

## JOOZ AND ELISE TACKLE THE LAKELAND 50

For weeks I'd been trying to psyche myself up for the Lakeland 50, the 'fun run' option at the Ultra Tour of the Lake District 100 mile race. I'd had a bad run 3 weeks earlier at the Osmotherley 33, and was really struggling to get my head in the right place for this final challenge. The Lakeland 50 was the last race I was planning to complete in the Vasque Ultra Running Series, and the furthest I had ever run. I'd felt shattered and run down for weeks, and imagined myself shuffling and moaning all the way round, that was even if I completed it. I'd been so unenthusiastic I hadn't even looked at the paperwork (of which there was volumes) until a few days beforehand. Luckily though, when I did finally look at it, I felt those first little trembles of excitement and anticipation. I remembered I would be in my beloved Lake District, in the great company of Elise and Claire (a kindred spirit we'd met at Osmo), and that actually, this was what I loved.

We'd decided to just drive down on the morning being as the race didn't start until Midday. Unfortunately that plan was fixed before we read that registration closed at 8.30am. So, up before dawn, picking Elise up at 5.45am. This was going to be a long day, as we knew we were going to be running through the night, and would probably finish around about the same time the next morning!

### Arriving at Coniston

It was all a buzz at Coniston. Most people had camped in the field the night before, and the atmosphere was relaxed but full of anticipation. Firstly, each competitor was weighed and the weight recorded on a permanent wristband to wear for the entire event. Now, I know from experience that we all eat far too much chocolate and jelly babies for this to be an effective form of weight loss, so asked why. Apparently, if things go very wrong and we find ourselves in hospital, then the measure of weight loss or gain is a huge clue to what is physiologically wrong. Next: kit check – very thorough, checking that every item on the list is carried: proper waterproof body covering, spare whole body base layer, hat and gloves, bivi bag, headtorch and spare batteries, first aid kit, food and drink, compass and whistle. Then we picked up our waterproof map and instructions, and dibbers were strapped to wrists. Marc the organiser gave an entertaining briefing about the event, and then it was off to Dalemmain for the start.

### The Start at Dalemmain 12.00 noon

Most of the competitors were travelling up to Dalemmain on coaches. But we had our wonderful personal assistant and chauffeur Darren to drive us. Elise, Claire and I arrived at the start nice and early and had plenty of time to mess around with rucksacks and queue for toilets. I exchanged a few words with Dave Makin who had dreamt up the whole idea for the event, and misguidedly (as I was to discover) called him a bastard! Fortunately I saw him after the event and was able to retract my words.

We were herded into the pen and soon after we were all charging across the field like an army, only to come to a stop within a few hundred yards to wait 10 minutes at a stile. No

matter, none of our little team were concerned about 10 minutes on our time. We were all in this for the experience, and our goal was to complete it, and more importantly, try to enjoy it.

### To Looping the Loop to Howtown 2.35pm

Darren hadn't entered the event, as he was outraged at the £70 price tag. Fortunately too, as when the day arrived he was carrying an achilles injury. However, he was keen to support at the event, and ran with us on the four mile loop at the start, where family and friends are invited to join in. He came with us for a while, as we left the loop running back through the start ("You CAN run a bit faster you know!", heckled the organiser as we passed through). A fairly stiff climb up from Pooley Bridge, where Darren decided to say goodbye, and then a lovely long runnable descent to the first checkpoint at Howtown Bobbin Mill. I think we set the tone for the day here, and we really weren't quick through the checkpoint. We all visited the loo, and enjoyed a piece of cake and a full cup of hot tea. It was bizarre, like a Mad Hatters Tea Party. I also got my first glance of a 100 miler's bare, bruised and battered feet. They'd started at 5.30pm the afternoon before, and had now covered just over 60 miles.

### To Falling in Haweswater 5.41pm

We knew that the biggest climb of the day was upon us, up to the Wether Hill Pass at approximately 2150ft. I wondered whether it was a good thing to just get it out the way early on, or a bad thing to get tired legs so early on. What the heck, just get up there! The climb was tough, and I realised that I hadn't done anywhere near enough hill walking this year. Claire was looking strong, and led us at a stomp, and I couldn't quite keep up.

