

BOB GRAHAM ROUND 16th February 2008

At around 10.30pm, on Saturday 16th February 2008, Garry Beardwood, Paul Jackson and I ably supported by Matthew Noble (our one man support / survival vehicle!) arrived at Keswick to start our preparations for a winter Bob Graham round.

Conditions were good for February although the temperature in Keswick was 4 below freezing - a miraculous interlude from weeks of windy, wet and sometimes snowy weather. To warm up, we started off at the pub. I drank water, but Paul and Garry had a medicinal half a Guinness.

We started preparing for the run at 11.30pm and sorted our kit out. After some energy drinks, we pretended to smile for some photos and were cheered off from the Moot Hall at midnight.

First leg – Skiddaw to Threlkeld

The pacers for the first leg were Jo Faulkner and Louise Wilkinson.

We ran through the back alleys of Keswick, through a park and onto the track leading onto Skiddaw. Jo set a steady pace and there was lots of conversation to take our mind off what we were doing. This was my hardest leg mentally. My mind kept dwelling on the 41 other peaks ahead and I was afraid I was not going to keep up with the other two. I managed to shut out these thoughts and concentrate on the climb to Skiddaw.

As we neared the top of Skiddaw we could see the lights of Penrith to the East and west to Cockermouth. In the moonlight we could see the outline of the second leg towards the Helvellyn range, There was a tremendous feeling of relief to get the first peak out of the way and I tried to push to the back of my mind the enormity of what was to come. The pacers set a good pace and we were not too tired by the top although we were one minute ahead of schedule.

It was then heads down for the descent off Skiddaw. We hit the fence line in good time and picked up a sheep trod towards Great Calva. Garry led the way with a new head torch he was trialling – it was like a car's headlight and vastly superior to my cheap and not very cheerful head torch.

Navigation on the route to Great Calva was helped by reflective markers on the occasional post and we began to munch our rations – in my case a trail mix of seeds, nuts and dried fruit. I also drank some water mixed with an electrolyte to keep up my energy levels.

We arrived at Great Calva ahead of schedule (7mins) and descended crossing over an icy river at the bottom before a steady climb up Mungrisdale common towards Blencathra.

On the sharp descent from Blencathra down to Threlkeld, we could see the welcome lights of Matthew's car. This was our support vehicle and held our lifeline – in my case a plate of pasta and a cup of tea.

Second Leg – Thelkeld to Dunmail Raise

The pacers for this leg were Ian Barnes and Tim Murray

This psychologically and physically was my worst leg. Ian and Tim quickly got us moving and we were soon on our way up Clough Head and over the Dodds at a steady pace. Dawn broke as we got onto Helvellyn which was spectacular and, on reflection, the high point of the challenge. At this point I was feeling pretty tired and my toes were numb. Descending Dollywagon Pike I tried not to look at Fairfield. As we got to the foot of Fairfield our pacers did a great job keeping us motivated and it was literally heads down and one foot in front of the other until we reached the summit. The wind had picked up and there was a spectacular cloud formation cascading over the Helvellyn range. Tim gave us a wine gum as a reward for reaching the top of Fairfield!

We descended Fairfield and my energy level was low. All I could see was Paul disappearing like a scalded cat up Seat Sandal. I was still trying to get my head around how many more peaks we had to do. Garry handed me a slice of malt loaf at the bottom of Seat Sandal which gave me a well needed boost.

When we broke the skyline we could see Matthew's car at Dunmail Raise and it was down hill all the way to breakfast. We were nine minutes ahead of schedule and it was 8.27am.

We stopped for 15 minutes. At this point I was exhausted but, after a cup of tea, some more pasta, a change of socks and some energy drink I felt much better. The sun was up and we were in full daylight. I had already run longer than I ever had before and we were only a third of the way through.

Third Leg: Dunmail Raise to Wasdale

The pacers were Dave White, Russ Cannon and Eric Draper

We had completed part of this leg the previous weekend with Dave and Russ so it was familiar territory. I joked with Dave that I hoped he was not going to get us up Steel Fell quite as fast – the previous weekend we had made it in 18 minutes. Fortunately, he tempered the pace this time. This was my first experience of Eric "the legend" who regaled us with stories up the steep ascent. This clinically insane, but all round good bloke had completed a double Bob Graham – firstly

clockwise and then, for fun, running it anticlockwise – an unimaginable 48 hour ordeal.

It was from this point on that I focused on one peak at a time (again!) and breathed a sigh of relief when we got past High Raise, at this point I remember Matthew saying to me a while ago that there were only two cars that could go anywhere a company car and a hire a car; and was a little disappointed he hadn't made it onto High Raise to pick me up. The pacers kept us going but we all had lows over the next few peaks and Bow Fell was particularly gruelling, the climb seemed to go on and on and then on some more! We kept on eating our trail mix and taking fluids in a vague attempt to maintain energy levels.

As the day progressed, we began to see many more people and it looked like a party on top of Scafell Pike. We did not hang around as we were so conscious of the time schedule.

