



An Interview with Tobias Mews - Richtersveld, Writing and Running

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By [Luke Jarmey](#)

Fresh off his men's win and 2nd overall at the 2016 [Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun](#), we have a yarn with esteemed British runner/writer Tobias Mews about the race and his general mastery of both pen and trail.

Q. So first off, for those that are not yet in the know, who is Tobias Mews?

A. I call myself an adventure athlete and journalist - in that order. I live a rather symbiotic lifestyle where my sport and writing can't live without each other.

Q. Something, I found particularly interesting about your background was the six years as a British Army Officer. Did a year at Sandhurst and the following period of commissioned life, lay the foundations for your running credentials? Or does your race resume precede all that?

A. My career in the British Army was very much the foundation stone for everything I do now. Indeed, I can draw a very clean line between the first 25 years of my life pre-Army and what I'm doing now. Some of my friends would say I'm a different person - not in character, but in my goals and ambitions.

Before the Army, I'd never done a race apart from the odd cross country event at school. I used to play golf and squash to a reasonably high standard, but never had an interest in endurance sports. Probably because I didn't think I'd be any good. My racing career essentially began in 2003 with Army level cross country races, with my first civilian race - Tough Guy - the following year.

Q. What provoked the change from Officer to Outdoor Journalist? And how long did it take you to become established as a writer and runner?

A. I've often said that joining the Army was the best decision I ever made. It gave me an identity that I was incredibly proud of. I loved serving my country and how the training had turned me from a boy into a man. However, the second best decision I ever made was to leave. But to do what, is the question that many in my situation have asked themselves.

Becoming an outdoor journalist was an accident. Whilst I was retraining to become a television journalist, with the plan to work as a defence correspondent, I raced on the weekends. I spent three years racing, almost every weekend, before I got my first break as an 'outdoor journalist' - writing a monthly column for Triathlete's World. Quite quickly I began to build a portfolio of work writing for the likes of Men's Health, Runner's World, Mens' Fitness and many others. I've now written for over 30 publications, written hundreds of articles and had my first book published -[50 Races to Run Before you Die](#).

Q. Parachuting into the race community as an unknown at the [Marathon des Sables](#), but taking 21st spot and top Brit, is incredibly impressive. How on earth did you manage that? And of course results aren't everything, but give us a juicy little titbit on some of your other finest performances?

A. The 2011 [Marathon des Sables](#) had a profound effect on my life. It was the first race I signed up for on leaving the Army, but also the catalyst for my career as an outdoor journalist.

Indeed, when I first signed up for the race, I had no other ambition but to finish. But as I ticked off races, of almost every distance from one mile to 320km stage races, reaching the podium on quite a few occasions or at the very worst, finishing in the top 1-2% of finishers, I started to discover that I was quicker than I had imagined. Then I watched the James Cracknell documentary and decided that I too wanted to come Top Brit. But like every novice [MDS](#) runner, I had no idea what my competition would be like, nor how I would cope in the heat. It was a bit of a journey of discovery.

After the race, I made a note of all the things I'd have done differently were I to do the race again. But with it being a bit of a once in a life time opportunity, I had no high hopes. So when I received a commission to write about the 2013 edition, I jumped at the opportunity. Strangely enough, although I managed to come 15th overall, I came 3rd Brit - being beaten by an old school chum (the humiliation!!) who happened to be a former pro triathlete and Danny Kendal. So I can't complain too much!

Q. Onwards to the present and the [Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun](#). First off, huge congratulations and secondly, is it as truly amazing out there as all of [Ian Corless' photos and reporting](#) suggest?

A. Yes. It is as good as, if not better. I was invited by the race director, Owen Middleton, to the inaugural race two years ago. But as I was running [Comrades](#) at the time, I couldn't do both. But I'm so glad I waited, because after two practice editions, they hit the nail on the head when they went 'transfrontier', crossing into Namibia and the famous Fish River Canyon.

Indeed, if ever a runner was to look for the equivalent of 'running crack', they'd find it in the Richtersveld. It is truly stunning and possibly the best place I've ever had the pleasure to run through - surpassing the Alps, Pyrenees, Sahara, Amazon Jungle and many of the other places I've run in.

