



POWER OF THE DARK SIDE

With the clocks going back, we're all going to find ourselves running in the dark at some point. **Matt Maynard draws on his experience of running in the Brecon Beacons to bring us his report on what to expect and how to prepare for a bit of moonlighting**

WORDS MATT MAYNARD

EARLY START

At 4:45am, the phone light blinked and the silent hostel was filled with the first blasting bars of the *Star Wars* theme tune. I shut it off with a sleepy fist before the string instruments started and an even heavier fist arrived from across the bed. Last night, I had humoured myself that the change in alarm would give me the 'Force' to get up. But now, with many hours until dawn, the night seemed like a frightening proposition – a journey into the darkness of those

middle-of-the-night emotions, best forgotten by rolling over and going back to sleep. Yet, I couldn't afford to do that. It was midwinter, I had a big race in the spring and had travelled to Abergavenny and the Brecon Beacons hills to train. I also wanted to practise running in the dark, as I'd have to from the start line in April.

And besides, by not getting going now, there'd be other people I'd be letting down later that morning... Then I really would know the Dark Side!

EQUIPMENT

For my Brecon Beacons night trail run, I'd got my kit and clothes ready the night before. (Otherwise, I run with legs through T-shirt arm holes). It also makes getting up easier, as I don't clatter around in the cold looking for socks left in the washing machine. Some nice additions for this night run were arm warmers and a couple of Buff headbands. I like to keep moving when running and once I warm up, I can adjust my temperature by



sliding down the arm warmers and removing the buff from my neck and head and instead wrapping them around my wrists. The colours clashed terribly – but hey, this was a night run in the Welsh Black Mountains. The route I'd planned up the famous Sugar Loaf would only take a few hours. However, as it was off-road and solo, I'd packed some safety items. That way, if I twisted an ankle and had to hobble home, I'd still be warm and OK. The head torch – the most important bit of kit – I adjusted over my Buff bandana, so it would be more comfortable on my noggin and wouldn't bounce around. I finally grabbed my phone and – remembering my wake-up call – gave the room a quick once-over with my head-mounted light sabre. Dzzhhmm!... “Get running, loser.”

EMBRACE THE DARKNESS

Being an outdoors person, I like being in big landscapes and looking at distant hills, knowing I can summit them in a few hours of steady exertion. The irony, then, of running at 5am into the blackboard of the Brecon Beacons night was not lost on me. “I might as well be in the gym,” I thought, as I located my hand to start my watch, soullessly climbing a treadmill's electric runway. And yet, even in the darkest night, it's never truly black. With my head torch on low beam, I soon became aware of my peripheries. The swash of water in my bottles began to sync with my stride. My breathing settled and a bat flew across my path, circled, and then headed on his way. You don't see that indoors at the local Squat 'n' Pose. I soon found myself at the outer edges of town. I'd memorised the first ¾ mile the previous evening to get me on my way. I'd been climbing without realising (as so

OVERALL RUNNING IMPROVEMENTS

Running in the dark has other, more tangible, benefits, too:

POWER When there is little else to distract you, the mechanics of your forward movement come to attention. I was aware of each arm swing, and concentrated on thrusting them forward, which, in turn, was driving my legs uphill.

STRIDE Strides become shorter as a reaction to lower light and concern for foot placements. A recent study* showed that regular running with shorter strides can reduce the risk of injury. (*Schubert, 2013)

ACCLIMATISATION Accustoming yourself to nocturnal surroundings will mean you feel more at ease during a planned night race.

NO LIMITS By embracing the dark, you increase your winter training opportunities and save the more usable daylight hours for sociable activities.

PLANNING NIGHT RUNS

BUILD EXPERIENCE

Run first on local streets, getting used to your head torch. When progressing to trails, run routes you know at first, before adding complications with navigation.

EARLY NOT LATE

Build up the night-run distance slowly, by running in the morning, rather than at night; you know that if you get lost or injured, dawn is only around the corner.

GPS VS MAP AND COMPASS

Following a GPS track is OK, but remember to take an extra

battery or spare phone. Having a map and compass as backup is even better. Upskill with mountain-training.org/walking.

