

## **Excalibur Off Road Marathon 10/05/14    By Simon G.**

I did this race a few weeks ago – nice to do exactly 26.2 miles off road (a new experience) in an area of Wales I've rarely run in before. The race is quite expensive (£40 I think it was), but it is for the good cause of Claire House Children's Hospice.

The race website...

<http://www.conquerexcalibur.org.uk/>

As a non-FRA race the "feel" was different. Basically there were 4 race options... either run or walk the full or the half distance. This meant there were plenty of "non-competitive" runners/walkers about at the start (although most of those doing the full marathon distance seemed to be taking it pretty seriously!). The checkpoints were plentiful (about 8-10), with a variety of different snacks e.g. chocolate brownies, swirl bars, pretzels etc. and always water. You just needed to carry a water bottle for refilling. No electrolyte drinks or gels but overall you didn't need many provisions.

The course itself was mostly along runnable tracks. There was a fair amount of climbing but no cutting across wild moorland or such like so trail shoes were the order of the day.

See map below...

### **The race itself**

On the day it took less time than I expected and I arrived in time to see the walkers set off at 8:30. Moments later I received a text I knew was coming, letting me know that a friend of mine had lost his battle with cancer. Only 49, less than a year ago we'd been camping together in Eskdale, unaware of his impending illness. After a few moments of sadness, I told myself once again to make the most of my time alive and I resolved to run hard this day for Simon.

I spent the next hour getting ready and observing the different kit options people were choosing.

Soon it was 10 am and us runners were counted down to start. Both half and full marathoners set off together which was quite nice really, I thought.

We began with a gradual twisty ascent along forest tracks which I took very easy as I was unsure how I'd fare in the latter stages of what for me was to be a very long race. The weather was dull but visibility was basically fine. I was pleased about that - not because route finding was an issue (the way marking signs and marshalls were excellent) - but because I wanted to see the views! Past Checkpoint 1 and the forest trees dwindled as we climbed onto the slopes of Moel Dywyll. By this point, in fact up to about 16 or 17 miles, I was continually overtaking people because of my very conservative start. My aim was not a particular time but to get round in reasonable shape, pushing it towards the end, if possible.

The next sections were really enjoyable. As the hills are not that big, the views were ever changing and the terrain too. At one point, just as the sun made an appearance, we ran across an area of grassy hillside the organiser had aptly described as “Teletubby land”! I felt great and this feeling continued as we ascended back up to the main Clwydian ridge before the half marathoners turned for home. We descended to the road before climbing briefly back up to Moel Arthur (nice hill fort on top).

Now we followed the main high ridge, along Offa’s Dyke up and down for a few miles, before gradually turning back for home after climbing Moel y Parc. Here, things started to get a bit tougher for me as my legs began to seize up. I’d been out for about 4 hours by now and it seemed to take an absolute age to reach the Moel Arthur checkpoint again. The field was pretty spread out by now too which was probably a good thing as for the first time a few people I’d overtaken earlier came back to haunt me. The weather had also deteriorated to a fairly constant drizzle and strong wind so it was time to put my cag and hat on.

Luckily I came out of this bad patch and for the remaining 6 or 7 miles I passed some runners and some passed me. Thankfully (unlike some long races I’ve done!), I wasn’t just going backwards. Up we went back to Moel Dywyll - now there was just the climb to Moel Famau to go. “Dig in!” I told myself and soon I was at the impressive summit. The marshalls there were fantastic – leaping about madly and shouting encouragement for the final section (partly to keep themselves warm, I’m sure!).

“How far?” I asked and was surprised to hear “only about 2 miles” in reply. Crikey, I thought it was much less than that. I instantly felt a bit deflated but didn’t bother to stop to consult the map. Instead, I hurtled off (ha ha!) down the main tourist track in a bid to stay ahead of another closing runner. Might still beat 6 hours, I thought.

It was with great surprise that I rounded a corner to see the finish gantry 200m ahead. That was more like 1 mile, definitely not 2. I crossed the line in jubilation, a tear in my eye. Partly in celebration, partly because I was still able to get out and do such things. Make the most of it folks!!



Finally, this was a very friendly event that I would thoroughly recommend as inclusion as a “long trail” in next year’s Grand Prix. My time was 5:46.