Dragons Back Race 2015…… Brian Melia

I was cruising home in the Ennerdale 2013 fell race when Helene Whitaker came up to my shoulder” liked your Mt Fuji report…. you should do the Dragons back race!!” I finished and that night I registered an interest for the 2015 race, not really understanding what it was all about, I knew it was a long way.

Moving forward to this spring I decided I need to reccie some of the areas the route covers. I knew day one was the Carneddau, glyders and snowdon (49Km 3823 m of ascent). Day two- Moelwyns, Rhinogs (54km, 3544m). Day 3- Cadair idris and plynlimon (68km, 3712m). Day 4 –Elan valley (68km, 2273m). Day 5 –Black mountains to the finish at Carreg Cennen castle (57km, 2313m)

Race director Shane Ohly played his cards close to his chest not revealing the route other than the headlines and a couple of snippets by video about the forthcoming race.

I was panicking about Crib Goch, as it is very technical, but knew this would almost certainly be in. The enjoyable weekends about five in all I had in Wales were lovely. Always more technical than I had initially imagined, but fun also.

 I went down for the race on Sunday for registration in Conwy.I was not confident as I felt I knew it was going to push me to my limit. The atmosphere was really friendly and settled my nerves a little.

The race started Monday 7 am in Conwy castle. I ran really slowly trying not to pick an injury up and followed runners until visibility over Drum became difficult. It was then map and compass…amusingly people were heading all over the place and I had to help some of the overseas runners who were struggling initially… Still there was a great feeling. I ran ok and was pleased to pass Glyder Fach and Crib Goch (1 year of worry over). The run over Snowdon down to the finish of day one was much more difficult than expected, but there were some friendly faces at the finish (Helen and Wendy Dodds). I quickly showered and prepared for day 2 then ate. The atmosphere was amazing…unlike anything else I have done and a real camaraderie was beginning to form. The stories from day 1 were gripping and enlightening. I hit my bed about 10pm having been recommended a 6.30 to 7.10 am start. Breakfast like the tents are all provided by a truly amazing group of volunteers.

I was less worried for my safety on day 2, but this is the biggest day by far in my opinion. Rules are ……no crossing of pastureland only paths marked on the Harvey 1/40000 maps. We all wore trackers so any discretion would lead to disqualification. I set off well and was comfortable meeting with Helene working for the TV company on top on Cnict, a must beautiful mountain before the tough Moelwyns…Mawr and Bach. The starts were staggered after day one so the elite runners started to show up and then I realised how rubbish my running was. I made some horrible navigational errors over the next 4 hours to the mid point, and then things settled down to the camp in Dolgellau. I was a little worried about blisters on some of the twisty descents, but was just about OK.

Day 3 went very well: conditions were good and I ran with Lawrence Eccles all day going over a misty Cadair and finally Plinlimon to overnight camp. We ran quite a way with Jez Bragg unfortunately overnight he became ill and needed medical attention. Amazingly he started with me Lawrence and an American Kevin for a few hours, but eventually dropped off our tails, eventually pulling up…. which was really sad as he is a brilliant runner! We ran really strongly through to the finish of day 4 with a well-earned swim in the river to clean up.

The atmosphere that night was mixed…. excitement and sadness with some really tragic stories of dropped runners and incidents. Most injuries seem to be around the feet. I had my own issues, but managed to be ready on the start line for around 7 am Kevin and Lawrence were keen also. We set off very slowly down the road, but within a couple of hours found ourselves rocking along nicely…. then something quite special happened we seemed to pick up the pace and within the next hour we started to pass everyone in the field and were only passed eventually on the top of the black mountains by Jasmin Paris and Jim Mann. We were slowed by having to help a troubled runner, but by then we were content we had a blast and just began to enjoy each other’s company to the Castle Carreg Cennen finish. It was a low key affair which suited us all and we just rested in the lovely sunshine having run 300k and 15665 m ascent (maybe more in our case).

The evening prize giving was special for many reasons, but mainly for sensitivity especially with those who did not complete the course, it did not really matter to anybody in the end, we were a close nit unit by now and beer was flowing wildly!! It was a great adventure, pushing most people to their limits. My tent started with 8 persons on the final night it was down to 3 others. There was both sadness and finally peace. Would I recommend it………??? Whatever you do …do not ask Helene

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