

Old Counties Tops

by Sam Wadsworth

A last minute injury to extreme runner Tom “Psycho” Hollins, had left me, 3 days before the race, without a running partner with whom to compete. Given the tremendous performances in the 3 peaks, I felt sure that I would be able to recruit a willing partner from within the club. A quick check however, revealed that a 37 mile race in the Lake District, taking in Helvellyn, Scarfell Pike and Coniston Old Man, is not everyone’s cup of tea.

But, cometh the hour, cometh the man, step up man of the hour ... Lucas Payne. “I’ve not run more than 10 miles in the last 2 years, but yeah...I’ll have a crack”. He might be a bit funny looking at 6 ft 8 and just less than 8 stone, but do not let his stick like appearance deceive you, Lucas is an animal; run, cycle, climb, he can do all of these things, and do them well.

We arranged to meet Kirsty and Andy Hirst in Gargrave at 5.30 and there was a nervous excitement as we loaded the kit into the car. Gels, tablets, electrolyte powders and sweets were present, in such vast quantities, I was left wondering if you could make yourself diabetic in just one day.

On arriving at Sticklebarn car park, the early morning Lakeland mist had already cleared and there was not a cloud in the sky. It promised to be a warm day's running. We started to prepare for the race. Lucas, who had been looking quite casual in his jeans and T Shirt, doffed his clothing to reveal a pair of shorts which looked like they had been borrowed off Kirsty - when she was 10. The forecast was for a hot sunny day so, plenty of sun tan lotion and body cover was required. Not having a light coloured tech-t-shirt and having heard that burnt vest strap marks were now “in”, I opted for just my club vest. “Best not forget your caps, don’t want a burnt bonce” said Andy, which was followed by much piss taking as he pulled out what appeared to be his old primary school cap. Lucas wasn't much better with a cap, from his time in the French Foreign Legion.

Looking quite the bunch of ultra professionals, we headed to the start line. Having no aspirations other than to make it round, Lucas and I decided to start at the very back, as we jogged along a track heading down the valley back towards Elterwater. A few minutes after the starting hooter, we decided that it would be better to stick with Andy and Kirsty, since Andy knew the best lines and routes.

Having caught them up, we started our first climb up and over towards Grasmere. Andy took some good lines coming down and we started to work through the field without any extra effort. At the bottom, as we passed through a gate, Andy was hot on our tail, but where was Kirsty? In true top gear fashion, Lucas and I decided to leave Andy and headed off to Grasmere and trying hard to pace ourselves, we found that we were slowly picking off teams. This continued as we started the climb up to Helvellyn. Feeling good, Lucas and I slowly worked our way through the field and made up around 15 places as we reached the summit and the first checkpoint.

Wearing trail shoes and sporting a plastic knee cap, Lucas had warned me he would be “pathetic” on the descents. He lived up to this description as we tentatively made our descent. I was actually quite glad not to batter my legs on the first descent and we hit the 2nd checkpoint and feed station at Wythburn car park feeling surprising good. Kirsty's Dad, was on hand to help us refuel with water and take the weight off our feet on the back of his pickup. A lot of teams were not stopping long, but we were happy to let them carry on, knowing that there was still 29 miles to go. Having stocked up on chocolate raisins, we headed off from Wythburn. We crossed the Ambleside-Keswick road and onto the Wythburn Fells, taking a path up towards High Raise. The going was slow, as the path was uneven, wet and in some places very boggy. I was quite happy with this, as something I was consuming was not agreeing with me and I had started to feel sick,

Lucas lost a leg, as he tried to leap a bog, which disappeared up to his bollocks. I broke down laughing as Lucas recovered his leg and I tried to find another way around. Lucas's attempts for me to suffer the same, or a worse fate, if neither of my legs reached solid ground, were falling on deaf ears. Either that, or his shouts of "Don't be a pussy", had passed the audible range of sound as his man eggs took a dunking.

The climb up to the shoulder of High Raise was complete and we had to then contour round towards Stake Pass, before picking up a path to Angle Tarn. We made Angle Tarn in about 4 hours 20 and knew that we had about another hour of climbing before we reached Scafell Pike. I had ditched all my electrolyte powder in favour of water, as I was convinced that too much sugar was the cause of my nausea. My chocolate raisin intake had also dropped as with each mouthful, there followed an urge to puke.

