

Old County Tops Fell Race 18th May 2013

37 miles 10,000ft

This is the seventh time I have completed the race, which is basically a tour of the Lake District taking in each of the highest tops of the Old Counties of what is now Cumbria, consisting of Westmorland, (Helvellyn) Cumberland, (Scafell Pike) and Lancashire. (Coniston Old Man)

You run in pairs and this year it should have been an all Barlick event, but unfortunately Peter Jackson who has completed it with me on four occasions was out due to illness and injury.

I therefore teamed up at the last minute with ex Wharfedaler Simon Franklin who now runs for Leeds based Horsforth Fell and Dale club, and had also lost his partner for the day Cathy Bradley.

The weather wasn't boding well for the day with the Met office forecasting heavy showers and Clag down to the valley floor.

Not to be put off, an early rise saw us outside the NDG hotel in Langdale in plenty of time to get ready for the 08:00am start, after the mandatory kit check which includes survival bag (this is a serious challenge) the usual trepidation begins, numerous visits to the loo, nervous rummaging through your bag hoping you haven't forgot some vital piece of kit, deciding what to wear, glances up at the sky hoping for some miraculously intervention and the rain to stop and the clouds to part, and wondering what possessed you to sign up in the first place and put yourself through what is obviously going to be hours of damp cold and from previous experiences at times agonising discomfort.

Anyway the time of reckoning eventually came and we stood on the start line, a slight delay as we waited for a late teams arrival, and then after the quick briefing from the organiser we were off, then suddenly stopped, for some reason certain runners in front didn't fancy getting their feet wet in the large puddles. In the conditions, if they thought for one minute they were going to keep their feet dry, I am sure they were soon to be disillusioned. Anyway, off we trotted down the track coming back out on the valley road near Harry's Place farm before starting the lovely intricate ascent over Silver How, getting use nicely warmed up for the challenges to come, while we looked down on the sleepy villages of Chapel Stile and Elterwater.

Soon we were dropped down and were heading through Grasmere village (at this time of day devoid of tourists), and up the main road to Dunmail and the Travellers Rest Hotel before bearing off right for the first serious ascent and summit of the day Helvellyn, via Tongue Gill, Grisedale Hause and Dollywaggon Pike.

We reached Helvellyn summit, the first real CP of the day in slightly over 2hrs from there it is a direct descent to Wythburn Church via Whelpside and Middle Tongue joining the main Tourist path just before it enters the woods. The paths through here needing particularly care as the stones are always slippery.

At the car park there is tea, jam butties, bananas, and flapjacks laid on, the plastic tea cups filling up with rain quicker than we could drink it, after a brief stop we headed up the forest track by the side of the busy A591 crossing at Steel End then started the long damp trudge up the Wythburn Valley and across the famous Bog before the route ramps up to Greenup Edge between High Raise and Ullscarf. This is always a low spot for me and by this time I was soaked to the skin and was starting to feel cold, and wondered if I could endure another 8hrs, but once we had negotiated the traverse around High Raise and reached Stake Pass, it started to feel warmer and the mist seemed to lift slightly, spirits raised we pressed on traversing Black Craggs, Buck and Rossett Pike on the Langstrath side soon arrived at the Angle Tarn CP, a brief stop to sort ourselves out and take on some food, we set off towards Esk Hause and our second objective Scafell Pike.

Up to this point with the wet conditions I wasn't sure whether to risk the direct descent to Great Moss from Scafell Pike via Rough Craggs (Mickledore being out of bounds for this race.) or to take the safer option of Little Narrowcove. Having reached the Summit and after consulting with Simon whether he was happy we decided to go for the quick way off,. So taking out the Compass and using the bearing I had preset we headed off through the clag and the boulders of the summit plateau to find the the beginning of the path, the conditions made it quite tricky and slowed up the decent but we eventually made it safely to the valley bottom and crossed Great Moss, where teams which had set off from the summit earlier heading down to Little Narrow Cove were only just coming along the trod towards us.

From Great Moss, you take undulating trods across upper Eskdale to cross lovely but swollen Lingcove Beck, then a final rise before heading down Moasdale to the CP at Cockley Beck for more tea butties and cake, and the last place you can get timed out.

With the pressure off, we slowly made our way up the last big climb of the day towards the Col between Grey Friars and Great Carr, before heading off below Swirl How across Brim Fell to our final objective of the day Coniston Old Man. All you have to do from here is drag yourself back the way you have come via Great Carrs, Wet Side Edge, Three Shire Stone and Blea Tarn to the Finish in Langdale and a well earned rest, soup, T shirt and a pint.

I am not sure about our exact time or position, just to complete and be part of this great event and spend a great day running through some of the best scenery the lakes has to offer and in great company is just reward in itself.

Congratulations to Simon for his 1st completion. Hope it didn't put you off, and sorry for calling you Pete for most of the day!

Andy Hirst