WALK THE UPS, JOG THE FLATS AND RUN THE DOWNS - OR SOMETHING

Posted on July 4, 2016 by Eddie

A gentle ramble round the Lake District Fells.
Or something like that.
Category: Observations

It was around eight in the evening and we were running down into Langdale from the Blea Tarn road when a nice chap walking his labrador asked the all important question; "which bit of this do you enjoy?". "The rest stops, definitely the rest stops." was the best that any of the group I was with could come up with. Two days later and with a bit of perspective, I can definitely say that I loved the whole run - even the bits that hurt (and there were a few of those).

This is the story of how I ran, walked and staggered round 58km of the Lake District, in the Ultimate Trails 55 Challenge.

Ambleside to Kirkstone Pass



The start in Rothay Park at Ambleside was well organised (even if the portaloos were hidden behind the marquee) and only a short walk from the campsite where I had spent the night. More importantly, it was only a short stagger back to the campsite when I finished.

I must admit that I felt pretty apprehensive as we lined up to start. I'd heard this race described as "a tough day on the fells" and "undulating", I was certainly aware that it is long. Â A sprained ankle a few weeks ago had put more or less ruined my training. As a precautionary measure, my ankle was heavily strapped.

At ten thirty, the race set off amidst a flurry of people clicking on GPSÂ watches and phone apps.

The first section was three and a half miles, almost all of it steep climbing up to the summit of Kirkstone Pass. My plan was to walk all of the steep hills, jog on the flat land and then run on the down slopes. This worked well on the way up to Kirkstone, though most of it was up (very up). I tackled the slopes at a brisk walk and then jogged and ran when things eased up. I could already see lines of younger, thinner and fitter people vanishing off into the distance. I reached Kirkstone in about an hour and a quarter, which is what I had planned - so far so good. I was 10% of the way round, but had climbed 30% ups.

The feed station was a couple of tables under a gazebo in the car park. I grabbed a drink, a handful of peanuts and headed on down into the valley.

Kirkstone Pass to Glenridding



The next stage was around seven and a half miles long; dropping down into the valley and then along to the village hall in Glenridding. The long slope down was delightful to run on and would have been even better if a heavy rain squall hadn't blown in half way down. I only just got my waterproof on in time. The ground was soaking underfoot and I gave up trying to find dry ground, I just ran through bogs and streams, figuring that my feet would dry out when I got back to my tent.

In every long race, you go through a point where you feel that you just can't do any more and that you want to give up. I was expecting to hit that at around twenty miles when climbing up a tough

slope. In fact, I hit it at 8 miles when jogging along a country lane. Everything gave up and I had no strength left in my legs, it was awful. Thankfully, I bumped into a bloke called Jeff, he was a serious fell runner, but had developed a niggling injury and was struggling as much as I was. We jogged/walked along the valley bottom to the checkpoint and encouraged each other to keep going.

The Glenridding checkpoint was indoors, which given that the monsoon had set in in no uncertain terms was a relief. I shovelled down a few cheese sandwiches, drank some flat coke, zipped up my waterproof and headed out into the rain. I left the checkpoint at 1.30pm, three hours in and slightly behind the schedule I was aiming for.

Glenridding to Grasmere

This was another seven or so miles; a long trip along the Grizedale valley, up over Grizedale Hause and then down into Grasmere. Simple. Actually, that description is a bit deceptive, the stage started with a short sharp climb to Lanty's tarn and then a steep drop into Grizedale. I was feeling a little better after the sandwiches and was moving pretty well. I stormed up the hill at a fast walk and ran down, overtaking a few people on the narrow paths.



And then came Grizedale.

I've nothing against Grizedale, it's a lovely valley. The paths underfoot are good and it is wonderful running country. However, a stiff headwind driving rain into my face rather changed things; it was

tough going and it got tougher. As we got to the end of the valley and started climbing to the Hause the wind and rain picked up. Then, just to add to the fun, it started to hail. Hail in July! Whose, idea was that?

It was somewhere along here that I started chatting to Wendy, an HR specialist from Teeside who was moving at more or less the same pace as me.Â In distance events like this, it is not unusual to run with people for a while; it's a very sociable sport.

At the top of Grizedale Hause, I was greeted by the smiling face of my mate Dave who was marshalling for the race. At this point, I didn't know whether to shake his hand, hug him or kick him. A few years ago, while walking in Little Langdale, Dave had suggested that I think about running an ultra-marathon and here I was, doing just that. I reminded him that if it wasn't for him, I'd be back home at the Radnage beer and music festival - I'm very grateful to him!



Dave and I had met up the previous evening for a Chinese meal and then Dave had hiked up to Grizedale Hause where he pitched his tent and waited for the first runners to come through first

thing in the morning. Did I mention that there were some people doing 110 km? Twice as far as I was doing!

The run down to the Grasmere Road started off quite technical and it was hard to pick up any speed, but after the slog up to the pass, it just felt good to be running again. As we got lower the paths improved and we picked up the pace. Somewhere on the down slope, a friendly competitor offered me a mini-sausage. That wouldn't have been my choice of pick-me-up, but it was wonderful. I've had expensive dinners that I enjoyed far less than that mini-sausage.

We arrived at the Grasmere checkpoint just after five; about an hour after my schedule.

Grasmere to Little Langdale

A few sandwiches, a handful of peanuts washed down with a cup of hot, (very) sweet coffee and I hit the road again. Wendy and I left the checkpoint at the same time and agreed to run together for a while longer. Actually, we walked together; neither of us wanted to run after just eating.

