

**Winter Spine Race – Challenger North**  
**160 Miles**  
**13 January 2025**

**by John Boothman**

This was a bit of a change for me.

I have previously done both winter and summer full Spine Races, but this year, I was unable to secure a place due to high demand and my internet not playing ball at the required moment.

Due to my addiction to need a Spine race fix, I decided to enter the Challenger North, 160 Mile Race, which runs from Hardraw (above Hawes) up to Kirk Yetholm in Scotland. Having previously done the Challenger South Race in summer, the north was an obvious alternative choice.

Despite being a shorter race, if you can call 160 miles a short race, it has the same kit requirements and despite doing these races multiple times, the same stress as the longer 268 full Spine race.

I started the race with my usual lack of “real” training, but was feeling OK as I know that half the battle is in your head, a quarter is in strategy & admin and the final quarter is your physical ability. On that point, I met a runner at the Alston check point, who was retiring from the race, Myself and several others tried our best to explain to him that he needed a sleep before retiring. All that was wrong with him was exhaustion and inability to think straight. His body and legs were fine.

The kit check and registration took place on Sunday at Hardraw, the day before the race. It is always stressful as you worry that your kit is wrong or that you have forgotten something etc etc. Because Hardraw is not far from home, I decided to drive home after the kit check and then pack my rucksack and my drop bag at home, go out for tea with Angela and the girls and then have a good night’s sleep before getting Angela to drop me off next morning, which was a Monday, for tracker fitting and the race start.

After a 5:00 am alarm, it was porridge and a brew and we were off - arriving in Hardraw by about 7:00 am. It was a busy scene with people all over the place doing last minute kit flap & faff.

Just after my tracker was fitted, I bumped into Ralph Baines (Clayton runner) doing his first very long race and he was really chilled, which surprised me on his first big race. We were herded along to the field where the start line was set up, I had a last minute hug with Angela and at 8:00 am, we were off.

It's a long drag up Shunner fell and the cart track was covered in solid snow and thick ice. I had packed my snow shoes on the back of my pack, thinking they would be a big help in deep snow on the tops. I settled in about 40 places down the pack and as the leaders were breaking the trail, we were just following in their footsteps and the snow shoes wouldn't be a great advantage, so they remained on my back pack. We went from pot holing snow drifts to bare flagstones, to icy tracks but fortunately it was not raining. It felt very strange being in a large pack of runners at this point, as when you are in the full Spine, you are more or less on your own as the field has become so spread out. There were some Bamby ice moments heading into Thwaite reminding us to tread very carefully.

I arrived at the Tan Hill Inn in just under 4 hrs 30 and it felt strange as usually, I would go inside and rest and refuel, but today, I just said "hello" to the marshals and carried straight on towards the bog of Sleightholme Moor.

Everyone was still pretty close together as you simply could not run at any pace, but once off the boggy section and onto a track, I could see the leading runners breaking into a decent pace run. I just jogged and walked in intervals doing my own thing. A few people passed but you have to put on your blinkers and ignore them, following the mantra that you always have to run your own race. In any event, it is such a long race that it is not worth battling at this early stage.

The snow had now diminished to the odd drift, but the bogs underfoot partially frozen but not solid and some puddles with hidden ice under the surface were making the going tricky. Passing under the A66 led to a long undulating muddy bogfest, eventually giving way to some better going on the approach to Middleton where it allowed a good pace jog but my lashing holding my snow shoes to my pack came loose and I lost them off which was frustrating as I had to stop and re-tie them. All the runners are now in darkness, but the path up the side of the river is easy going with no ice or snow. A few miles up stream, we head off to Check Point 1, Langdon Beck (Teesdale Tandoori) arriving in just over 12 hours. My plan there was to change socks, re stock food in my pack, top up charge in my watch, eat some of the famous curry and then head out. I know most of the team there and I tend to get a bit distracted from the job in hand as I talk to many friends who I have got to know over the years. Last winter, my friend Steve, who I first met during the Dragons back race 2021, was one of the checkpoint volunteers here and I remember him looking after me and us chatting and him wishing me well as I left. Sadly, Steve was recently

involved in a tragic accident whilst out running and passed away, so as I left this year, I paused for a while to remember him. It was a reminder that we must live our lives and do things now and not wait.

From here, a road diversion to avoid the Falcon Clints and Cauldrons Snout Waterfall due to high water levels and possible ice brought us out at the top of the Snout. I had decided to still carry the snow shoes as the next leg goes over Cross Fell and there had been huge amounts of snow up there and due to the altitude, I figured it was unlikely to have melted.

I soon arrived at the top of High Cup Nick, in the dark and somewhat misty conditions. I was on my own but could see a couple of head torches approaching me! A group of three had taken the wrong side of the Nick which isn't wise, and were back tracking, so we teamed up to navigate what is a gnarly section off the top until we eventually hit the better track down into Dufton. We split up again as two of us were faster than the other two on that section.

