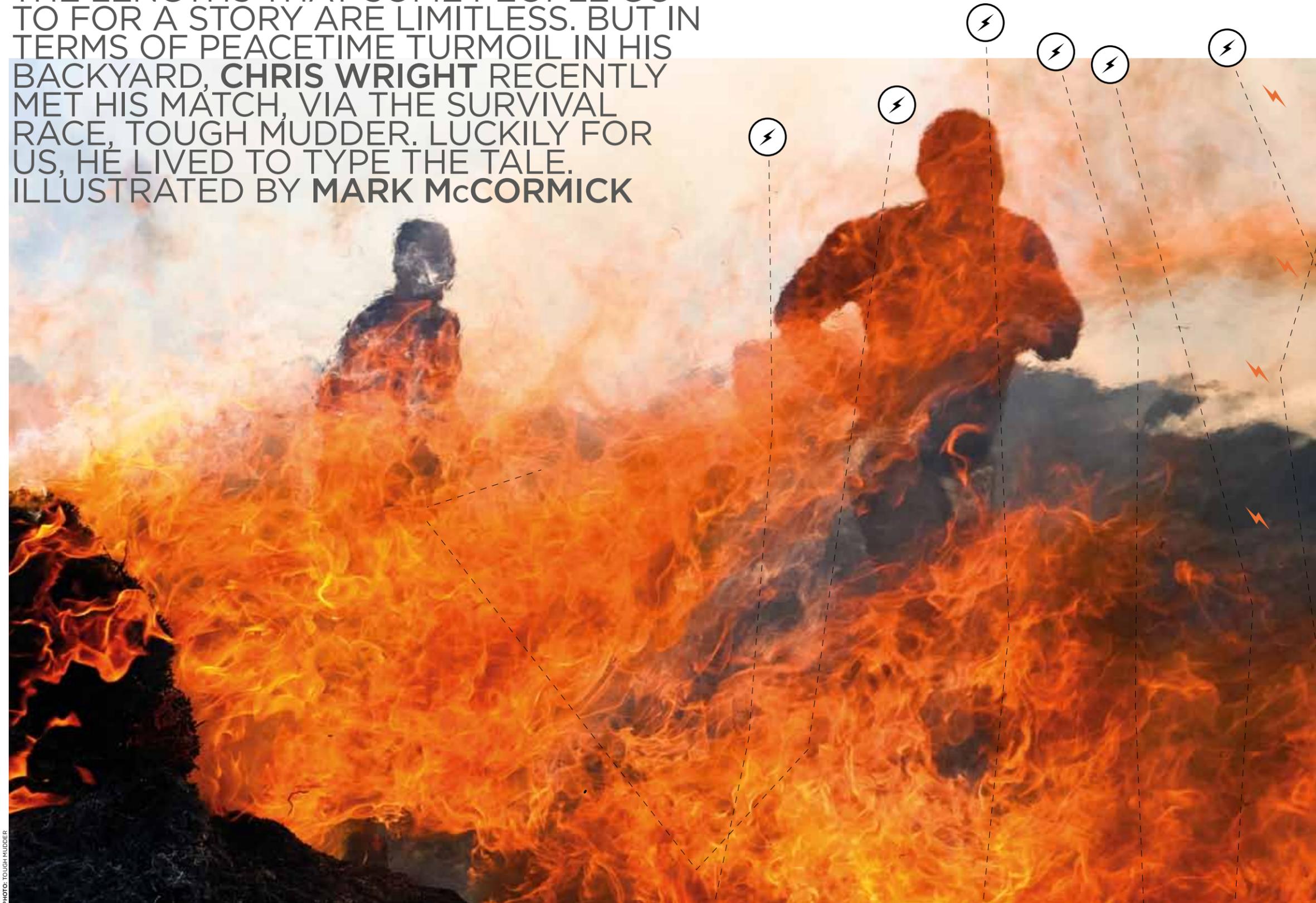
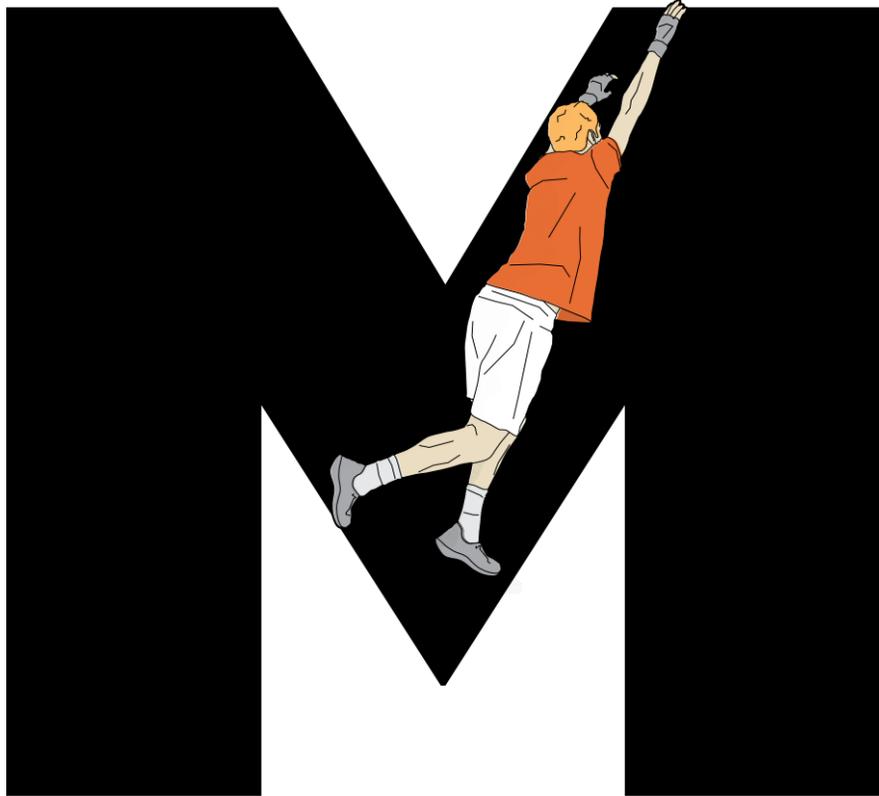