The next major milestone was Scafell. I was beginning to feel apprehensive about Broad Stand; I am not a climber and my fears were not helped by us seeing the body of a walker at the bottom just as we arrived. Garry had arranged for Dave Till from Mountain Rescue to be there to help us with the climb and even the mighty Eric confessed his fear of heights although he climbed like a mountain goat. I could not have completed the climb without the fixed rope. The walker had slipped coming down and we could hear the helicopter overhead evacuating what was unfortunately a fatality. I was very relieved when we reached the top.

A steep descent to Wasdale followed and my knees and feet were suffering. We arrived at Wasdale Head car park at 2.35pm – by now eighteen minutes ahead of time, largely due to the direct descent.

Matthew's welcome car produced another bout of pasta and some welcome variety of tinned fruit and yet more energy drink. Another sock change.

At this point my lack of knowledge of this part of the leg assisted my mental preparation. We had only completed a small part of the fourth leg and not from the Wasdale side so I felt it was not yet in the bag.

Fourth Leg – Wasdale to Honister

An army of pacers met us at Wasdale Head car park including Jo and Louise, Alan Miller, Gavin Thomas, Matt Beresford and Shaun Butler. This was where the split between the runners began to occur. Garry quietly set off first, followed by me and then Paul up the steep climb to Yewbarrow and I tried desperately not to look at the top. I had managed to catch up with Garry by the top as I was determined not to lose touch at this point in the challenge. The descents were very wearing.

There was a stunning sunset as we ran between Pillar and Kirk Fell. The walkers had gone home and we were the only ones left out on the fells. Another frosty night beckoned.

Great Gable was a rocky climb but, unlike the earlier part of the leg, I was familiar with the route down to Honister. Paul was suffering and was some way behind and Garry crept ahead over the last three peaks to Honister.

The ground was very icy and my shoes were failing to grip the frozen grass on the descents. I lost count of the number of times I fell over and this slowed my progress.

As we arrived at Honister, my pacers recommended that I keep going and not stop for a rest. I had a quick slurp of tea and Matthew presented me with yet another bowl of pasta but I was not up to it. Next time (unlikely), I will look for greater variety with my rations!

Fifth Leg: Honister to Keswick

Pacers were Chris Robinson and Alan Mitchell

As I picked up my new pacers, adrenaline began to kick. I could see Garry's lights disappearing at a rapid rate up Dale Head. We kept up a good pace and by the top of Dale Head I could smell the finish line.

I caught Garry between Hindscarth and Robinson and passed him. I was feeling unaccountably strong, free from the anxiety of earlier in the day when I had no idea whether I could complete the challenge. I now knew I could and was assisted by ignorance of what was ahead as I had never run this leg. I called my wife on my mobile on the way down and told her to set off immediately for Keswick. "I'll be there in an hour" I assured her at 9.30pm. I was as high as a kite on adrenaline.

It was a steep descent from Robinson and I was still falling over on the icy grass. As we hit the track at the bottom of Robinson I thought my toes were going to explode yet, at that point, we were unsure whether Matthew would have had time to drive round to deliver our road shoes at the top of the Newlands Valley. It was a tremendous relief to arrive at the meeting point to see all our road shoes lined up on the tarmac. It was like pulling on a comfortable pair of old slippers compared with my fell shoes which for weeks afterwards I could only contemplate with dread.

Chris, Alan and I set off at a fast pace which I couldn't maintain and Keswick seemed to be getting further and further away. It felt good to run on the blessedly level surface of the road but at several of the inclines I had to drop down to a walking pace. We kept going and I remember picking up the road

signs to Keswick, particularly the 3^{1/2} mile sign where I got a stitch. Chris and Alan kept me going and we finally made it to the outskirts of Keswick.

As I rounded the corner at the bottom of the market place I could see the outline of the Moot Hall and a small group waiting for me. I sprinted (probably more like a drunken hobble) the last 50 metres and narrowly escaped being run over by a couple of high speed taxis and buried my fists into the door with enormous relief.

A beer was thrust into my hand and a complete stranger came up and congratulated me. He had tried earlier in the summer but had twisted his knee. Garry made it several minutes later and we retired to the pub for further beers and in an attempt to warm up as at this point the freezing night air was beginning to bite. Paul made it with a few minutes in hand and we were all there to welcome him back .. a successful attempt all round!!!

A big thank you to all the pacers (detailed below), we couldn't have done it without you! and an even bigger thank you to Matthew our support driver who was probably even more knackered than us as he also hadn't had any sleep over the previous 24 hours and had driven several loops of the Lake District; together with setting up numerous pit stops. He even had to contend with trying to warm up the gas cylinders to get them to function due to the low temperatures by an ingenious method... fortunately explosions were kept to a minimum!

Also another thank you to Garry without whom I probably wouldn't have contemplated the challenge so early into my fell running adventures... but there never is a good time.. is there?

The Pacers:-

Joe Faulkner
Louise Wilkinson
Ian Barnes
Tim Murray
Russ Cannon
Dave White
Eric Draper
Dave Till (Broadstand)
Allan Miller
Gavin Thomas
Matt Beresford
Shaun Butler
Chris Robinson
Ian Mitchell
Shaun Addison

Simon Waller 18 03 08