

FOR AND AGAINST

Is commercialism bad for trail running?

Some would say our sport becomes less pure as big business gets involved



FOR

Absolutely, says Sam Cornell – it is losing sight of its values

Ultra-trail running has been connected to the wild landscape of the British Isles for centuries and has particularly strong roots amongst the deceptively perilous Munros of Scotland and testing fells of North England. The unforgiving nature of the environs is what appeals – a taste of the wild and a chance to test one's mettle.

Fell races are renowned for their simplicity and down-to-earth pedigree. A runner can arrive in the early morning, pay a small entry fee, and engage in an elemental pursuit with their compatriots. One could almost forget that, not too long ago in this country, the pleasure of the great outdoors was reserved for a privileged few.

But trail running is changing. The ubiquity of social media and the increasing practice of one-upmanship is a perfect storm to fan the flames of the wannabe adventurer's ego. The sport has experienced exponential growth in popularity and is now attracting a new kind of runner: the Monday-to-Friday city trader who gallivants around the country by the weekend, unwilling to bask in the muddy pain of it all and requiring aristocratic entitlements.

At a time when many wish to increase participation of the marginalised and underrepresented, new events, such as Highland Kings – “an endurance adventure with a royal seal of approval” and with an entry price of £16,000 – are cropping up to cater to this molycoddled runner. Self-proclaimed “luxury events” like this are resurrecting the outdoors-for-the-privileged mentality.

The event's race director has even managed to cajole Sir Ranulph Fiennes into providing a testimonial. This is the same Sir Ranulph Fiennes who lost the tips of his fingers to frostbite in Antarctica – a risk unlikely for those “warriors” partaking in the Highland Kings ultramarathon, who will dine on food prepared by Michelin-starred chefs and sleep in opulent campsites.

As custodians of ultra-running, we must have a conversation to determine if there's a place for this sort of extravagance in our sport; providing an outlet for the wealthy to live out their fantasies whilst denigrating the true spirit of ultra-marathon running.

■ Sam is a public health researcher, writer and trail runner.



AGAINST

No, says Paul Halford – it is only what you make it

Trail running's roots were based on simplicity, nature, accessibility and community and, in the main, nothing has changed. Being able to put on your running shoes and head for the forests or the hills is as pure a source of escapism and joy as it ever was, and it will always be free.

However, what has altered are the commercial opportunities linked to trail running – such as races, tourism and kit. A few decades ago, it became a sport, one that is ever becoming more professional, with bigger prize money and more serious athletes. Entry fees are growing and companies have sprung up offering trail running-linked holidays and the like.

Realising this, the International Trail Running Association last summer released a 22-page report into the current state of the sport, written by its then president Bob Crowley. The first half-dozen or so pages discussed that trail running was at a major crossroads. With a 12% annual increase in the number of participants, the sport and activity were at the dawn of a new era, labelled “trail running 2.0”. He wrote: “Will we rise to the challenge of welcoming the tremendous influx of new members to our community and teach them our values, or will we allow them to be diminished and eventually forgotten?”

The concern is that we will lose those initial values, but I do not believe that is a given. Trail running can become a high-profile sport with committed athletes, while still being what it always has been to someone who just wants to head out of the door to do a run in the hills.

Take road running, for example. It's way ahead of trail running in terms of its commercial development. It's a massively lucrative sport for some athletes. But some runners do not know or care about running as a ‘sport’; in fact, it would probably be some way down the list behind football for most. To most of those on the startline at the TCS London Marathon, running is an activity not a sport.

If people want to pay £16,000 to go on a trail running holiday, that is up to them. The rest of us will carry on doing what we always have. We should just welcome the fact that more people are enjoying trail running.

■ Paul Halford is *Trail Running's* digital editor and a trail runner with more than 20 years' experience. **TR**

