighs in meltwater to the start, a brief wait for the official time keepers to say go and we were off. Day 2s first checkpoint was the last summit checkpoint from day 1 for the 50km teams, and to start with our route was an exact reversal of our decent to the mid camp the previous day. We plotted a route up through the initial steep ground of the valley side and once in the corrie we had a couple of options, either into the back of the corrie and then along a more moderate angle to the summit or straight up through craggy 45 degreeness. The latter was our neighbour's hair raising decent route to the mid camp, since they survived and it was looking like a long detour into the corrie we decided to go for it. We were in the lead of the mass start by less than a minute by the time we made the top but didn't hang around. We quickly left our closest team behind in the mist whilst running down a smooth slope on fragments of slaty schist. More old snow to cross, a short scramble launched upon and a nasty tumble avoided by a strong pat on my behind from Chris (thanks Chris).

Then we were back to fairly flat running using bearings and vague features in the cloud to our next summit checkpoint.



Heading across to some misty hills on day 2

The next section took us back down to grassier altitudes and crossed our route from day 1, here at our most Southerly point on the map we were passed by Team Silva followed closely by team IF Levik who had been on the mass start with us. Here we wasted some time by drifting onto slightly more stepped terrain than Team Silva had found, largely due to an urge – in my head at least – to start contouring early. It turned out a little too early and this cost us some time. But anyway once we'd gained enough height we could enjoy the 2km long Njunjeskatje ridge, which promised to offer fast flat running with atmosphere. Unfortunately we were in the cloud the whole way but it was still very atmospheric. We passed two of our Swedish housemates on the ridge, exchanged a few words and sped on and on towards the ridge's end, running a little too far before breaking off left to our valley bottom checkpoint, some more time wasted here.

A steep climb, our last one, with around 650m ascent, began on a good path through birch and juniper giving a very hot and sweaty section back up into the cloud. After 200m of up we broke off the path left through thick knee high juniper to start a rising contour towards the wide col and easier running. Here we were over-taken by our nearest rivals Team IF Levik again, somehow we'd gotten in front of them in the mist.

As we gained the col in distant pursuit of Team IF the cloud lifted enough to see that we'd contoured a little too much and now needed to turn hard left to hit our ridge and final approach to checkpoint 5. Lucky for us our rivals had also contoured even further so spurred on by this advantage we picked up our pace on the final climb, really our last hill now! The guys in Team IF were probably faster than us but we stayed together through the next few km. More snow and back onto familiar terrain from day 1. An exciting decent next to mini waterfalls in craggy ground, two shallow river crossings and then flat, making a beeline in the mist for the small path that would lead us to our last control. Fortunately for us Team IF veered left out of sight at this point and we didn't see them again until the finish. Once on the path and beginning our final decent we could relax a little and enjoy some reflection. The view during this final descent beneath the hill-cloud was pretty stunning, looking past Birch forests of Bjorkliden onto Lake Tornetask and beyond that towards another equally wild and expansive mountain range to the North.

We finished to the sound of cowbells and were thrust a microphone to describe how we'd recovered overnight – a question we'd been briefed on at the start of the race on Friday! "No I didn't give Chris a massage!" and "Why didn't you ask one of the many beautiful Swedish women camping nearby to give you a massage?!" The reception is definitely grander than that of the LAMM and instead of a much needed Wilfs' you get a buffet of

sweeties, dried reindeer meat including smoked heart and a “BAMM burger” all set against uplifting dance music.



Final descent to the finish

The afternoon continues with a free massage of your most worn out body parts, the team of four masseurs doing around a hundred massages between them.

Once we'd convened in the banquet marquee that evening and found at least two of our six other countrymen to sit with, the prize giving and thanking race helpers got under way. All in Swedish but we knew when it was the right moment to join in with the Viking like chanting. Coming third, we were each given an attractive bright blue Hagloffs duffel bag. Our fellow countrymen Rachael and Richard of Team “Two days of R and R” who came 5th in the 50km class and won the mixed category were presented with this year's dried leg of Reindeer to give them the extra strength to win their overall category next year!

An all you can eat buffet banquet of reindeer steak and accompanying vegetables with chocolate brownies for pudding plus one free beer completed the evening. Another night in our comfortable chalet, a luxurious breakfast buffet and it was time to leave.

A very big thanks to Anders Morell of the BAMM and Martin Stone of the LAMM for giving us the opportunity to race in this event. Thanks also to Duncan Archer and Jim Mann for gifting us their well-deserved prize, all of the Swedish competitors and race organisers who made us feel so welcome and to Haydn Williams for letting us borrow his fancy lightweight tent. A great event and a great few days.

We took a camera along with us for the race to catch a few holiday snaps, you can see a few of them here:

<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10100506612508268.2664525.199705630&type=3&l=916fd25a80>