A post on Spine Facebook from Post Box Pantry Café in Dufton said they would be open for all of the race, day and night so I planned a hot chocolate and egg sandwich before reporting in to the Dufton checkpoint in the village hall. I chatted with the runner who I was with (I can't remember his name) and I said we can get a nap and food in the café which we both looked forward to, but as we approached, it became clear all was in darkness. We were gutted, so on down to the village hall approx. 18 hr 15.

During my allowed for 30 min stop, they tell us the café opens that morning and we are too early. At this point I am starting to feel a bit nauseous, which is normal for me on my first day in a long race. I ask the medic (who I know from other races) if they have anything to help, but between us, we decide it best to see how it goes before intervening with drugs. I had a pot of natural yoghurt which can help to settle me so I had that and a nibble of some strong ginger flapjack, as ginger can also help. I topped up my water and with a minute to spare headed out for what is always a daunting climb up Knock Fell and the over Dunn Fell to Cross Fell. I am on my own and I make steady progress and summit Knock Fell where there is now quite a strong wind and it was starting to rain, I stop behind a large cairn taking shelter to add extra layers of clothes now the main climb is done. I would have been way too hot on the climb with those extra layers, but once on the top, it's a very different story. I get a deja vue feeling, remembering the summer event where it was fog and wind and couldn't see the path. It was same again, only with snow drifts adding to the problem, although not enough snow to warrant getting snow shoes out. I near the weather station where the path is always difficult to find in the dark. I'm still under

dressed despite adding layers earlier at the cairn, so I stop to add even more clothing but get wet in the process as its now pissing down as well as blowing a gale. As I battle getting dressed, two head torches appear with two runners catching me up. We stick together for the difficult foggy section until we head up the final climb onto Cross Fell where I pull away from them again. I have no idea why, but we all have our slower and faster sections. Once on the summit it's a shitty descent for a good mile or so to Greg's hut where John Bamber and crew will have the fire lit and the kettle on plus a portion of chilli noodles. I am feeling slightly less nauseous but not perfect. I bumble in and get sat down in front of the fire, manage a brew and most of the noodles. Somewhere around the 24 hr mark now.

The long trek to Garrigill, then Alston lies ahead, It is now daylight and the track starts off very icy and rough, but gives way to better going and less ice, dropping altitude all the way to Garrigill. When I arrived at Garrigill a pair of marshals check that I'm OK. Also there was a young lady with a dog who knew my name. It turns out that she is waiting for another runner and she is from Gargrave. It is a small world. Although it is only about 4 miles to Alston, I decide to detour slightly to the public loos to try alleviate my unsettled stomach. It was a wise move and things started to get better from there..

I arrive at Alston checkpoint after about 28 hours and plan to shower, clean teeth (very important) & get a 2 hour sleep and food before heading out. I had a quick shower, another toilet stop and got in the bunk, but midday and not dark in the room plus the builders are here doing major alterations. Bang bang bang & brrr, brr brr of the cement mixer plus the power tools and so on. This was a waste of valuable day light so I packed up my sleeping bag and my drop bag, got some lasagna in me followed by banana and custard and then headed out on the long slog to Bellingham.

Before leaving, I ditched the snow shoes into my drop bag. I had carried them far enough!

The main Spine race had started 24 hours before our race but they had 110 miles to make up to where we started but the race leaders were coming into Alston as I was about to leave. Now these athletes are made of something else and don't need much sleep so I knew they would soon pass me, in fact the leader Kim Collinson left Alston before me.

A few miles along the trail, a short diversion was proving difficult to find and I was caught by John Kelly, one of the leaders. We discussed where we should be going and I even phoned HQ to make sure we were not taking the wrong route (John had already incurred a penalty for taking the wrong route earlier so he was also cautious) Once back on track, he left me floundering in his wake.

The next check point is Greenhead and marks the start of Hadrian's wall section. It took me just over 38 hours to get there, having completed just under 86 miles. I have said many times before that I do not like the Hadrian's Wall section, but I seem to be getting used to it. I do all the wall section on my own but as I go through the wall to once more head North, I catch up another runner and then meet another runner who had just had a sleep behind the wall. We press on, but soon split up again. The next oasis is my favorite - Hornystead Farm. As I am approaching it, a head torch is catching me and I guess it's one of the leading runners from the main race. A runner from my race would not be catching me so quickly at this stage. Dave Philips catches me and we chat a little, discussing the upcoming pit stop. I inform him its not far and I end up leading him the last mile to the farm and when we walk in, we find John Kelly and Tiaan Erwee (2nd & 3rd men) both fast asleep. Its early and Helen from the farm isn't up yet, but having been there before and knowing the drill, I make everyone a coffee. John & Tiaan were clearly knackered and all three, despite competing against each other, were all concerned about each other, which I though was great.

John & Tiaan left whilst I stopped and had some broth. As Dave was leaving, he said to me, "If you see me asleep on the trail, don't wake me up". "Strange", I thought, "there is a settee here and he wants to sleep on the trail". I learned later that he prefers power naps of 7 - 10 mins outside.