THE TOUGH MUDDER

THE LENGTHS THAT SOME PEOPLE GO TO FOR A STORY ARE LIMITLESS. BUT IN TERMS OF PEACETIME TURMOIL IN HIS BACKYARD, **CHRIS WRIGHT** RECENTLY MET HIS MATCH, VIA THE SURVIVAL RACE, TOUGH MUDDER. LUCKILY FOR US, HE LIVED TO TYPE THE TALE. ILLUSTRATED BY **MARK McCORMICK**



In hindsight, it was the electrocuted testicles that first made me suspect I'd made an error of judgement. Maybe I should have heeded the warnings when I crawled in mud under barbed wire, plunged off a five-metre platform into freezing water, and tackled an obstacle called Arctic Enema, which turned out to be exceptionally well-named. But, no, it took a low-hanging wire to a low-hanging zone to make the folly of the situation fully clear to me. But I'm getting ahead of myself.



My story starts with a Facebook post from an old school friend about an obstacle course known as the Tough Mudder. This is exactly how most people end up involved in events like this — a friend posts or shares something through social media, it sounds like fun and before you know it, a potential team has come together.

Billed as “probably the toughest event on the planet,” Tough Mudder is a 19-kilometre obstacle course, combining a rugged cross-country run with over 20 challenges designed by British Special Forces. Its rise has been truly extraordinary: the first event was held near Allentown, Pennsylvania, in the United States in May 2010, and around half a million people competed in 35 races worldwide in 2012 alone. In May this year the company passed one million registrations since launch. There will be 53 events this year in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and Germany. And all participants must pay, typically between US\$85 and US\$180, depending how far in advance people sign up. There’s also a mandatory US\$15 insurance charge. Even allowing for the fact that some of the money goes to charity (currently Help for Heroes and the Wounded Warrior Project), getting muddy remains big business.

