

Ultra Tour of the Lake District 2009

Coming back from a skiing holiday in January, Ellen pointed out an advert for an ultra marathon in a running magazine. "100 miles around the Lake District with 7000 m of height gain and a cut-off time of 40 hours. You'll enjoy that. They've got a 50-mile route as well. We could do it together." I thought no more about it and went back to Barry land.

The following day, after we'd sorted out all the post-holiday admin, Ellen reminded me, "Well? What do you think about that run?" I mumbled something about not wanting to commit to long hours of training, but it was too late. The thought of taking on a long distance challenge again had sparked my imagination. It would be pretty cool for a 45 year old to complete something like this. Except that everyone knows middle-aged men don't use the word cool.

I went out for a test run the following day: a measly eight-miler. I felt ok. I hadn't done any serious training for over 18 months. All I did was a bit of running now and again to keep the beer belly off. Over next few weeks I built the mileage up until I was running 20s with relative ease. They weren't fast you understand; speed wasn't really the issue. The final test was to try a back-to-back long run. I did a 20 followed by a 12 the following day. Surprisingly I had no niggling injuries or soreness. I knew then that my body could cope with the training and so I entered the race.

What sort of training do you need for a 100 mile race in the Lake District? The route is long, hilly and on uneven terrain so you need a program that will train your body to cope with those stresses. I started training five days per week but found that I wasn't getting enough recovery so I cut it to four. An easy run on Wednesday was followed by a long run on Thursday, very long on Saturday and then long on Sunday (building to very long on both days). Long is 12 to 15 miles; very long is 25 to 30 miles. The long sessions were always based in my local Shropshire hills: the Wrekin or Long Mynd. I ran in rain, hail, strong winds, bright sunshine and sometimes all of the above in the same day.

We had some holidays up in the Lakes to practise the route and sort out the navigation. I'd taken the advice from the race website (www.lakeland100.com) and bought a GPS. I'd always used map and compass before so this felt a bit like cheating. It turned out to be a godsend on the night sections though and was well worth the effort learning how to use it.

Finally I was ready but I was pretty nervous. 2008 was the inaugural year for the UTLD. 30 runners set off and only 11 finished – one of them was timed out at over 41 hours. This year there were over 130 entrants, some from overseas. Could I really complete an off-road race over such a long distance? How on earth was I going to stay awake, get enough food, drink enough fluid and just keep going? More advice from the race website said that the following things needed to be taken care of or you wouldn't finish: pace, feet,

food, fluid and mood. I practised eating meals and then going running, found all my rubbing points (or so I thought), finally found a hydration system that worked for me, and went through two pairs of off-road shoes. I knew I was ready when I could do six hours' training and feel like I could go again.

Cometh the hour... I slept in until 10 am on Friday morning then spent the rest of the day napping and eating noodles and honey. After the race briefing I got my feet taped up and then was ready for the off. My running partner Gary met me and we lined up for the start.

At 7:30 pm we set off at a manly walk while everyone else ran on. We'd planned for this of course, but it was still a little disconcerting seeing everyone running while we walked. We'd been expecting a front to come in at around 8:30 but the weather was perfect. As we climbed out of Coniston we chatted to a team who'd practised in North Wales. They were confident in their navigation right up to the Miners' Bridge where they went straight on and we went over the bridge following the rest of the field.

We passed a few more people, but were careful to keep to our 36-hour pace, and then dropped into Seathwaite at around dusk to the first of 14 checkpoints. This one, like all the others, was well stocked with cake and water and staffed by friendly and supportive volunteers. There were already some runners taking care of blisters. With dry feet so far, this didn't bode well for the wet sections to come.

The next section to Boot required a lot of care in the dark. The first part was relatively straightforward with our route lit by a line of bobbing head torches. The ground changed to bog, stream, tree stumps and boulders. There were already people off route as we passed competitors struggling with the difficult conditions. We topped out and the terrain changed abruptly to open fell. We joined another pair of runners that were looking for the stile where we cut left. I checked the GPS: the black triangle was on the pink path and we had 350m to go. Right on cue the stile appeared and then the gap in the wall and the stream. At this point the official road book warns not to go down to the gate. This is almost impossible unless you've recce'd the route beforehand. In the dark we fought our way through ferns to avoid losing precious height and managed to find the stream crossing. Another team of runners weren't so fortunate. Further on, we passed a couple trying to climb over a wall that did not form part of the route. I put them right and we made our way efficiently to the checkpoint in Boot.

There was tea and cheese and ham baps! These weren't at the top of my list of sports nutrition but they didn't half hit the spot. I stashed a couple of rolls in my rucksack, got some grit out of my shoes and we were off again.