I'd resolved before this event not to take a passive role with the navigating. I'd been a bit lazy in a few events this year and just followed blindly. But I knew that I COULD navigate and I didn't want to be following others who perhaps weren't quite so experienced. I kept tabs on the map at all times, and became resoundingly aware that lots of people seemed to be wandering forward along the ridge, when we needed to cut down to join the beck. We regrouped with Claire and cut down, picking up a good trod through the bracken, and catching up and overtaking a big group of people who had been far in front of us. This boosted my mental spirits no end. Trouble was though, my physical spirits were ebbing. We'd been up since before dawn and had missed lunch. I was starving! I started to dream of the coca-cola at Mardale Head, and hope there was some proper savoury food. I was slow along the long path at the side of Haweswater (though was in better shape than one lass I saw throwing up in the bushes), though we managed to stay in front of most of the people we'd overtaken. It had started to rain, the rocks were slippy and the day was looking pretty miserable. Claire was looking really strong, and disappeared into the distance, and we hoped that she was on for a stormer and would run a great time. Our heart sank for her when we caught

her up coming into the Mardale Head Checkpoint. She'd taken a nasty fall and hurt her knee quite badly.

It was pouring with rain at the checkpoint. Typical as this was one of only two that weren't indoors. I was really disappointed to learn that the coca-cola had run out, after looking forward to it for so long, but was delighted to get a cup of hot soup and some bread. I stood in the rain and gulped it down, just what I needed. Everyone was shrugging off their rucksacks and putting them in puddles, to put on their waterproofs. Claire took a few minutes to raid her first aid kit and patch up her knee. Unfortunately her Garmin watch was smashed beyond repair though.

The atmosphere was grim. People were trudging away in the rain with their hoods up. As we began the long climb up the Gatescarth Pass, we felt like refugees leaving camp for a long journey into the unknown.

#### **To Partying at Kentmere***8.03pm*

With our hoods pulled up tightly against the wind and rain, conversation was minimal as we ascended. I thought about Mark Palmer who had completed this whole event in 8hrs 34 the year before, and did some mental arithmetic. He ran ten minute miles. Not much slower than my best pace for a road marathon. As I gasped and laboured, and picked my way awkwardly over the slippery rocks, I marvelled.

Finally it levelled out, and then began to descend. Oh God, this was even worse. The rain was torrential, and the path was my worse nightmare, a made path of rocks and stones laid on their sides, not helped by the river coursing down over it. We caught up with two of Claire's friends who were doing the 100, kitted out from head to foot in their waterproofs, hoods drawn tight; their feet killing them now. We congratulated them on their achievement so far, and Claire joked that this was probably the only time she would ever overtake them.

We came into the checkpoint at Kentmere, and I don't think I've ever felt so at home anywhere else, ever. It was warm, there was music playing and fairy lights twinkling. There were physiotherapists, bowls of pasta, smoothies, cups of tea and biscuits. There were a lot of glazed eyed people, and we all knew that each of us knew exactly how each other felt. I booked myself in with a physio; I needed an elbow in my buttock, I'd been limping along for a while now with a painful piriformis. Agony, but she knew what she was doing. It hit the spot as I groaned about 'how cruel' it all was. I commented to Elise and Claire that I felt terrible for just 27 miles. Only just over half way, and it was going dark rapidly outside. Elise explained that it was probably because it was going on 9pm, and our bodies weren't used to that! A bowl of pasta, a cup of tea and a few biscuits all went down well. The greatest pleasure however, was stripping off the wet waterproofs and t-shirts and putting on dry clothes. Ah bliss.