And although Tough Mudder, formed by two Britons in the United States, has enjoyed the most mercurial rise, it is far

from the only endurance event growing in popularity. Long-standing events like Tough Guy continue to go strong, with new arrivals appearing every day. In the UK alone between June and August, people could choose from, among other things, two Tough Mudders, a Commando Challenge, Zest Challenge, Back 2 the Trenches, JCB Mudrun, Mud Runner, Water Wipeout, XMud, Norse Challenge, Tough Guy Nettle Warrior, Total Warrior and River Rat Race. None of these are pleasant — indeed, they are marketed on their unpleasantness. Anyone who signs up for Tough Mudder knows that if they complete the race, they will have been drenched, covered in mud, frozen and electrocuted with 10,000 volts. And still they sign up — even *paying* for the privilege.

But why? Our team leader Marc has a theory that this is all a rebellion caused by the mundanity of office life. That to truly escape from the drudge, we have to do increasingly daring and ridiculous things. When going for a bike ride won’t cut it any more, when a marathon is boring and a triathlon mainstream, you just have to dive head first into the mud. Plus, my whole team, and probably the median race-goer, is about 40 — old enough to be feeling it, old enough to want to prove we can still do something extraordinary. It’s a combination of a prompt to get fit, a last hurrah; a box to be ticked, a laugh, something different,



a magnet for a bit of camaraderie — and a rage against the dying of the light.

So we meet in a Holborn pub and listen to a blues band as we joke nervously about electrocution and discuss how we’ll all get fit, starting next week, definitely. If we have time.

TOUGHENING UP

It is 8.15am on January 4. I have done the school drop-off, and driven round the corner to Richmond Park. It is day one of getting fit. It is also minus four degrees.

I put the band Primal Scream on the iPod and take off, exhilarated. I don’t so much jog as sprint along the path, silently mocking the Yummie Mummies I pass along the way. Look at me! This is easy! I could run all... run all... hang on.

Within about 400 metres I have stopped, wheezing. The Yummy Mummies — one of whom will subsequently turn out to be a Level 3 advanced personal fitness instructor and qualified nutritionist who has represented her county in at least three different sports — overtake me with an easy smile, chatting idly as they go past.

Getting fit is not easy, it turns out. It hurts. And in the early frozen days, I don’t think I’m making much progress at all. But after a week or so, I have a sign. I make

WE JOKE NERVOUSLY ABOUT ELECTROCUTION AND DISCUSS HOW WE’LL ALL GET FIT, STARTING NEXT WEEK, DEFINITELY. IF WE HAVE TIME

my usual spluttering chest-burst progress along a flat section then up a modest but grinding hill, and at the top find myself amid a herd of wild deer, just as the sun rises behind them. As I pull out the BlackBerry, a deer, a wide rack of antlers resplendent on its head, obligingly steps in front of the sun in perfect silhouette. Shocked to see this so close to central London, and suitably galvanised, I find things start to get easier.

I join a gym. Not a normal gym. One of these places that keep springing up premised on the theory that instead of a slow and steady hour of gradual exercise, you should push yourself to your absolute limit for 20 minutes, and then you’re done for the day. I have my doubts about this: I think we all *want* to believe that you can get all your exercise for the day in 20 minutes, because none of us have any more than 20 minutes a day to devote to exercise amid the pressing mundanity of everyday life. But I go along with it. The instructors, nice as pie when you meet them, turn into



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FIRE WALKER

evil incarnate when I get on the weight machines. "Nobody's going to take it easy on you when you do Tough Mudder," is a frequent refrain. I want to punch them, but am usually trapped under some sort of bench press listening to bovine motivational music. Then they make me do 160 stomach crunches before I can leave, with instructions to eat "bonkers amounts of protein" ringing in my ears.

We've all got the best of intentions, but things get in the way. Work, illness, kids, deadlines, hangovers — so by the time the day comes, I'm certainly fitter than I was, but I don't have the six-pack I dreamed of. I'm not running marathons; and I'm not entirely sure I can pull myself over a wall. But the way I see it, none of these things is going to help with electrocution anyway.