It started to rain. Not too badly at first but it then developed into the best that the Lake District can offer. Well, the lakes have got to come from somewhere, haven't they? Gary and I had decided at the outset to dress to the forecast and take heavy waterproof coats. This made the 13 hours of rain that followed much more comfortable than if we'd worn our running jackets.

The route to Wasdale from Boot is a simple navigational challenge: follow the same bearing for about four and a half kilometers until you hit the bridge by Burnmoor Tarn. The GPS pulled us in again while half the fell seemed to be lit up with headtorches. The bridge was a little pointless. We were calf-deep in water for a hundred yards or so and then on to the high point and our descent to Wasdale. The checkpoint consisted of a Land Rover with full fat Coke and cake on its bonnet.

The route to Buttermere took us across two rivers up to the Black Sail pass and then down a nasty descent to the Youth Hostel. Up again, over Scarth Gap Pass, and finally down to the wigwam checkpoint. Once again the GPS proved its worth in the dark and helped us avoid following the brave runners taking a rather more direct route down the flanks of Haystacks. We were met by some enthusiastic helpers who plied us with warm soup. I can't tell you what a boost that gave to our dampened spirits. In the wig-wam were three dejected souls that had pulled out. I shut out the mental image of me sat there wearing a foil blanket and got on with the job in hand.

So far the race had gone according to plan: keep eating and drinking, run within ourselves and stay on track. As we left Buttermere in the growing dawn light it became obvious that there was some key advice that I hadn't followed and should have: if you have a hotspot, stop and sort it out. Well, despite testing my running shorts almost to destruction without any signs of rubbing, I had some hotspots in places no man deserved to have them. They would be a constant companion for days to come. At least the pain took my mind off my legs and feet, and the rain.

The checkpoint at Braithwaite was a little too warm and comfortable. I found it quite hard to get going. Gary and I did some run-walking along the A66 to fire some enthusiasm into us. We picked up the pace quite nicely on the switchback towards Skiddaw House and then back to Blencathra, overtaking quite a few runners. When we got to the checkpoint we heard news of several runners dropping out behind us.

We pressed on to Dockray but something was wrong. Our pace, which we had practised hour after hour, was slowing down. We had agreed to meet our wives at Dalemain but at this rate we weren't going to make it. Worse still, we were slowing so much that being timed out was a distinct possibility. We were caught by the group that we passed on the way to Blencathra. They were all talking about stopping at Dalemain, saying that 56 miles was a good day out. I was getting angry about the negative talk and needed to get away from them. Gary said, "Look Barry. I haven't got it in me to get to Dalemain quick enough. I know I could push it, but I'd end up pulling out at 75 miles or so and run the risk of getting injured. You go on." This hit me hard. I didn't want to leave him but I wanted to keep running. Apart from the blisters, I felt okay. There was more talk from the others about how far there was still to go after Dalemain; that was it. I said goodbye to Gary and I was off.

The Dockray checkpoint had a van with water that tasted like it had been taken out of the local swimming baths. The guys were friendly and I was grateful for anything I could get (as long as it wasn't malt loaf which I was about to overdose on). Just past the village, I went behind a wall and took my pants off. I had a quick feel of the blisters on my undercarriage. There were several about the size of peas. None had burst yet which was a good thing. I put a good smear of Vaseline on them and got going. The cool air provided some temporary relief.

The facilities at Dalemain were excellent. There was hot food, shelter and my friends to encourage me. The country house had become such a milestone in my running plan that I was relieved to get there. I had convinced myself that if I reached this checkpoint still standing, then I would finish. With 49 miles still to go, I wasn't so confident. I took stock of my body: legs fine; joints ok; blisters, err let's move on; feet – there was a small blister on my little toe. I popped the blister, renewed the tape on my feet and put some fresh socks on. With my belly full of pasta and salt and vinegar crisps, I cracked on.

The nature of my run changed from then on. Before, it was a case of a shared experience. Now, I was on my own. I carried on with my tactic of winding runners in, thinking naively that I would catch up with Ellen on the 50 route. I didn't of course, but the thought kept me going when my body started to complain.

One hill rolled into the next. My mind was strangely detached from what was going on, as if I was an observer. I passed a couple of runners struggling up High Kop, found the marker stone (thanks Garmin) and dropped down to the soul-destroying slog along the banks of Haweswater. Another Land Rover with cake and Coke on the bonnet (I think it was the same one) was waiting for me at Mardale Head.

