

Don Quixote and the Haworth Hobble (a partly true account)

To start at the very beginning, is a very good place to start.

So, it's December 2005 and I'm having one of my all too frequent physio sessions. I'm talking to my physio about his recurrent ligament trouble in my ankle, he tells me to keep a diary so we can isolate what exasperates the problem, I already know and have done for some time, it's running over very uneven ground, like tussocks.

'Well don't do it then' he says with the sort of clarity of thinking that I've never been good at. And it's that simple, that's me out of bumpy fell races for the foreseeable future.

I moped about for a couple of days, then started to think about what kind of races I could still run without injuring myself. I weighed up the options and realised I could still spend my time doing runnable traily type fell races with plenty of up and down and no nasty Turks heads. This suited me down to the ground, and I set about jumping in at the deep end and finding the longest of that kind of race locally. Maybe I was proving I could still run, or just tilting at windmills, but what else is someone who's just hit forty and can't afford a big motor bike supposed to do? I wondered if Don Quixote was having a midlife crisis too (literary Toddies will know about Quixote, I saw the cartoon version). Basically it's a 17th century Spanish tale about a peasant who starts to believe he's a knight and goes off to fight monsters. At one stage he believes that, windmills are giants, so he attacks them with a lance. It's all about imaginary bogeymen and the fight being against yourself. He also is a bit dim. In many respects, I am Quixote.

So that's the background and the explanation of why instead of lining up with 17 Toddies at the Half Tour, I'm slouching about in Oxenhope with a small select band of Toddies waiting to start the Haworth Hobble, 31 miles and 4400ft of ascent. Say it quickly it doesn't sound so bad. Lets see, Phil 'Nutter' Hodgson, Rhys 'Nutter' Watkins, Richard 'Nutter' Leonard, Mandy and Kath aka 'BG Bonkers Club', Neil 'Used to be a nutter but I'm ok now' Hodgkinson, and Jeff 'Aspirant nutter' Walker. Did I really want to be in this club? What was I thinking of lining up on the start line with this lot whilst the sun struggled to rise over Penistone Hill?

Too soon we were off. The longest I had raced previously was probably about three hours, I had no idea how my body would react to being asked to run for over five hours without a resus team on standby. I looked around for a friendly face, not finding one I followed Neil Hodgkinson up the first, log, muddy climb. Neil's a veteran of this sort of thing and tucked in behind him and congratulated myself on my choice of pacemaker. Quixote had his Sancho Panza, I had Neil. Quixote is tall and skinny, whilst Panza is his smaller, overweight, often confused mate. I decided I'd taken that analogy as far as I wanted to. Whilst I was thinking about this, Neil disappeared into the distance whilst I fell off a stile.

I can't claim to have enjoyed the first climb up to Bronte Bridge and Top Withens (Wuthering Heights) and I blame Kate Bush. Do you know when you get a song in your head whilst running and can't get rid of it? Guess what song I had? Anyone? (.Plod..Plod..Heathcliff, it's me Cathy, come home tonight... Plod.. Plod). If I ever bump into Ms Bush in the Stubbing Wharf, I'll spit beer down her top.

There then followed a long stretch from Widdop to Kebs along the Pennine Bridleway, past the limestone hushings and dog walkers at Hurstwood Reservoir. Towards the end of this stage my legs were beginning to complain on the downhill bits and I started to worry. I'd only done about 13 miles, and it was difficult not to be conscious of the fact that we'd barely started. Luckily I remembered the only really sensible advice I'd been given before setting off, 'if in doubt, eat something'. I would have liked scampi and chips, perhaps washed down with a pint of Landlord. Unfortunately a lack of decent pubs on this godforsaken, post industrial bit of moor meant that I only had a fun size mars bar, although any notion of fun seemed a foreign concept at the time. But it did make me feel a bit better.

Crossing the road by the windmills at Cliviger I vaguely tilted at them, Quixote style, but then noticed an ambulance speeding up the road from Burnley. Fearing that a well meaning member of the public had seen me crossing the moor and thought the worst, I grinned inanely, straightened my back and strode across the road as if I did this kind of thing every weekend. My whole being gave off an aura of not needing an ambulance, just intensive counselling and maybe a spot of haloperidol.

Now the route took us down through the muddy lanes of Shore, Whirlaw, and Cross Stone, where seemingly all the cows in Calderdale come to crap. My only distraction in this time was passing the golf club and watching nice men in sensible trousers hit golf balls and walk slowly after them. I resolved that my fiftieth birthday I would have another mid life crisis and develop an interest in talking about 'five irons' and 'niblicks'.

Then we were marshalled down past the Cross Stone church and back up the other side of the valley by the stupidest imaginable route to Mankinholes. Jam doughnuts were the attraction as I hobbled into the village, courtesy of the local scouts. I ate four then felt sick. Curse those pesky kids.

Then onwards and quite literally upwards to Stoodley Pike with its' legion of bemused tourists, all with matching tartan flasks. Then down through the woods to Hebden via a tortuous bit of tarmac that finished off my knees completely. The only comfort was that I seemed to be surrounded by people suffering more than me. Going back up Heptonstall Road many of the runners had stopped sat down, lay down, went home. It was about his time that it started snowing, in the flurries the scattered, stalled runners seemed to be contriving to arrange themselves in a convincing tableau of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow.

Heptonstall was deserted, like a wild west town when the baddie arrives. After sniffing the fumes coming out of the Cross, the route drops down to the Blue Pig. It was there that something happened. We'll call it the 'Miracle of the Blue Pig' if you like. There was a Mr Blakeley look-a-like in a Horwich shirt standing at the drinks station, as I shuffled past I heard him say the magic words,

'I reckon I'm on under 6 hours if I get going'.

My legs obviously heard this and liked what they heard, sub 6 hours was my target when I first entered the race. I felt like Popeye after a tin of spinach. My legs suddenly remembered how to run and I was away.

The climb up Crimsworth was a joy as I felt good and the sun snuck out from behind the big black cloud it had been hiding behind for most of the day, and actually I began to gain places.

I was feeling so positive that I didn't really mind that the track over Stairs had been transformed into a Charlie Dimmock style water feature by last night's heavy rain, augmented by melting snow. I paddled down the hill. Soon I was in Oxenhope and about to tackle the last quarter of a mile climb up some tarmac to the finish. Here's a new rule, no races, under any circumstances, should finish on a climb like this. The US constitution bans 'Cruel and Unusual' punishments. This should also apply to fell running. Let's lobby the FRA. Still, despite this last torture, I made it to the finish; I'd done 5:58:37. That'd do.

Seconds later I was sat down in race control at a Formica table the type of which they usually sell to secure units in mental institutions, cramming calories into my mouth by the shed load, cake, pies, passing Yorkshire terriers, anything really.

Don Quixote dies at the end of the book, after coming to his senses and realising his windmills were just boggarts in his head. Maybe I'll do the same in about fifty years, but not yet.

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