The oldest mountain desert in the world, this place has it all - river beds, sand, rocks, boulders the size of houses, mountains, hot springs, canyons, gorges - the lot. And then sprinkle in the

abundance of wild life, from mountain zebras to ostrich and leopard, plus the unique plant life found nowhere else on the planet - you're in running heaven.

Q. I noticed you ended up running with Jo Williams (1st Female and overall winner) for the bulk of the race. This is a slightly different approach to the often ultra-competitive 'take no prisoners' mindset of top racers. Had you guys planned all along to run together, or did it just happen out there?

A. I didn't know anyone before entering the race, although I had of course heard of Elisabeth Barnes and Linda Doke, one of South Africa's top female trail runners. But I didn't go there to 'race'. I had just come joint 4th in an incredibly tough 100 miler (the [Heroes Ultra](#)) three weeks earlier, so I wasn't sure how my legs would feel.

I quickly found out in the second half of Day 1, when my knees started to protest. I had been running with Jo and until then, but then lost pace as I began to manage my pain, finishing 20 minutes behind her. But I got my act together for Day 2 and we stayed together for the remainder of the week.

For me, it was more important to share in the experience than to be in a massive rush. I felt no pressure to beat Jo or anyone else. I simply wanted to enjoy the race and run at my pace. - which just so happened to be a bit faster than many of the others.

Q. So with a few navigational errors along the way, just how complex is the route finding? Does that add to the sense of adventure or is it just irritating?

A. This was the first race I'd done where the route was given to you as a GPS track in conjunction with a map. There were no route markings (except for a technical section up the Tatersberg Boulders) which is exactly how it should be.

I love using maps, so I had planned on using the GPS as a backup function, rather than my primary navigational aid. I only had my [Suunto Ambit Peak 3](#), loaded with the route - so it wasn't super complicated.

But it really did add to the sense of adventure. We were the only people running in the 6000 km² park. To put it in context, that is four times the size of Greater London. With only our maps and the GPS to guide us to the respective checkpoints and the finish, it was exciting.

Q. As an out and out experience how does the [Richtersveld](#) stack up against other top multiday races you've participated in?

A. I've done over ten multi-day races and the [Richtersveld](#) is right up there on the podium. It offers something truly unique that the other races don't. I'd almost describe it as a boutique ultra - a sort of running safari. It's by no means an easy race. In fact, I'd argue that it's bloody hard, right up there with the toughest, but if it's the sand that slows you down, it's the grit that keeps you going. And with views to die for, plus a true sense of peace, one feels truly privileged to be there.

Q. That leads quite nicely into your writing and your debut book, [50 Races to Run Before You Die](#). Give us a little overview on the book and what sparked the idea?

A. One could describe the book as a sort of running memoir sparked by a love affair that has lasted 10 years. It's a collection of 50 of my favourite races (out of a possible 200 odd that I've done), split into three categories: good for beginners, sucker for punishment and hard as nails. It's not designed to be a list of 'toughest races' - but instead offers something for everyone. Although I call myself an ultra runner, I don't want to run an ultra every weekend. Rather, I mix it up, from wife carrying or obstacle course racing one weekend, to fell running or an ultra the next. Variety, as they so often say, is the spice of life.

Q. Was it easy to narrow down to 50 races? Or are there some absolute crackers that you really deliberated over before leaving out?

A. I started off with a list of about 70 odd races that I thought were really good. But doing a race is one thing, writing about it is another. As a journalist I choose races on whether they offer a good story. They've got to be worth talking about.

There were some races that I wanted to write about, only to discover that they'd been discontinued. The hardest part was deciding what category (good for beginners to hard as trails) a race belongs in. For instance, although my experience of chasing a Silver Medal in the 89km long [Comrades Marathon](#) should have put it in the 'hard as nails category', but because 20,000 odd runners were running alongside me, I felt it better fitted the 'sucker for punishment' section.

Q. It's not just the excellent writing that stands out in the book, but also the beautiful photography and design. Tell us a bit about this process and how you sorted it all out?

A. You only get to write this sort of book once (unless I write a sequel - 50 More Races..), I had a good idea of what it would look like. I love seeing stats and graphics, but I also wanted photos to play an important role, as this is what can sell a race. Sourcing the photos for some of the races was quite tricky, but luckily I have worked with many excellent photographers who had captured the moment and kindly lent me their images.

