

Ennerdale Horseshoe Fell Race

8 June 2013

by Andy Hirst

The race is 23miles with 7500ft of accent, and is the seventh time I have competed in this race.

It might not have as much accent as Wasdale but is rougher underfoot and it's also a race where you have to be committed. I certainly wouldn't like to drop out at Green Gable and have to walk the 10 miles back down the valley. Another factor being the lack of water on the route especially on the last half, and on a hot day like today can be a problem, even though the Marshals at most CPs manage to carry some water up, but this will have probably run out by the time the back markers come through.

The race starts from the Scout hut on the banks of Ennerdale water and takes the path along the lake shore and a network of lanes past Mireside farm to hit the valley road below Bowness Knotts, a brief rest to queue for the stile before climbing up a diagonal path to the left below Herdus which steepens as it swings back round, heading towards the first CP at Great Borne. The time you are allowed to get to this point is quite tight - 50mins before being timed out.

The route to here passes very close to the summit of Herdus and as I am in the process of climbing all 541 Birketts (all Lakeland hills over 1,000ft) and having passed close many times I thought I would take this opportunity to knock it off, which I did without loosing many places, and arriving at CP1 in 46:32mins where Joss Naylor was helping out calling out numbers to the marshals.

From here it's a slight descent then a run able climb roughly following the old boundary fence then contouring on grassy trods round Starling and Little Dodd before the final steep scree ascent to the summit of Red Pike CP2. From here a long rocky contour to High Crag keeping to the Ennerdale side by passing below the summit of High Stile, most runners go over the top of High Crag negotiating the long rough descent off Gamlin End, then taking the main path over the top of Seat to the Scarth Gap Pass.

This section is a high point for me, I prefer to adopt a route I once spotted Colin Valentine take, which involves a rough exposed traverse high above the Ennerdale valley across boulders and loose scree, finally hitting a good scree run which brings you out on grassy slopes 2/3rds of the way down Gamlin End, then cutting across onto the Buttermere side you can take another rough traverse under Seat, bringing you out at the summit of the Scarth Gap pass where I can usually guarantee to have made up a few places.

Up to this point a few runners had tagged onto me from Red Pike but when they saw where I was heading, made a few muttering noises and decided to retreat and take the safer line over High Crag. Oh well, the secrets still safe

From Scarth Gap you take a rising traversing path below Haystacks before climbing steeply regaining the main path at Innominate Tarn the final resting place of Wainwright, before arriving at CP3 at Blind Beck Tarn the last guaranteed opportunity to take on some water.

From here it's a long long drag out to the summit of Green Gable and is sometimes a low point for me, and from the start of the race I had felt like I had nothing in the tank, and was dreading this bit, but with the majestic north face of Great Gable coming into view, it lifted my spirits and spurred me on soon reaching the summit and CP4. I even glanced back to look at the long expanse of Ennerdale stretching away below reminding me how far I had come but also how far to go with the hardest section yet to come.

I quickly dropped off down the rough scree path from Windy Gap into Stone Cove under the imposing rock face of Great Gable, then a short climb to the Col above Beck Head before dropping off to the today dry Beck Head Tarn, before the climb onto Kirk Fell summit CP5 from the summit you follow the fence to locate the gully to drop into Black Sail Pass before the long climb out to Pillar, at this stage I was feeling quite good and was steadily passing runners in various stages of cramp and fatigue. The summit of Pillar CP6 soon arrived helped by the splendid views back to the Gables and glimpses down into wilds of upper Ennerdale.

After the steep stony descent off Pillar into Wind gap, the best line is to traverse to the left high above Mosedale to miss out Black Craggs and the Scoats but not to get sucked into following the path to Red Pike (the Wasdale one) which is easily done in mist, no problem today though.

Once past here, most of the rough stuff is behind you and the running gets easier and good progress made following the wall off Great Scoat, to a dip in the ridge. You even feel like you are making progress with Ennerdale Water and the finish(6 miles away) in sight, before the final ascent onto Haycocks CP7 catches all your focus and strength. From the summit and the initial rough descent the running improves again, a contour above Silver Cove quickly takes you round towards CP8 at Iron Crag, I was feeling good here, the steady start paying dividends and managed to keep running up the slopes to the summit and making up odd places.

From Iron Crag it's a long steady descent to the Forestry Plantation at Black Pots. On a hot day like today, I always look forward to the brief shade the trees offer, but a lot of felling had taken place and what ensued was an obstacle course over and through fallen trees.

Most Lakeland races always seem to have a little sting in the tail, and this is no exception, the last CP being located on Crag Fell not a large or steep climb from here, but after 20 odd miles a real effort.

Then the final flagged steep descent off, through the woods and back on the track where one last final rise took all the reserves I had left to surmount, then a steady run past people clapping and offering words of encouragement, right over the Weir past Joss before with relief the finish line finally appears.