Two weeks before the run, the course map is released. We study the obstacles to prepare ourselves, receiving a reminder to sign our Death Waiver, or we won't be allowed to compete. How nice.

Two days before the race, Marc sends a group email with the essential information. He has narrowed the options for a post-race drink down to two pubs.

And finally the day arrives.

ARE YOU TOUGH ENOUGH?

At 6.30am on a Saturday morning in June, the team hops onto a train from London to Winchester. It is sunny, which is a good thing — you spend a lot of time wet in Tough Mudder, and cold or rainy weather would be an additional cruelty. There is a lot of gallows humour, as well as a surprising quantity of bananas.

Arriving at the site, the first thing that's clear is the sheer scale of what Tough Mudder has become. This is just one of two consecutive days of running in a category called London South; there are many more of these across the UK alone. Today, every 15 minutes from 8am to 3pm, waves of several hundred runners will be sent along the course. There must be close to 10,000 competitors, plus their supporters and other spectators. The central area where registration takes place, and where the start and finish lines are, looks a lot like the centrepiece of a rock festival, replete with bars, food outlets and an overpriced merchandise shop selling Tough Mudder baseball caps (£15) and vests (£25). It's big business. You can get Tough Mudder tattoos, even Tough Mudder haircuts. Mulletts are a speciality.

Britain is an uneasy place to get away with gung-ho American-style chest-beating palm-slapping machismo, but the organisers know their audience, and a smart Irish MC mixes motivational speaking with humour. And there is a lot more laughter than you'd think: about a third of all competitors are in some kind of costume or fancy dress. There are people

PREP THE RIGHT WAY



If you've signed up for the Tough Mudder on impulse, and are nervously wondering "now what", check out the official event website, which is full of information and tips.

Early in your preparation process, you should figure out what your current fitness level is. To help you do this, the site has a quick 10-question quiz called "Are You Tough Enough?" The results will give you a gauge as to how much training you will need, and will likely help you figure out what skills or body parts you need to focus on.

There's also a section called Tough Mudder Boot Camp, which according to the Tough Mudder team delivers "resistance training with high-intensity cardiovascular exercises" to prepare you for the challenges on your Tough Mudder course. And before you protest that you just don't have enough time, the team says the programme is "entirely flexible and can be tailored to the time you have available and your level of fitness".

Furthermore, you should heed the team's tips on what to bring and how to dress. For example, participants are encouraged to wear normal running shoes on the day of the event. The website warns, "Cleats won't help — in fact they'll be worse on your feet and are dangerous for the other participants." Another tip is to wear lightweight clothing. "Even if it's a cold day," the site states, "heavy or thick clothing will just retain water and make you colder." Don't forget to bring a change of clothes for the party afterwards, either.

WHY DO IT?

With the risk of health issues, injury, electrocuted nether regions and even, in extreme cases, death, why do people voluntarily sign up (and even pay) to join events like the Tough Mudder at all?

To answer that question, it seems fitting to invoke what some have called the most famous three words in the history of mountaineering, uttered by British climber George Leigh Mallory. When asked why he was crazy enough to be one of the first to climb Mount Everest, he simply said, "Because it's there."

Mallory later died on the mountain during his third try at conquering it in 1924, a year after that interview, which adds a sombre note to his brave words — but they're not the full quote, which sums up rather better why men and women every year attempt crazy feats of the muddy and painful kind.

Mallory mused of the mythical peak, "Its existence is a challenge. The answer is instinctive, a part, I suppose, of man's desire to conquer the universe." The Tough Mudder as a metaphor for taking on life? Possibly.

in full-length figure-hugging morph suits, dressed as the Power Rangers. There is a team of women in Superman costumes, capes included. And there are people running in Speedos, ballerina outfits (men only), and even in business suits. Everyone starts with a number painted on their heads, though it seems the height of optimism to expect it to survive the onslaught ahead.