The actual design of the book was done by Aurum. I gave them samples of work other books that I liked the look of, from which they mocked up a design. We then went from there, nipping and tucking until we had something we liked.

Q. Has this labour of love given you the bug to publish further books? If so, can you disclose any ideas as to what they might involve?

A. Writing a book is definitely a labour of love. Very few writers earn a decent living from books, unless they're wizards, chefs or celebrities. But the satisfaction you have of seeing your work in a bookshop is priceless.

I'm in the process of writing my second book for Aurum which is about Race-It-Yourself challenges - a term I've coined for anytime challenges that have an athletic slant and inspire you to get outside. If you think of races as like going to a restaurant for dinner, I'm coming up with 'off the shelf ready meal' type challenges that have no entry fee or service charge. Watch this space, it'll be out in May 2017.

Q. Ok this is probably quite a hard one to answer... But travel being no limitation, if you had to pick respectively one Good for Beginners, Sucker for Punishment and Hard as Nails race for the average endurance runner to compete in and work towards, what would they be?

A. It's a very difficult one to answer but I'll give it a go:

Good for beginners - The London Marathon - simply because there's an excellent camaraderie around the build up to the race. It was my first marathon and one of my first races. I've now done it six times.

Sucker for punishment - [Comrades Marathon](#). The biggest and oldest ultra in the world - it's a proper classic. It's also a great step up to an ultra, although you'll need to qualify to get a place.

Hard as Nails - the [Transalpine Run](#). 8 days and 300 odd kilometres across the Alps - this is an amazing race. It was my first multi-day race - after two only years of trail running. But it set the benchmark for future races.

Q. Tickling our running taste buds there Tobias! Anyway onto the next question and one we always find fascinating to compare with other top runners; give us a rundown of what your training generally entails?

A. This is the bit where you might hate me. I don't really train. Well, at least not in the traditional sense of the word. Running is my default sport, but I also road cycle, swim, mountain bike, kayak and ski. I mix it all up and very much see these sports part of my lifestyle. I used to race to train - where I'd bounce from one race to another.

I now live in the French Pyrenees where I've got a world of adventure on my doorstep. I don't run at a set pace or a heart rate or whatever a training program might dictate. On the contrary, I will grab a map and go explore a new trail, mountain or river. Or go for a ride. I'll tell myself I'll climb a 1000m or run for four hours, even if it might not be very far.

Sport is part of my routine. It's meant to be fun, not a chore. I'm no longer striving for PBs or podium places, but if I achieve these things by accident, then it's a bonus. I've now got a wife, eight month old baby and an 18th century French farmhouse to keep me distracted, so it's fairly difficult to follow plans.

My main effort is to always be fit and able to take part in races and challenges at a moment's notice. Which means I can't be at the top of my game all the time, much as it would be nice to.

Q. What's your nutrition like? Does it play a big part in your running or do you subscribe to the Usain Bolt philosophy of hard training (and copious natural talent) offsetting regular trips to the old KFC?

A. Over the past few years, I've begun to really enjoy cooking, so my diet is fairly balanced and healthy. I don't eat too much junk food, although I'll occasionally indulge when the moment demands it. I try to get my five a day in and only eat food that I can identify as food. My two indulgences are wine (I live in a wine region called the Jurançon) and pizza, although I do work on the 'all good things in moderation' philosophy.

I'm not too picky about what I eat during a race. I'm currently going through a bit of a nut and raisin phase, where I'll either make a bag of trail mix or buy one from Tribe. I'm also a big fan of 33Shake - nutrition that actually makes you feel better afterwards!

Q. Finally, what adventures does the rest of the year hold for you?

A. There are a couple of races on the table, from the [Buff Epic Trail](#) to the Haute Route cycle sportive here in the Pyrenees. But I'm doing quite a few of my 'Race-It-Yourself' style challenges, which is an excellent way to learn about a new area.

I've totally fallen in love with this part of France and simply want to explore more of what's on my doorstep than necessarily travel to the other side of the planet. Although I'll probably be doing a bit of that too!

Thanks Tobias, this has been a real pleasure and best of the luck for the rest of the year's racing!

To keep up with Tobias check out:

Website: www.tobiasmews.com

Blog: www.hardastrails.com

Twitter: www.twitter.com/tobiasmews

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