



From the Sahara to Ben Nevis, run strong with Sabrina

With growing numbers of people enjoying trail running and the success of the first 'Black to the Trails' event, we got in touch with a group set up in 2020 to specifically encourage Black trail runners. Now with nearly ten thousand followers on Instagram, Black Trail Runners is playing its part in shaping a future for the outdoors that appeals to a diversity of people.

One of the co-founders, Sabrina Pace-Humphreys, shared her story with us as one of many different people enjoying trails today.

Discovering running

Crossing the finish line of the toughest foot race on earth after 156 miles crossing the Sahara Desert over 5 days, is an extraordinary achievement. It's an even greater achievement for Sabrina Pace-Humphreys as a mixed-race woman, racialised as Black, who grew up thinking places and experiences like this weren't for 'someone like me'.

Sabrina began running in 2009 as a way to overcome severe post-natal depression and to this day, running remains a source of uplifting experiences. She says, "I go on early morning runs to the top of local viewpoints, breakfast in my backpack, to watch the sun rise and I'll remind myself that even in the dark times, the light always comes."

Running against racism

Running has also evolved into a means for Sabrina to tackle another, longer term source of suffering - racism. Poor treatment had been a feature of her life since childhood, when other youngsters would call her racist names and bullies would target her outside school. Growing up in a rural Cotswold town without her Black father at home, Sabrina did not know other People of Colour and so her problems were exacerbated by isolation. Later on as an adult, the lack of support was made worse when White people in her community could not believe racism existed in their area.



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One particular incident caused Sabrina grave concern in 2019 when she realised that being a Person of Colour put her personal safety at risk outdoors. She was in the Alps training for an alpine race when she lost her footing crossing a snow field. Hanging onto an almost vertical ledge and fearing for her life, Sabrina screamed for help but runners passed by ignoring her. Thankfully the sixth runner did stop to help her and she noticed that, unlike the previous White runners, he was a dark skinned Italian.

In May 2020, Sabrina – and indeed the global running community - made a strong connection between racism and running following news reports of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery. Ahmaud was out for a run in South Georgia, USA, when three White men followed him and ultimately shot him dead. To protest about this injustice, Sabrina was one of many people around the world who ran 2.23 miles in Ahmaud's memory #IRunWithMaud. In Sabrina's book 'Black Sheep', she explains how this was a turning point:

"The run was a small thing, a marker for the pain I felt, but I didn't want this run to be the end of the uprising. As I moved forward, I thought about the act of running and how I use it as a tool to escape the trauma I have experienced. I thought about times that I had felt scared or uneasy while out running alone....I thought back to that time in the Alps and also to a road marathon in Riga, Latvia, where I was running a double 13.1 mile loop marathon and I was called a racist name by a spectator. The other white runners got cheers and applause, but I was abused because of the colour of my skin.'



Photo Credit: © Jonny Cook

Championing diversity in the countryside

Determined to support People of Colour in enjoying running outdoors, Sabrina co-founded the Black Trail Runners in July 2020 alongside Phil Young and Sonny Peart. This was during the socially distanced summer of 2020, when many Black people were heading for the outdoors – perhaps for the first time – and finding that the countryside wasn't always a welcoming place. In fact, people from around the world contacted the group to say they had the same concerns. This was early indication that Black Trail Runners was offering a safe space where trail runners of Colour could feel seen, heard and understood.

Black Trail Runners (BTR) propose that the low numbers of People of Colour in trail running boils down to three barriers to inclusion: Access, Knowledge and Representation. Raising the profile of Black runners in the countryside is key, as Sabrina's story of her Ramsay Round challenge illustrates in this film by The Running Channel. This mountain run was created by a Black Scottish man - Charlie Ramsay - in 1978. Sabrina said, "If you don't see anyone who looks like you trail running, you don't think it's a safe space for you. To discover that Charlie was Black made him familiar to me." Charlie's example inspired Sabrina and five other members of BTR to follow in his footsteps in 2021, culminating in a group photo at the top of Ben Nevis! The group were supported by 'Girls on Hills' leaders who shared tips on how to safely tackle unfamiliar terrain.



Black to the Trails event. Photo credit: © Simon Roberts

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Developing skills and knowing what equipment is needed is a learning curve everyone faces. However, generally speaking, Black people have historically spent less time in the countryside than White people because they are more likely to be urban dwellers and may not benefit from leisure time spent in the countryside with family and friends passing on what they know. Socio-economic barriers are also more likely to impact Black people, e.g. cost of travelling out to the countryside, opportunity to take time off work. Black people have to overcome these invisible barriers before they can enjoy the natural environment and the many physical and mental health benefits that it brings.



Black to the Trails

To specifically welcome People of Colour and also White people who want to support diversity, Black Trail Runners hosted the first 'Black to the Trails' event in May 2023 at Dunstable Downs. This is in the north Chilterns, near the end of The Ridgeway National Trail and not far from Wendover Woods, also along The Ridgeway, where BTR held their first taster session with Centurion Running in 2020. These two locations were selected for travel convenience from London and this year's event went one step further by providing a bus from Luton train station. Entry fees were made as low as possible and, for anyone for whom finance is a barrier, entry was free. Caribbean food and great music too!

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At 'Black to the Trails', runners of Colour made up 70% of event participants, compared with the typical UK trail races attracting 0.7%. Considering 4.5% of the UK population identify as Black, the Black community comprises a significant number of people who could be interested in running outdoors. Interestingly, the event also attracted mainly women, suggesting events can be designed to address under-representation of numerous kinds. Phil Young, co-founder of BTR, said, "We can show that a race can look different, and that bringing Black culture into different sports only adds to it."

Setting an example is exactly what Sabrina is doing featuring on the front cover of Runners World UK with the headline 'Run strong, run free'. Sabrina said, "There I was running on a trail, with a body, a skin colour, hair and nose that for years I had hated because of how different it made me from my family, my friends and the communities I inhabited. I allowed myself to feel proud, and of course I bought all the copies in the supermarket!".

Keep running Sabrina, we're cheering you on!