Hornystead to Bellingham is 5 miles of reasonably good going, As I leave, Helen's husband Norman (I think) appears and we have a chat. What nice generous people they are. I say it every time - but they are. After about a mile, I pass Dave curled up behind a wall and do as instructed and do not disturb him. After another mile or so, he catches me up and we chat some more and stick together. He climbs up Shitlington Craggs a bit better than me but I'm quite impressed with myself at how I manage to keep up.

There were some marshals on the top where it levels out and it was downhill from there. I catch Dave up again as he misses a finger post sign showing a left turn. We head of down to Bellingham and I tell him what's coming up. He heads off but again misses a turn, so we end up going into checkpoint together. Approx 48 hours have elapsed.

More familiar faces on duty at Bellingham and I get to work sorting my socks and kit ready for the last leg. Whilst it now morning and daylight, I am not totally knackered, but I know that this is the last decent place for a sleep, albeit on the floor. The alternative would be the church at Byrness, but my memory from there is so bad as the last time I slept there is was -10 inside and I was nursing an injury. As the

thought of that was putting me off completely, I decided to allocate 1.5 hours for sleep at Bellingham to get me to the end.

This is where the top runners are super human, they just nap for 5 mins and carry on. As I was dropping off to sleep, I could hear someone with a foreign accent getting kit check ready to leave.

My sleep was pretty successful followed by some super tasty sausage casserole. I got my kit checked and was off, hoping to get to Byrness not long after dark, which I did. I caught up to a Dutch runner along the way, who it turns out was the guy leaving when I was going to sleep. This shows that for me, the rest made up the time lost very quickly. It is 18 miles to Byrness where I checked in before him, approx 57.5 hours into the race. I want a maximum 30 mins stop here so can't get comfy. I charge my watch for 20 mins and have the mince and mash, which was welcome, I check the weather which looks good and also check if there is water available at the two huts. It is, so I only top up with a litre.

Before I leave, Radmir the Dutch guy lands in and also has food. I head out and start the steep climb up Byrness Hill and onto the Cheviots. From there, it is a good 24 miles to the finish. It is 8 miles to hut 1, which goes well with little snow. It is reasonably warm and dry, but sections of the track are duckboards which are lethally slippery making the going tricky, as you don't want a slip and a get a broken arm or leg at that point.

Behind I see a head torch which is Radmir. It is difficult to tell how far behind he is in the dark. I arrive at hut 1 in good shape and the crew make me a coffee and I top up water. I make sure I eat some food, as I know this last section goes far better if you have fuel in the tank. Sixty one and a half hours have elapsed since the start of the race.

I leave hut 1 before Radmir arrives but I can see his torch approaching. It is 9 miles to hut 2 and the wind picks up as I pass the aptly named Windy Gyle but it is still dry, I press on knowing once there, I will be on the home straight.

I arrive after 65.50 hrs where I have another coffee and a custard pot with xmas cake ready for the last push.

I waste little time now and head up the last biggish climb, the Schill. It was a bit of a bog fest approaching the climb and once on top I look back to see how far behind any head torches were. Annoyingly, not far and as always at this point in a race, despite not being at the front of the field, I don't like loosing a place so close to the finish.

I bound as fast as I can down the hill and off towards the road to Kirk Yetholm. A finger post at a wall crossing says KY 4.5 miles and the pursuing head torch was getting closer. I decide that this must be a full Spine front runner as I was sure Radmir wasn't that fast, unless he had had 4 Weetabix at Byrness.

I descend at a good pace (I like down hills and no worries now about saving anything) Hitting the road with roughly 2 miles to go, I see the light quite close so push on but then it just disappears.

I trot over the hill and down to the finish and what I can only describe as the quietest finish ever. It is 4:17 am and conscious of not annoying the locals, I quietly chat to the few waiting Spine media and Angela.

In just under 3 days I had taken a total of 338,160 steps over some very challenging terrain.

I finished in 68.17.29. I was 20<sup>th</sup> overall out of I think 115 starters and I was 11<sup>th</sup> in my class. I was very happy with that.

We head over to the Border Hotel to get a welcome bath and change. It was strangely quiet to what I have experienced before. but that's just timing. Then we head out to get a couple of hours kip in the camper.

9.00 am and we head back in to try get breakfast as they finish at 9!! But then sat in the lobby were the first four finishers of the full spine, Kin Collinson, Dave Phillips, Tiaan Erwee and John Kelly.

They all wanted breakfast as well, so a short discussion between kitchen staff and manager and we were sorted.

A surreal end to this adventure, me and Angela sitting down at a big table having breakfast with the top four in the main race and three who I had the pleasure of meeting on the trail and making them a brew plus help guide a couple of nav errors.

Great to sit and listen to their discussions.

Home that afternoon and back to doing the odd job in between resting.

My conclusion is the preparation is as hard for the Challenger North as it is for the full race. My feet have swollen just as much as after full race, but I wasn't quite as tired after.

May as well do the full race next time.