

Fellsman – thoughts from another long day out.

Usually I don't think of the distance, I see 'long races' as just another long day out in the hills.

Ingleton Community Centre full of familiar faces greeting each other.

Passed kit check & rewarded with a massive round tally.

26 checkpoints! Blimey, that's a lot.

Getting warm in the hall so wander outside – crikey it's hot already, and it's only 8.30 in the morning!

9am. Under starters orders. We set off & it feels like a battle scene from Braveheart. Mad men chasing off up Ingleborough. Felt like everyone passed me on that climb.

I'm supposed to be running with Phil, Oz, Colin Hutt and Rhys' friend Bill, but know from previous experience that they don't know the meaning of a steady start, so they are long gone and it's only half a mile from the start.

Ingleborough is very tough – hot, sticky, trying to keep up a jog. I look back near the top & saw a string of hikers making their way up the hill.

Feel a little more relaxed, at last. The first climb done, down to the Hill Inn (one of the first pubs I ever went in).

Whernside – up & nice & steady. Up to the top, passing runners ahead, no sign of Phil & Oz – maybe I'll see them later?

Back of Whernside to Kingsdale. This is new territory for me & it's great grassy running – soft grass, gentle gradient.

Up steeply. Muggy & very hot – Gragareth. Passed a couple of chaps already slowing in the intense heat, perhaps they set off too fast?

Hike a right for 4k to Great Coum, passed a few more & 2 chaps in the distance, then caught them just before the summit.

Lovely run off down towards Dent. One of my new companions found his mug left at last years Fellsman tied to a gatepost at Flinters Gill cp. Made his day.

Lots of cheers from race supporters at Dent.

First lady. Heck, would rather not know as there's so far to go. Ask my 2 companions if they mind if I try to stay with them as one of them had done the Hike 10 times before, I didn't know where I was going and the pace seemed comfy.

Chat all the way up to Blea Moor, keeping left out of the boggy ground as instructed. Really hot now, maybe a storm brewing, but not even a sniff of a breeze on top, remember 2 marshals sat on deckchairs outside their tent in the sunshine.

Only one companion now, we chat all the way down to the valley, pass a garden full of turkeys and chickens?! A mile running along the road, beside a cool refreshing river. Desperately want to jump in to cool down.

Stone House checkpoint & a late pasta lunch with plenty of salt. Think it's about 2.30pm. It's roasting in the refreshment tent. Mug of tea, on the move. Not easy. More of a face wash than a drink. We chat all the way up the lane to Great Knoutberry cp. Apparently it's about 20 mins up & back down to the same stile in the wall, so a chance to see a few fellow hikers on the way up & down.

Bit of a trudge across to Redshaw. My companion has gone quiet & urges me to 'forge ahead'. He tells me we are 15 mins down on a 15 hour schedule compiled with 30 mins leeway – sounds like a BG schedule.

Wow! Didn't realise we were looking so good.

Head down now, the aim is to get to Cray before 7.30 so I don't get grouped until Park Rash. (Tactics of a long run going into the night – the further you can run on your own before being compulsorily grouped for the night section, the less reliant you are on other runners slowing you up – harsh but fair!!) Need to push on, time to start working.

Snaizholme & Dodd Fell. Excited youngsters rushing to clip my tally & remind me I'm still 1st lady.

Fleet Moss. "1st Bird!"

Choice of beans or rice pudding straight from the cans – no bowls this time so spoon some cold beans into my mug & set off across the bog. At least I know this bit. John, Moss and I recced it at Easter in the deep snow.

Hope I can remember. It's not too bad now – apparently traditionalists go straight through the middle. I follow the line of disappearing posts, but worryingly I can only see 3 sets of footprints. Where did everyone else go?

Survived the bog to Middle Tongue & caught up with 3 other 'Hikers'. They know my name & seem surprised to see me, but they all look strong. 7.07pm. Do you think we can make the cut-off before 7.30? I'm sure we won't as there's Hells Gap checkpoint before Cray.

I try, I really try, sprinting down the rough lane to keep up with them to Cray at 7.45. These guys seem strong so it'll be ok to be grouped with them for the rest of the run.

Surprisingly, the marshal at Cray asked if we want to be grouped? Resounding 'No' from everyone. Great, I can get all the way to Park Rash at my own pace. I can relax a bit now & settle back into my own pace. Time for a cheese & honey sandwich, and hot cup of tea, watching a fellow hiker wash his feet & change his socks and then brace myself for the climb up Buckden Pike.

It's a beautiful evening, still & really warm. I'm behind the 3 guys I followed to Cray & the one with Clean Socks, but they don't seem to get away on the climb and I keep them all in view all the way to the top. 'Clean Socks' takes some photos at the summit as the sun turns red so I pass him, keen to keep up with the other 3.