I slogged my way up to Gatesgarth Pass and then worked my way into Kentmere, just on dark, to see a wonderful sight. The Kentmere village hall had been decorated with party lights and there was a lovely smell of hot food wafting towards me. The guys running the checkpoint had done a tremendous job. Wary of getting sucked into following the example of the curled-up runner on some chairs, I bolted some food and was off again, into the second night.

It was raining again but not hard enough to need the protection of the heavyweight waterproof that I'd ditched at Dalemain. I knew the route well here. Troutbeck was followed by Ambleside where we were cheered by a small group of people. Thanks. Lakes Runner had put on a tremendous spread. More ham and cheese baps and some ibuprofen.

Chapel Stile followed and then it was the treacherous section between Blea Tarn and the Wrynose Pass road. Just before I got to Bleamoss Beck I heard a woman screaming. I thought she must have hurt herself on one of the slick boulders. I found her wading through the beck – it turned out that she didn't like wet feet. Wrong route for hydrophobia.

Just past the cottage next to Greenburn Beck at Bridge End, I caught up with a group of walkers that had set off from Dalemmain. When they saw me, they quickened their pace. My ego wasn't having this! With the gauntlet well and truly thrown, I quickened my uphill walk and treated them to a rather dirty pair of heels.

The final leg into Coniston was emotional. The steps out of the quarry were huge and I seriously considered going up the ramp. On the way up to the pass I was harried by some 50-milers and a Border collie. Tough dog. Over the top I started running. That's what I thought until the Border collie and his owner caught me up. I was making all the running motions but only managing a walk. With the end in sight my body was complaining; everything, and I mean everything, from the waist down hurt. Once onto the track above the Miners' Bridge I started running properly. It was actually a jog but compared to my recent feeble efforts, I was really motoring.

As I ran through the streets of Coniston, emotions welled up in me. The event I'd trained so hard for, that had taken over my life for six months, would be over in a few seconds. I ran through the finish and was welcomed by two or three valiant volunteers. They took off my racing chip, gave me a medal and congratulated me. I was an ultra runner.

140 runners set off to do the Ultra Tour of the Lake District 2009. 41 people completed the route in less than the prescribed 40 hours (three more runners finished but after the cut-off time). I came in 21st with a time of 34:51:58. A massive thank you must go out to all the volunteers at the checkpoints; their enthusiasm, particularly in the small hours, was inspiring. I'd also like to thank all the runners I spent time with along the way, you really made a difference.

Some Tips

I'm not a coach, nor am I sponsored. Realistically, I'm not that good a runner – middle of the road really. My only qualification to give the following advice about doing the Ultra Tour of the Lake District is that I've done it, and I've got the tee-shirt (a rather swish Montane gillet actually).

First off, work out why you're doing it. The reason has to be really strong to get you through the tough bits (basically, everything past mile 30!)

Read everything on the www.lakeland100.com website. There are some great training articles.

Practise the route. Although the trail is on main paths, there are plenty of places you can go wrong, particularly in bad weather or darkness.

Learn how to navigate. If you go wrong, you need to know how to find your last known point. Following someone else's headtorch in the dark is no guarantee you'll get back on track.

Get a GPS and learn how to use it. I bought the Garmin Etrex Legend HCx and thought it was brilliant. Once set up properly, and combined with a compass, it was accurate enough to show I was off track by 10 metre. It's not a substitute for good navigational skills though.

Design a training plan that tackles the key features of the race: long distance, lots of hills. I got one off the internet for a 100 mile road race and adapted it. Build to five or six hours on two consecutive days with a medium run (15 miles) in the week plus a recovery run. I started on five days per week but cut it to four because I wasn't recovering enough. Focus on long steep run-offs. It's the downhill sections that take the most out of your legs and joints. Eat before a long run and see if you can keep it down - keep persevering with this one. Practise eating on the run: malt loaf, fruitcake, ham baps and cheese baps are the main foods provided at the checkpoints. Don't forget some salt; the small sachets from cafes are useful.

If you're going to use poles, I didn't and wished I had, then use them in all your training.

During the race itself, take some energy gels with you. Get one down your neck for a boost before a big hill or if you're feeling a bit low.

Only use tried and trusted kit in the race.

If you get grit in your shoe, stop and shake it out. If something rubs, stop and grease it or tape it. Five minutes at 11 hours in could make all the difference 18 hours later.

Put tape on your nipples and all your other rub points. Shave any hair off first. Lukotape, available from Amazon, is the best.

Finally, when you're stood at the start line, breathe in the Coniston air and pause to think how lucky you are to be fit and healthy enough to even consider covering 100 miles and 23,000 feet of height gain in less than 40 hours.