This stage was five miles long.



We climbed out of Grasmere over the shoulder of Silver Howe and for a brief moment the sun came out and a gorgeous rainbow appeared over the Grasmere valley. I'm sure that Silver Howe is a small hill but it seemed enormous - and we didn't even go over the top. The drop down into Langdale was rocky and it was hard to build up any speed. At this point, we came across an unexpected problem. One of the gates on the footpath was locked and we had to climb over. Now climbing over a gate is

not a huge issue, but a group of tired runners, twenty miles and lots of hills into a race are not particularly flexible. The sight of the group of us trying to get over that gate would have made a good YouTube video.



Into Langdale and the cruelest part of the race. As we ran one way along the path, we bumped into runners going the other way after completing the loop of Little Langdale that we were just about to embark on. It would take us another three hours to get to this point again, by which time the runners we had crossed with would be finished and tucking into a hot dinner.

Up into Little Langdale and a lovely little checkpoint under a gazebo in the woods. I had a couple of sandwiches and an industrial quantity of some nice fruity flapjack. At the checkpoint, someone pointed out that we had 13 miles to go; a half marathon distance. The five or six of us standing around, inhaling calories, smiled at each other, just a half-marathon to go, we'd got this cracked!

We left this checkpoint at 6.20, expecting to be at the next one in two hours.

Little Langdale to Chapel Stile

According to the information we were given, this stage was about six and a half miles long; over Blea Tarn and into Langdale then along to Chapel Stile. I'm not convinced that this is correct. Judging by the time this stage took us it was more like eight miles - by which time we were desperate for more food.



We slogged up through some woods from the checkpoint and took an undulating path past Little Langdale Tarn to Blea Tarn. I'd forgotten how rocky the path alongside Blea Tarn is; it was very slow going and I was worried about my ankle. Eventually we dropped down into Langdale (past the man with the Labrador) and up onto a path along the other side of the valley. We ruefully ran past the Stickle Barn pub which had been a checkpoint the previous year and which had provided free chips for the runners. Just beyond the pub, we passed a very nice gent who was waiting for his wife with a big bag of chips - he kindly allowed the three of us who were running together to have a chip each and we headed on towards Chapel Stile. This bit was tough. The terrain wasn't particularly hard, but we couldn't work out why we didn't get to the checkpoint earlier than we did. Expecting to arrive at

8.30 ish, we finally made it to Chapel Stile at 9.30.

At this point, we were slightly worried; we had just taken three hours to cover what we thought were six and a half miles (ok, the terrain was tough), but we still had a similar distance to go and the race had to be finished by midnight.

Fifteen minutes later and suffering from an overdose of fruity flapjack we headed out the door.

Langdale to Ambleside

The path took us down the valley and then up onto the slopes of Loughrigg, one of my favourite Lakeland Fells. At this point, we were joined by someone who was doing the 110 km race and who was moving at about the same speed as us.

The path cut across fields and joined a road that runs along the side of the hill. This was a bit worrying, we were on this road, heading downwards, for longer than we expected. We thought we must have missed a turning when we eventually saw a race marker pointing to a path sloping uphill. The people marking the route did an amazing job, but it might have been good for my blood pressure to have had one or two markers on that road on Loughrigg, just to let people know that they were on the right track.



We hit the last hill, up over the shoulder of Loughrigg, as darkness fell. Knowing the hill fairly well, it was good not to be able to see too far ahead; Loughrigg is one of those hills with far too many false shoulders and summits. You are forever thinking you are at the top only to be greeted by yet another slope upwards. When you can

only see a few feet ahead of you, you don't have that problem.

Then all of a sudden, the lights of Ambleside appeared below us. One last down to run. Absolutely brilliant! I felt as though I'd only run five miles, not thirty five. Down the hill, over the bridge, sharp turn right and into the field that we'd left over twelve and a half hours earlier.



Some kind person removed the timing chip from my ankle - I couldn't have bent down to take it off. I was given my finishers medal and a t-shirt and (most importantly) a hot bowl of chilli. The only disappointing thing was that Dave was waiting at the finish to see me and that in the dark we missed each other. He had a bottle of wine with him and I'd like to have investigated that.

In one sense, it was a bit of a failure. It took me almost three hours longer to finish than I had hoped. Then again, given the weather, my interrupted training and the virusÂ I was keeping at bay, I did ok. The truth of it is that I'll never be a fast runner (the winner finished in less than six hours), but I am gritty; I can keep going and there is something to be proud of in that. Will I be back next year? Ask me when the stiffness wears off!

Thank you to all of the people who organised this event, especially the volunteers who did the kit-check, marked the route, provided sandwiches at the checkpoints and were unfailingly cheerful and encouraging; you made a brilliant day, even better.

Yes, the last two pictures are blurry. This is either because theÂ iPhoneÂ doesn't take good pictures in the darkÂ or because my hands were shaking. I'll let you choose!

Equipment:

For anyone who is interested (and any companies who would like to send me samples...)

- Shoes: Brookes Cascadia trail shoes with Profeet custom insoles.
- Socks: Mund coolmax trail socks from Sport Pursuit
- Backpack: Salomon Agile 12
- Waterproof: Kraft lightweight from Sport Pursuit
- Trail shorts, compression tights and top by Decathlon
- Head torch: PS-H8 by UniLight