Think they're trying to get rid of me. The pace seems to increase. I'm determined to keep up with them, as they're running well. We pass 2 other hikers, fading on the way to Top Mere. I know the marshal there. He seems happy to see me & tells me Phil & Oz are

only 15 minutes ahead – encouraging me to try & catch up with them. The 3 guys ahead are still going strong. I can't let them go so dig in. I'm not letting them leave Park Rash without me in their group!
I make it to the cp only a few seconds behind them, great!

A familiar voice says 'hi' from inside the tent – it's Oz, and Phil. Apparently they're dead on their feet! Yeah right, that's a bit like them telling me they're setting off steady.

Grouped in a legion of 6 and I'm quite happy with my luck, everyone seems strong & we must only have about 12 miles to go. We're asked if we want to wait for the next 2 hikers. 'No'. we've passed them already, and they seem to be getting slower. (Sorry guys, but it's now a race & I've worked hard to get here). Am I showing a little bit of the competitiveness here that I'm told I have in abundance?

So we yomp up Great Wherside, there's quite a bit of chat, some stumbling over rocks as the dusk settles in. I'm surprised we can't see the beacon on the summit until we're virtually there.

It's still roasting, nearly 10pm but we're told to put on our long trousers – it's in the rules. Head torches out and off we go looking for "2 large cairns" which direct us to the fence we can follow all the way down the hill. Running downhill in the dark – bat runs are great practise for this. Luckily I know the next bit pretty well, so I'm able to earn my team stripes with a bit of easy night navigation and lead the group to Capplestone Gate and the start of the beacons guiding us to Yarnbury checkpoint. Here they ask if we want to be de-grouped. No!

It's a sprint down the road into Grassington and I'm lagging behind. Sorry guys, I think you should have de-grouped, I'm letting you down at the last minute. I just can't go any faster and I'm conscious that Phil & Oz are very near to the time they did last year. Down Grassington Main Street, passed drinkers enjoying their Saturday night pints outside in the balmy air. We're cheered on. Wonder if we can finish in time to join them for a pint before last orders?

Down to the river, over the bridge, still running really hard. It's uphill to the finish in Threshfield, only a little way, but I'm desperately hoping that we can walk a bit. We do, and then there's the finish, a final run into the school grounds and we all squash into the doorway to announce our numbers & relinquish the tallies with all 26 checkpoints clipped. Done it. Wow. Felt alright too 'til that last couple of miles.

Hugs, kisses, shaken hands between the six of us. Great!

I feel sick. Cup of tea, and hopefully feel better. Another cup of tea, no longer fancy a beer and trip to the pub. More tea. We just sit there, some eating, most just drinking tea. There's not many other hikers around. Not sure where everyone is. Still feel sick.

I collect my kitbag & have a shower! Feels fantastic, and the nausea is subsiding a bit. Back for more tea, chatting, still can't face any food except a bit of tinned fruit.

It's just after 1am. Sleep. I lay my sleeping bag out in the designated ladies dorm – the floor of a classroom, and put my head down. I never sleep well the night after a long run, my legs twitch and my body just does not relax. Amazing, you'd think that after all those miles and at that time of night I'd sleep like a baby. I manage a couple of hours, until I hear another group of hikers arrive, they're elated, naturally.

John's still out & so is Mandy & I have an idea that they may do about 18 – 19 hours – which means they should be in about 3 – 4am. So I get up to cheer them in at the finish. First a cup of tea!. The catering staff must be really fed up of me now. They don't seem to be, and they are very jolly considering it's the middle of the night. I sit & wait on a bench for an hour or so, drinking tea & chatting to the nurses on call to support the event – they've only had a few 'patients' with blisters & sore feet. A disappointingly quiet night for them. There's more folk around now, mostly drinking tea and shuffling to the showers or to the dorms. Suddenly I'm tired as the sky begins to lighten and the birds begin to sing. I've checked that everything's ok with John (and Tracey, his running partner). I've been allowed in the Fellsman Control Centre, and found out they've left Park Rash at 2.45 am, so it'll be about 3 hours til they finish. Time for another sleep.

Tracey wakes me, they're all back safely, lots of blisters and sore feet, but back in time for breakfast.

The Fellsman is the fabulous event that I was promised. Sensational Dales scenery, great organisation, friendly hikers and 'staff', and amazing organisational feat, think I'll be back again.

It's Monday night after the Fellsman and I feel jet-lagged, wide awake at midnight, still excited and in awe of the wonderful weekend's adventure. So I decide to put pen to paper and share my day with my fellow Toddies.

I had a great day, and won what has to be one of the best prizes ever – a miniature leather hiking boot. I keep picking up the Jim Nelson Trophy to study the names of all the famous ladies who have previously held it... Jean Rowe, Sarah Rowell, Anne Stentiford, Glynda Cook, Ruth Pickvance,... OK, I'm not in their league but I'm honoured to look after this little trophy for a year, and have my name engraved under theirs.

Chris Preston