

Hot and bothered: a long day out in the Lakes

“Unlike the athletes of other sporting contests, ultra-runners cannot pretend to be uplifted by their events. We are routinely humbled and in fact (and ironically) have to embrace our own powerlessness to ever perform very well.” Eric Grossman

“All the training in the world cannot prepare the runner for the intense physical, emotional and psychological fatigue that sets in after 12 hours on the trail.” Andy Jones-Wilkins

In the USA, ultra-running is more developed than perhaps anywhere else in the world. I wonder what they would make of the Bob Graham Round? I strongly suspect that the experience of running and walking 66 miles or so over 42 peaks with 28,000 feet of ascent and descent in the Lake District in under 24 hours would appeal to that sector of their running community. Tongue in cheek, the same AJW described himself and his colleagues as *“self-indulgent, addicted, anti-social, introverted fruitcakes.”* Maybe so, but I know that ultra-runners have a great time, especially when its over!

I can relate to Grossman’s comment about embracing our own powerlessness. 25 years ago this year, I approached the summit of Red Pike, the 32nd peak on my own BG, having lost the hour in hand on my 23 hour schedule, another hour and then 10 minutes more. Assuming I didn’t lose any more time, I would finish in 25 hours and 10 minutes. I seemed completely unable to do anything about my physical and mental state. I was truly well on the way to being humbled. But I sorted it out, and over some of the roughest ground on the Round. 23 hours 50 minutes I was on my feet that day.

I wasn’t there in person for the crucial hours of Nicky Jacquierey’s Bob Graham, the ones where you feel that everything is going wrong and that the world is against you, but I was there in spirit with her. Because I have been there.

Nicky’s preparation had been thorough and meticulous. If anything, I felt that she had spent too much time on the BG route itself and tried to persuade her in the final 6 weeks to log some miles on ground away from the route and the Lakes, to prevent staleness creeping in. I know she found the week before (the dreaded taper) difficult to manage. Join the club; you simply don’t know what to do with yourself.

The date of 21/22 May was set early. Her schedule was circulated well in advance, so all pacers and supporters knew what was what. The schedule was for 23 hours, starting at 6.30 p.m. The accompanying notes were detailed and impressive. Instructions on how to sort out anaphylactic shock in case any nuts got in or near her system. You can train and you can plan, but take note of AJW’s words above. 23 hours is a lot of time for things to get badly bent out of shape.

Alison and I travelled up as soon as we could after school was out on the Friday evening, feeding 3 hungry teenagers on the way, so we missed the start. Base was at Burns Farm campsite outside Threlkeld and we slotted the van in and amongst the tents, vans and cars of other pacers and supporters. Before retiring for the night, we received the news that Nicky was steaming along and 25 minutes up at Threlkeld. The time had been made up between Skiddaw and Great Calva and on the rocky descent from Blencathra.

So it seemed that all was well. Not sure Stu Pitches would agree with that though. He had the honour of carrying Nicky's sac over leg 1. He's a big strong lad, surely tough enough to cope with an allegedly heavy sac. Ask for an advance weigh-in next time Stu, before you accept the job! There was a minor navigational blip approaching Skiddaw summit; probably a simple lack of attention on a balmy May evening. No damage done, other than to navigational reputations of course!

It was a warm night; plenty of sweat shed even through the dark hours of Leg 2 with Winter BG'er Eddie Winslow at the navigational helm. The climbs went well and she was 43 minutes ahead of schedule at Dunmail Raise. The temperature was 12 degrees C at Dunmail at 3.00 a.m. for the waiting support team. Too warm!

So, all still seemed well. But one of the difficulties of any ultra challenge is what, when and how to eat. The best-laid plans can collapse under the feeling of nausea at almost any stage after 20 miles or so, and once it's with you, it's hard to shake. From what I can gather, nausea made itself felt around 3.30 a.m. Anyone fancy another 14 hours of effort, feeling like you are going to puke at any second? Don't let me put you off this type of challenge, but this issue needs wrestling with and overcoming.

Cut back to the campsite. Various comings and goings ensured a poor night's sleep for yours truly (and I suspect others) and by 4.15 a.m. I had had enough. Alison was due to leave for Wasdale at 5.30 a.m. so I fired the stove up for the first cuppa of the day, which was well enough received considering the early hour. After the Wasdale pacers had left, I had the place pretty much to myself as the kids slept on peacefully and I pottered about, having a shower and getting kit ready for the day ahead, and lashing on the sun cream.

So, we must move on to Leg 3, when the whole thing could have seriously unravelled. Throughout this Leg, in the company of Alison Weston, Roy Ruddle and Bob Wightman, Nicky suffered from a badly upset gut and had to answer the regular calls of nature that were the consequence. So you get the picture; you feel like you want to be sick and the world is pouring out of the other end. And it's getting hot. And I told her to enjoy it!

It is a measure of someone's true character how they react to adversity (even more so unexpected adversity). Don't feel sorry for yourself. That won't help. This contender reacted, as the day really warmed up, by picking up even more time across the roof of England. Quite remarkable, really. Foxes Tarn, not Broad Stand, had been the plan to get across to Scafell summit. But when in the company of climbers with the North Face of the Eiger and the Walker Spur of the Grand Jorasses under their belts, why not go for a short rock climb? More time clawed from the schedule.

