

TO FELL AND BACK

It's a glamorous life, working for GQ, I tell you. Over the past three years of slipping into sharp suits for GQ I've found myself in some pretty glittery situations: I've shared cigarettes with the current James Bond, Daniel Craig – who, get this, thought he knew me from somewhere (he didn't, by the way, I've just got a really ordinary face, so I actually look like most people); I've snuggled up on a sofa in New York with supermodel Helena Christensen, to sip Champagne and discuss her latest semi-clothed photo shoot; and I even used to meet model Nell McAndrew twice a week to go to an aerobics class in aid of a fitness feature for the magazine.

But working for GQ is not all fine tobacco, caviar, canapés and yoga mats. Sometimes you're called upon to step up to the plate, be an alpha male, show some steel. And last week I did. Sort of. Because last weekend I drove 300 miles up to the Lake District to join a group of fell runners. Now, I'm not sure how much you know about fell running, but I'm guessing it's very little. Even less so if you live outside of anywhere where whippets are considered an essential accessory (though you would be shot for using the term "accessory" in such parts), and zilch if you've spent your entire life in London or the Home Counties, as I have. So let me enlighten you. Fell running is basically running up mountains, through bogs, across streams, into the clouds, through hail, wind, the odd bit of snow and then back down said mountains. And in a few hardy pockets of the North of England and Wales, this is done instead of road running. For fun.

Anyway, having signed up to compete in the notoriously ruthless and unforgiving Isle of Jura Fell Race during a testosterone-fuelled boast in the office, I was told by the race organisers, Phil and Mandy, that I needed to get some practice in before the May race, otherwise I was liable to expire less than a couple of hundred yards from the start line on the remote Scottish isle. So, that was why I found myself hurtling past the Watford Gap on a Friday afternoon en route to the Lake District to meet Phil and Mandy who had kindly agreed to be my fell running mentors for the weekend and let me join a group of masochists... sorry, runners from the Todmorden Harriers as they dashed around the mountains of Cumbria.

Writing this now, it's all terrifying stuff – mountains, bogs, running, the North of England – but it didn't dawn on me how hellish this fell running business would be until Dave, the member of the 'Tod Squad' who welcomed me as I arrived at our climbing hut base, made me a cup of tea (strong, natch) on arrival and handed it to me in a mug emblazoned with the words "Good Luck". "You'll need it," he laughed. At this point, I also realised I was something of a novelty and that as tough as the weekend was going to be for me, it was going to be an absolute joy for the Tod Squad as they put a Southern softie through his paces.

As the evening wore on, more of the Tod Squad arrived, including my hosts Phil and Mandy, who, despite being the most affable and loquacious couple you could ever wish to meet, couldn't contain their mirth when I told them that not only had I no fell running experience, I'd also never been up a mountain; in fact, it was also only my third trip oop North. That's how much of a soft Southerner I am. Despite being the butt of many a joke it was a good night sitting around a fire drinking ale and listening to stories about fell running legends – names like Bob Graham, Billy Bland and Joss Naylor. It was refreshing to learn of a host of sporting characters that I've never heard of before – an impressive feat for someone who instinctively reads newspapers from back to front and spends an unhealthy number of hours watching Sky Sports News. It was also refreshing to learn that fell runners see nothing wrong with ploughing through bottles of red wine and beer the night before a big excursion, rather than sipping on isotonic performance drinks. And, spending the night sleeping in a room with eight other men, I kind of needed a drink.

Morning came, well the middle of the night as far as I was concerned, and we were up and out on the fells. Running up the road to the base of the mountain: fine. Hiking up the tracks at the base of the mountain: fine. Attempting to run up a rocky mountain-side covered in moss and sheep and stuff: not so fine. Less than half an hour in and my thighs were burning, my calves were screaming, "stop, or go slower... or something" and my feet were as sore as a sailor's sunburn. Fortunately, but shamefully, a number of the Tod Squad were carrying injuries so were just taking it easy. Easy? There I was bursting at the seams, about to internally combust on a mountainside in Cumbria through sheer exertion and my companions were mere taking it easy.

A warning to the uninitiated about mountains: just when you think you've got to the top, the mist parts and you realise you're not at the top at all. The top is actually up there. And when you get to that top the mist parts and you realise ... and so on. We did eventually reach the top of the top, or peak, of what I've since been informed is called Bow Fell (sounds so pleasant, doesn't it?), about three hours later. After 180 minutes of running all I had to reward myself was an isotonic sports drink – that wasn't looked upon too highly – a Boost bar and some flapjack.

My second, and perhaps most important, warning regarding mountains, is that when you get to the top of the top, you have to come back down again. And running down is not quite the pleasurable sleigh ride you might think, but rather involves lots of intense feet-to-eye coordination to avoid tripping over a rogue rock and hurtling face-first into a bog, or worse still, over the cliff edge. Though, you would reach the bottom quicker. I was mightily impressed by one of the Tod Squad in particular, Geoff, a cross between Ray Mears and Pheidippides who hitherto had been a solid running companion and, kindly stalling his progress to keep me company, began his descent like a cheetah on a bed of hot coals.

We finally hit the bottom of the mountainside five and a half hours after we'd begun; me, if not a broken man, a slightly bend-double one. But, you know what they say, what doesn't break you only makes you stronger.

Posted by Mark Russell, Chief Sub-Editor

Mark works for GQ magazine and has been asked by the sponsors of Jura Fell Race to write an article on the race! So we thought we'd better let him know what he was to expect. He will be accompanied on the race and assures us he is training hard! Mandy