#### **To the Casualty Tent at Ambleside***11.06pm*

It was difficult leaving the haven of Kentmere, and going back out into the gloom and drizzle (yes, fortunately the rain was diminishing). I was still limping a bit as we climbed the Garburn Pass, but the buttock ache was also to diminish over the coming miles. We joked with some fellas we caught up with that we wanted to get to the next party at Ambleside, which would be even better. As we passed into darkness as we went into the cover of trees, and we finally switched our headtorches on. It was difficult to see, the air was filled with drizzle, perhaps midges, and there were still pockets of mist. We were careful with the navigation, checking regularly with our compasses that we were still right, and it went without a hitch. I got a signal and rang Darren who had said he would wait at Ambleside to support us. Three or four miles to go; I said we'd be about an hour. That was before we got to the steep descent with the slippery smooth limestone and the tree roots grabbing at our feet. Finally we hit tarmac and jogged into Ambleside. I didn't know what to expect at 11pm as we ran past the pubs and nightlife of Ambleside, but it was fabulous, just clapping and respectful 'well done's'. There was Darren, who had been there for hours, so relieved to see us, not least because it meant he could finally go back to the campsite and get some sleep.

The checkpoint at Lakes Runner in Ambleside wasn't quite the party we'd anticipated. Rather, it was more like a warzone casualty tent. Several 100 milers were in there with their shoes off, and the smell was terrible. People were sitting staring vacantly, and conversation was minimal, just the odd incoherent mumble. The marshalls seemed to be assessing peoples' conditions quite carefully here, asking questions and staring into eyes. Like a bizarre drug test; we were high on exhaustion. We sat and refuelled on lukewarm tomato soup and coca cola. 34 miles, the furthest I'd ever been. 16 to go. I was shattered, but there was now no doubt that I was capable of completing it.

Eventually we were ready to go, and we set off on the final leg. We'd broken the back of it now, and the rest of it was familiar and well reccied. However, it did also contain the bits that I'd dreaded the most!

#### **To Delirium at Chapel Stile***1.06am*

We knew that the route between Ambleside and Chapel Stile was easy-peasy, and we made good progress running all the way through the park on the smooth path, overtaking 6 or 7 people. We came into another fantastic checkpoint at Langdale School, this one with pans of hot stew. The marshalls joked that it was the cheapest stuff they could get and it contained children, but it was the best thing I'd ever tasted, ever ever. I joked that the checkpoints were little bits of absolute heaven, and that I was totally in love with the marshalls. They said I was now delirious.

#### **To Quickly at Tilberthwaite***4.17am*

The three of us felt renewed after stew, tea and biscuits and we were off again. But we weren't to run another step until we hit the road in Coniston. The route finding was more difficult now, on narrower vaguer paths, and it was misty in patches. We went carefully over the rocky ground, successfully staying on course.

Once we were past Blea Tarn I needed my walking pole to help me over the rocky ground, and I was glad I'd carried it for 45 miles! We soon arrived at the last checkpoint in Tilberthwaite, and this was the only one we didn't hang around at. I grabbed a piece of maltloaf and thanked the marshall for standing on that misty hillside at 4am.

### To Finishing Ectasy 5.49am

So, the last leg. And the bit where I'd got lost on a reccy on a misty day. Luckily we'd timed it well, and a misty dawn was just breaking as the path disappeared. We fumbled about in the bracken only very briefly before finding the path. We made good progress on the folks we'd left behind at the checkpoint, they were nowhere to be seen. At this moment, the end was just a few miles away, and we were high up in the mountains as dawn was breaking. I felt euphoric. And I knew absolutely that it had been totally worth it, and this was a real highpoint of my life. And a real achievement. We passed several more people struggling down the difficult descent, and soon we were running into Coniston just moments from finishing. It was 5.45 in the morning, and there were people out on the street clapping us. I felt the goose-pimples run all down my spine, and had to crack some jokes with Elise and Claire to stop myself from crying. Into the hall for the final 'dib', and there was a whole hall full of people respectfully clapping us for our achievement. It really was all I could do to hold back the tears.

I sat down and Claire's mate brought us a beer over. Just the ticket at 6am! It went down well. I took the shoes off my sore, achey and burning feet, and I wasn't able to put any back on again for 2 days.

Claire texted a few days later. Her garmin had continued to record despite the screen being totally smashed. 50.99 miles. 17hrs 49mins. Total moving time 13hrs 30. And I don't regret a single second of that time spent in the little bits of absolute heaven.