It was 8.19 a.m. when Nicky arrived at Wasdale (46 minutes up on schedule) for more careful ministrations from husband Ken and Susan Melia, the road support team. Going clockwise, the climb out of Wasdale goes straight up the side of Yewbarrow. It's very steep. (The late Chris Brasher, who tried the BG many times, but never succeeded, had a penchant for a couple of bottles of brown ale with his lunch at Brackenclose. I joke not, and you will not be surprised to learn that the mountain soon came to be known by his support crew as "Spewbarrow". Men were men in those

days.) After a short rest Nicky rocketed up Yewbarrow in 43 minutes. I checked the splits on Billy Bland's 13 hours 50 minute record run and he only did it in 33 minutes. On my Round I struggled up there in 62 minutes. In the quaint parlance of the US ultra-runner, was she already "smelling the barn"!?

Leg 4 going clockwise has been the graveyard of the hopes of many a BG contender. It has 7,500' of ascent in just 11 miles, rocky and rough. She had the company of Peter Shields and Alison Eagle whilst the navigation was down to Helene Whitaker who knows a thing or two about long distance challenges having completed the 3 classic UK rounds (Bob Graham, Paddy Buckley and the Ramsay) in one summer. It would be hard to ever be in better hands.

The heat became oppressive. Her hat was soaked by the pacers every 20 minutes or so and water poured down the neck and back of an increasingly hot and bothered Nicky. A wet towel was soaked and put round her neck to try and keep skin temperature under control. Well it must have worked just fine, because the pace never really dropped and she arrived at Honister pass at 1.30 p.m., 56 minutes ahead of schedule.

I had made my way to Honister with the kids after striking camp at Burns Farm. No news of progress at Wasdale had filtered through before I left, but the appearance of Dave Wilby and Kelly Harrison and friends ensured that I knew my services would be called upon earlier than the schedule indicated. Ken and Susan appeared in the support vehicle and made ready. The other Leg 5 pacers (Kevin and Rachael Gooch, Jo Foster and Fliss Milner) arrived from Burns and the wait began.

The heat looked like it had really got to her as she gingerly sat down for food, drink and more sun cream. There was plenty of time in hand (in one sense too much) and a good finish would have made a 21 hour time a distinct possibility, which would have been amazing in the conditions.

A quiet word with both Peter and Helene saw me briefed on the current physical and mental state of our heroine (I shall not be so ungallant to share those confidential assessments here), and we were ready for the off. A hot and sunny afternoon made for easy navigation and having been over Leg 5 the previous Saturday with Emma Gregory of Preston Harriers, almost all energy could be directed at Nicky.

The long drag up Dale Head saw a very quiet Nicky. (This is not unusual; this climb on her BG is the only time I ever recall Alison Weston being lost for words!) A chunk of time was lost to the schedule. She was finally slowing down! A decent shuffle across to Hindscarth revived the chance of a 3 hour leg, but the climb up Robinson saw an increasingly weary contender struggling to keep with the schedule. The descent off Robinson was taken at a brisk walk, Nicky having made it plain that her knees were "not good" (not quite how I would have put it I must say). With time in hand, there was no pressure to run and it was clear that Nicky just wanted to finish and wasn't interested in pushing for any particular time. Frazzled, she was by now.

There was a necessary break for a change to road shoes just after Newlands Chapel. The road section was also taken at a walk (though not a slow one, I might add), bar a jog once across the bridge at Portinscale and on the run up to the Moot Hall. At 5.12 p.m. Nicky's long and hot day out was over, a time of 22.42 for the Round.

A rather emotional reunion with Ken and pacers and supporters from earlier in the day ensued. The calmness of the celebration was loudly interrupted by the arrival of the multiple contender Pudsey & Bramley Centenary BG “train” and supporters. The market traders and passers-by must have wondered what all the fuss was about. Nicky looked ready for a cold shower.

Now the dust has settled, I am sure everyone can look back on another great day out in the hills. Nicky plans to thank all those involved in her own, characteristic fashion.

Ultra running often (always?) involves putting your head down and suffering for hours at a time. The last 3 Legs of Nicky’s BG contained much suffering and not much smiling. But she showed remarkable physical and mental strength to complete the Round on such a hot day, and deserves her success. She can now turn her mind to other things and challenges. Recalling the words of Maurice Herzog: “There are other Annapurnas in the lives of men” and of course women.

Supporting Bob Graham Rounds is one of life’s true joys; helping friends (and sometimes people you have never met), achieve a goal which is beyond most people, brings rewards which I find difficult to articulate. Fell running is a small community; ultra fell running even smaller. But we help and support each other through these mad endeavours, and are all strengthened by the mutual experience.

Thanks Nicky. I enjoyed my afternoon out, as well as all that went before it, and I know that Alison did too. Here’s to the next big challenge, whatever it may be.

Morgan Williams
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