Our appointed start-time arrives and the Irish MC sends us through to the start line. Even reaching the start requires everyone to climb over a wall taller than any of us — an obstacle to vault before we've even begun running. Then, penned in between the wall and the starting point, we listen as a man runs through a few essentials, like not attempting the electrocution obstacles if you have a pacemaker, or taking the high jump into water if you can't swim. He also makes us repeat a few pledges.

"Tough Mudder is not a race but a challenge."

"I do not whine. Kids whine."

"I will not leave my fellow Mudder in the mud."

"I overcome all fears."

"Look at someone and shout in their faces." We obediently look at someone and shout in their faces.

"When I say tough, you say Mudder! Tough?"

"Mudder!"

"Tough?"

"Mudder!"

And off we go. Despite myself, I high-five the announcer on the way through.



ON THE RUN

It is possible, albeit briefly, to appreciate the beauty of your surroundings on a sunny day in Tough Mudder. The venues are usually agricultural or parkland, and today we are running between fields, some of them filled with brilliant yellow flowers amid the undulating green of the region's gentle hills. They don't feel so gentle though when we start running them.

Whereas the course map suggested straight lines, in fact the organisers have turned the arrow-straight into the right-angled, the sublime into the ridiculous, a series of 90-degree switches up and down

hills to spread out the field. People tend to prepare for the obstacles and forget the running. In fact even without the obstacles, it is pretty much a half-marathon.

The first one up is Kiss of Mud. Some low barbed wire, spread over pits of mud, through which we must crawl. Mud is not so bad once you get down in it. Once you're in, you're in — you're not going to be clean again in a hurry, so why worry? Barbed wire is to be avoided, but the collective mood at the end of obstacle one is: okay, that wasn't so bad.

Nor is Glory Blades, a series of tilted wooden walls that must be surmounted. Walk the Plank, that five-metre leap into water, is no fun at all, but the next few — jumping over and sliding under greased logs, leaping over mud-filled trenches, a sideways climbing wall over water, are a litany of low-grade unpleasantness, though all perfectly achievable. It is sunny, there is booming, appropriately awesome music from generator-fuelled speakers around the course, and the mood is good.

Which is, of course, when we arrive at the Arctic Enema. This is one of Tough Mudder's signature obstacles, and is one of the handful that will appear in every race, regardless of its location. A series of dumpsters have been filled with water, and then with a vast amount of ice — so much so that there are two semi-trailers there doing absolutely nothing but storing and creating more ice. Organisers say in a day-long event, they will put in 30,000 to 36,000 kilograms of ice. You climb up a ladder, jump into the chest-deep water, then have to submerge yourself completely to get under a partition in the middle of the dumpster that reaches well below the water level. Then you haul what's left of yourself out the other end.

It sounds easy in theory, and this obstacle has not worried me in advance. But when I jump in, I feel my muscles go into shock. I had expected that with my legs, but instead it's my chest muscles that freeze, and I can't inflate or deflate my chest — I can't breathe.

The nearby volunteers and marshals are used to this, and one talks to me as I hang on to the side of the dumpster. "Control your breathing," he orders, and eventually I do, but unfortunately by now, having been much longer in the water than I had meant to be, I can no longer feel my feet — or pretty much anything else, for that matter. He kindly asks me if I want to skip the underwater bit and I think hard about it. But I can't do that, can I? Then everyone else will be a tougher Mudder than me. I will have an achievement with a footnote. The beer at the end won't taste so richly of entitlement and reward. So I plunge fully underwater, feel my way under the partition, and stagger over to my waiting teammates who pull me out the other end. "Your face," says one, "was sheer terror." And it was.

Grateful again for good weather, we are running instantly, trying to get some heat circulating again, but I'm some way past the obstacle before I can feel my feet. I think I can safely go through the rest of my life without wanting to do that again.

Other obstacles come and go. We crawl in the mud again, this time under tanks (tanks! The warfare kind!) and more barbed wire. We tackle the Boa Constrictor, which involves climbing down narrow tubes into muddy water and then scrambling up more tubes to get out again.