LIMIT DIFFICULTY

Choose obvious linear features such as rivers, canals, dry stone walls or ridges to follow, rather than a path across open country. Planning my Sugar Loaf run, I chose the southeasterly ridge, because it followed a long ridge from Home Farm with a handy stone wall to 'handrail' and stop me straying. Following linear features might be less direct,

but they mean less time navigating (and potentially getting lost) and more time running.

HAVE AN OBJECTIVE

Having a definite turnaround point kept me focused and moving through the night. Sugar Loaf mountain was my goal for sunrise. At dawn, I was treated to a light show across the entire Black Mountains.

DON'T GET SPOOKED

Avoid plunging into deep forest on your first outing. Nothing really goes bump in

the night – but sometimes it's hard to be so rational. Be gentle with yourself. Go with a friend if you have any concerns at all about your safety, and always tell someone where you are going.

NIGHT VISION

Guard your ability to see into the shadows. When reading signposts or maps, use your head torch low-beam (or the red LED) setting. Tip: Try using just one eye and closing the other as you read. Then, when looking up again, use the other eye to check your new direction.

“AS DARTH VADER SAID: ‘YOU DON'T KNOW THE POWER OF THE DARK SIDE’... UNLESS YOU TRY”

often happens when you can't see the lie of the land) and Abergavenny was now twinkling beneath me. Now it was into unknown territory. Time to get the map out. As I ran onto the trail, a pair of yellow eyes shone back, then flashed away. My imagination was in that hyperactive state of night where George Lucas 'Siths' are more common than a sheep or fox. But I pressed on. My 220-lumen laser sword cleaving a path through low-hanging branches and puddles. Slowly though, I slipped into that special night-running state. The mind calms. Other senses open, compensating for lack of sight, and the land unveils its more subtle qualities, otherwise overlooked during the rush of day. Recent rain had loosened smells from the ground, and soon the

TIPS ON LIGHTING YOUR WAY

• **RAISE YOUR HEAD TORCH** angle when running faster to see further in front.

• **DIM THE TORCH** and save battery on uphills. Slower speeds need less light.

• **USE FULL BEAM** for technical downhills.

• **TRY USING A LOWER** setting to increase awareness of peripheries and surroundings.

• **HOLD IN HAND TO** see ground more clearly in mist.

i) see around corners on tight singletrack.

iii) lengthen shadows of obstacles in your path.

• **STOP OCCASIONALLY.** Turn it off. Enjoy the night.

odours of leaf mould and fungus came tinkling down the track, tossed in the impromptu waterway beneath the leaves. The wind was rising as dawn approached, and the wet branches clacked together in the darkness, sending a fresh rain of twigs and bark bouncing into my light.

MINDFUL MOMENTS BEFORE DAWN BREAK

The unilluminated was like a dark void. My breathing was the only news I had of my body working away in the shadows. Everything else was unimportant and forgotten. At just a mile from civilisation, I'd entered a rare moment. Time for Ewoks behind trees, for fantasy and for reflection; a stolen slice of day before the rational world woke up.

Dawn was creeping in quickly on the final approach to the Sugar Loaf. It would be good to get a bit of perspective on the landscape around me again. Night running can seem an intense and emotionally challenging experience at times. But, then again, perhaps those are sometimes the emotions our standard plod in the park lacks. As Darth Vader said: “You don't know the power of the Dark Side”... unless you try.

SHINING A LIGHT ON A HEAD TORCH PURCHASE

LUMENS (brightness). Minimum 80 lumens for off-road.

RECHARGEABLE BATTERY Great for the environment and bank balance.

BURN TIME Compare the full-beam burn time to the low-beam one.

EASE OF USE Can you press the buttons wearing gloves?

REACTIVE Useful setting where light is measured and adjusted automatically (when reading map, etc) to save night vision and battery.

PERSONALISED SETTING Program the intensity of the low beam yourself.

WEIGHT/BOUNCE The feel on your head.

INGRESS PROTECTION (WATERPROOFING) IP 5 and upwards for very wet runs.