We made Angle Tarn to Scafell in 55 minutes and psychologically felt that we had broken the back of the race. Another leg burning decent off the face of Scarfell and we were down in Great Moss, a large valley plain with a river meandering around it. The direct route involved a line across the "moss", which should read "marsh" and a climb to the top of Mosedale for the descent to Cockley Beck. I persuaded Lucas that we should take the longer route following the path around the river side, which was longer but easier running. (In my recce it had taken a few minutes longer, but it felt as though it would take up less energy than running through wet marsh).

We made our way up the head of the Mosedale Valley, knowing that the Cockley Beck checkpoint was only a few miles away. This is the last checkpoint with a cut off time, so having passed it, we could crawl round if need be. My spirits started to pick up as we came down Mosedale. The first mile of the valley is very wet and boggy, so even though it's downhill, it's not the easiest of running. A short distance in I had to call Lucas back, as I had taken a turn for the worst and hit a low on the energy front. I had not been eating because I felt sick and was now paying the price. I had to sit down and cracked open an emergency Clif Bar, which very rapidly sorted me out and got me moving once more. I had pre-warned Lucas that I wanted a 10-15 minute break at Cockley Beck and funnily enough, he was happy with this.

We hit Cockley Beck where I collapsed in the shade, and tried to take on some food. I would have quite happily removed vital parts of my reproductive anatomy for the race to have finished there, but no, looming in front of us was the next climb, up Greyfriars leading onto Coniston Old Man. Lucas's comment that the race was "definitely more painful than childbirth", was followed by much chastising by a woman with her newly born infant. As I closed my eyes and took myself off to my cave to try find my "power animal", Kirsty and Andy arrive at the checkpoint.

At this point, Kirsty was positively fizzing with enthusiasm and energy: "Wow, that was great, I've loved that run". Andy on the other hand couldn't speak - he didn't look like he'd been in quite the same happy place as Kirsty.

Lucas and I started to come too a bit as we rested. Kirsty and Andy set off whilst we were still discussing changing our footwear. We set off about 5 minutes behind them and opted for a less direct route up Greyfriars. We head off up the road and after about a mile, cut up the valley side, heading for the shoulder between Greyfriars and Swirl How. Whilst I have started to pick up, Lucas is now suffering, with only willpower to get him up. We make the top of the ridge and have just a few miles before we reach Coniston Old Man. Now we start to meet runners on their way back from this "out and back" section to the Old Man. With everyone you meet, you exchange words of encouragement, knowing that the end is now just a few miles to go...except it isn't...it's another 8 miles to the finish. Having been out all day though, this certainly feels like the home run in.

As we descend to the Three Shires Stone at the top of Wrynose Pass, Lucas perks up, his descending is improved immensely by a pair of fell shoes, but we ditch these and don our road shoes for the last descent down the road. We turn off to Blea Tarn and push hard up the last climb, to lose a team who have been closing in on us. We cross the road and descend into the Langdale Camp Site, opting for a run in on the road, rather than contouring round on the fells. As we cross the finish line we are greeted by the Lowther family, who after their exploits at Fairfield, have come on over to see us. Kirsty, still looking as fresh a daisy has clearly loved every minute of it. Andy, a regular of this race, has just been put off ever doing it again. After getting some coffee down our necks, Lucas and I head off to a stream to cool our legs, in the vain hope that it will ease our pain tomorrow.

I have run some hard races before, but I can confirm Andy Hirst, who runs this race year in, year out, is a real man. (Either that or he's just a bit mental). This report perhaps does not sound like a glowing testimonial for the race, (unless you thrive on the idea of exhaustion, sunburn and diarrhoea all in one day), but that is not the case. Racing, by its very nature is about pushing yourself to the limit of your ability, be it over 100 meters or 100 miles. If you fancy pushing yourself over something a bit longer than the usual race distance, I couldn't think of a nicer race and a more picturesque part of the world to do it.