Then there's the Funky Monkey. As if having a monkey-bar obstacle, upwards-inclined, after running seven kilometres isn't bad enough, they have also greased the bars. I fall in, deciding I am fast becoming bored of being soaked. Next is the Mud Mile, a scramble over the deepest and most sodden mud-pits yet, the air alive with the sudden suck of footwear leaving its owner and staying obstinately beneath the mulch. Not to mention Hold Your Wood, where you have to pick up a log and carry it around a whole separate circuit.



Fire Walker is up next. This is one of the ones that scares people in advance, since it involves leaping over naked flames coming out of a huge barbecue — but it's really nothing to worry about since everyone's soaked; just a quick leap over the fire into yet another trench of brown chest-deep water. Island Hopping (more jumping over water, more falling into water) and Trench Warfare (a crawl through stony trenches beneath tarpaulins) are fine too, with nothing like the expected claustrophobia. It is all starting to look quite achievable.

That is, until we approach Electric Eel. We hear this one, even before we see it. To be more precise, we hear howls of pain. Surely the cruellest of the obstacles, this involves crawling along a wet tarpaulin under a low frame from which are suspended hundreds of live electric wires. I have seen a video by an American runner about this obstacle, who advises competitors to "avoid the patches of water". In our case, the entire thing is standing in 15 centimetres of water. No avoiding that, and its marvellous conductive properties.

The standard approach is this. Gingerly climb into the apparatus. Get about halfway through, successfully avoiding wires. Get electrocuted. Howl in utter astonishment at just how painful it really is. Plough forward propelled by elbows and knees in a desperate bid for freedom, hitting what feels like every wire on the way through, before emerging, whimpering and swearing, at the other end. Pause to pull someone else out.

I really can't recommend being electrocuted. It is just not to be encouraged. That's as simply as I can state the matter. It is just not what you expect. Pain is the wrong word: it's like being shoved, viciously and unpredictably, by a great wobbling unseen force. It's like a really annoying ghost with a cattle prod and no sense of humour. Really, I mean it, don't get electrocuted. Make it one millionth on your List of Things To Do.

When it seems things can get no worse, we reach an obstacle called Hero Carry, which nobody has been quite sure about in advance. It turns out this obstacle involves carrying a teammate up a hill, and then swapping over. Had I known this, I would have been clever. I'd have made sure I was running with a woman, a small one, ideally svelte and lean and about the height of a bedside table. Instead, having not been forewarned, I end up with Matt.

We grunt and grimace and struggle, first me slung over his shoulders in a fireman's lift, then he on mine in a piggyback. It's not dignified. That is the absolute last thing it is. It's a terrible look. When we finish he says, "I wouldn't have liked to carry me. I weigh 90 kilograms." I look at him. "I weigh 68," I say.

PHOTO: TOUGH MUDDER





More walls! Endless walls. What is it about walls, and tunnels, and mud? This is a teamwork sort of a wall, a wall to be hoisted up before reaching down to pull someone else up. This is the sort of wall you would high-five at the top of, were it not likely that you would fall off doing so and break your collarbone, and probably a fellow Mudder too. Something called Cage Crawl follows, which doesn't involve much more than getting completely drenched in cold water

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for the sixth time this morning. And then after a three-kilometre run — nothing in the normal course of things, brutal by now — we are near the finish line, with just two obstacles to come.

Both are notorious. The first is called Everest. Basically, the obstacle is a sloped wall, greased, in the shape of a skateboarder's quarter pipe. Organisers say it is 4.5 metres high, takes 150 man-hours to build and weighs three tonnes. And the whole team has to get over the thing.

You might just be able to run up the thing solo, get a grip at the top and pull yourself up; but the norm instead is to run and grab a waiting hand. Being a cynical person, to say nothing of a work-from-home socially retarded freelancer, I have never really been one for teamwork and the collective effort. But by now, with almost 18 kilometres and almost 20 obstacles behind me, it just seems the most beautiful thing in the world when I run, leap, and see a waiting hand to catch mine. Whosever hand it is, I love them. Scrambling up, I turn to do the same. By now — and this is the good bit — I notice

people are helping the next runner up, even when they're in a completely different team. I finally begin to see what the fuss is about in this idea of shared achievement.

But there is no time to indulge in such misty-eyed joy at the human spirit — for we have one last obstacle to go.

At every Mudder, the last obstacle is called Electroshock Therapy, and it is by far the most talked about by people who are preparing for the race, such is its unspeakable absurdity. We all know it's coming, and yet we still sign up, lambs to the slaughter. It involves running through deep mud beneath a structure packed with wires, all of them carrying up to 10,000 volts and pulsing once per second. Whereas with the Electric Eel it is just about feasible that you could pick a way through untouched, the density of wires here means there is nothing for it. You are going to get electrocuted — it's just a question of how much.

It is time to get American about things, to come over like a US Marine. We psych ourselves up, breathe deeply, pump our chests and shoulders like boxers. I watch my teammates plough in. It is time to get a bit primeval. With the guttural roar of a rutting moose, I run in.

I have raised my hands to protect my head and by about halfway through, things seem okay. Then I get one in the back of the legs. It is like being hit from behind with a baseball bat, but I am still going. I am going to make it. It is all going to be fine.

And then. The low-hanging wire. The low-hanging fruit. Its aim is exceptional.

I am no longer emitting the guttural roar of a rutting moose.

Howling like an absolute banshee, a banshee that's been castrated, a banshee that's been castrated at the end of a 19-kilometre run and covered in mud and HAVING PAID FOR THE PRIVILEGE, I am propelled downwards and end up face-down in the mud, taking a further well-aimed zap to the right nipple on the way down.

Three things are clear to me. Having fathered two children, I will be stopping there. I am absolutely covered in mud. And I have finished: the shock (and what a well-chosen word that is: electric shock) has hurled me straight out the end of the obstacle and clear of the wires. Staggering to my feet and bear-hugging two colleagues, neither of whom mind my muddiness because they look at least as bad, we cross the line — to be greeted with a bright orange headband and a pint of Strongbow. It tastes just preposterously good.

WE ARE TOUGH MUDDERS

There are those who don't like what Tough Mudder is becoming. The carnival of it, the inexperience of many of the competitors, the wetsuited over-preparation of others, the merchandise, the scale. And it is facing its challenges already, on one occasion

tragically. In April 2013 the event suffered its first fatality at an event in Gerrardstown, West Virginia, in the United States, when a participant died at the Walk the Plank obstacle. There's no doubting the effort that is made in safety and medical logistics — it's visible everywhere — but still, when an enterprise grows at the speed with which Tough Mudder has done, the infrastructure is surely under strain.

And for those for whom Tough Mudder is not enough, there is the far extreme of the badass über-lunatic spectrum, the World's Toughest Mudder. In this annual event, participants continuously repeat a 16-kilometre looped course with 32 obstacles for 24 hours, the winner being the one who completes the most laps. Last year Junyong Pak and Amelia Boone completed nine laps — close to 145 kilometres. That is equivalent to running from Kuala Lumpur to Malacca, in Malaysia, cross-country, with 288 obstacles in the way. My team will not be doing World's Toughest Mudder.

But staggering back through the crowds, past the swathes of clean people who are about to start their own run, I find myself with an unattractive feeling of superiority: I've done this course, those guys haven't. There's a definite brotherhood to it too, after miles of running past signs saying "No Mudder Left Behind" (which strikes rather more of a chord than those that say "Leave Dignity Here", "Remember You Signed a Death Waiver" and "Shouldn't You be Mowing Your Lawn?").

We shower, sort of — an open wooden frame with a load of hoses and an intermittent supply of water — and head in to Winchester, where Marc's choice of pub turns out to be exemplary. Everyone is starting to cramp by the time we get trains back to London, but the feeling is that it was worth doing. Once.

I get home and try to explain my painful extremities to my wife. "Try breast-feeding," she says witheringly. Ah, nobody else understands but a fellow Mudder. And as I collapse into exhausted sleep, I have only one thought. I have absolutely no wish to be electrocuted again in this lifetime. And if it happens, you can be darn sure I won't have paid for it to be done to me. ●



PHOTO: TOUGH MUDDER