SBU35: THE ST BEGA'S ULTRA

Posted on August 28, 2017 by Eddie

In which I follow in the footsteps of a legendary Irish Princess; though I suspect she wasn't wearing trail running shoes.
Category: Observations

Regular readers of Kouyanet are warned that this is another post about running. Normal, service will be resumed later in the week.Â

The St Bega's Way Ultra follows the path of legendary Irish princess, St Bega, travelling between two chapels, that both bear her name. The Start is in the heart of the Lake District, overlooking Lake Bassenthwaite near Keswick, and the Finish and race HQ is in the west coast village of St Bees. Rather than follow the easy way via the coastal plain, the route runs right into the heart of the Lake District mountains before dropping down towards the sea.

https://video.relive.cc/02711763831_garmin_1503825188307.mp4

I arrived at St Bees on Friday evening and registered for the race. My race number was 7, which I assume was due to the fact that my name occurs early in the alphabet, rather than any expectation that I'd finish in the top ten! Races like this one all have a mandatory kit check; the organisers want to make sure that the people they are sending out into the hills are equipped for emergencies. Much to my surprise, my waterproof jacket was deemed not to be waterproof enough and failed the check. The annoying thing wasn't so much that my jacket didn't pass muster, it was that I've run a number of races carrying that jacket and this is the first time that anyone has had a problem with it. If they'd told me I needed a different jacket at a race start in Keswick or Ambleside, I could have immediately gone out an bought a new one, but not in St Bees. You can't buy very much in St Bees, in fact as I was to find out a wee while later, you can't even get food on a Bank Holiday weekend - I had to drive to the next town for supper. Anyway, a couple of the lovely people running the event offered to lend me a jacket and as things happened, the weather forecast was so good, that full waterproofs weren't required.

Having checked in, I pitched my tent in the school field, where the race HQ was based. To add to the fun, I discovered that my mattress had a slow leak - by early morning, I was sleeping on the ground!



About 5.15, I woke up, put on my running gear, taped my ankles to protect them on the rough ground and headed off to the school gym where everyone was gathering. I remembered to leave my drop bag with dry shoes and socks to put on at checkpoint 2, but forgot my race number and had to go back to the car to get it. When I finally got organised, I had a cup of coffee and a pot of porridge and started to feel apprehensive. Why are these events full of people who look younger, thinner and fitter than me?

Around 6.15, we loaded into coaches and drove the easy way round to the start of the race. I wonder what St Bega would have made of the Workington bypass.



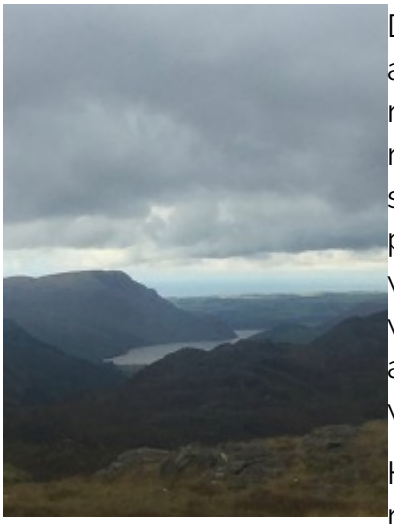
Looking back over Derwent Water towards Keswick and Skiddaw

The race started on the slopes of Dodd, one of the side summit's of Skiddaw. Just before the start, a woman - Frances - asked if I was me - which I was. We'd been exchanging advice about this race on a Facebook group a couple of days earlier and it was great to meet her. We started uphill, over the top of Dodd and I walked up with Frances, envying those who could run up that slope with no apparent effort. Dropping down from Dodd the path was very slippery and being fairly confident about my ability to descend, I left Frances behind and joined up with another group of runners. From here there was a flat section across the fields towards Portinscale and the shores of Derwent Water. The wet summer had done it's damage and the footpaths were soggy and my feet got really soaked. For the next five or six miles, there was a group of us more or less running together. The paths along Derwent Water and down Borrowdale are familiar ground to me and it was brilliant to run in such a lovely place. As we got through Grange, the group had whittled down to two of us who were more or less running at the same pace. It turned out that Diane, who I ran to the finish with, was someone else I'd chatted to on the Facebook group - it's a small world.

Eleven miles in and we got to the first checkpoint in Rosthwaite, this is where the Four Passes Event starts and finishes, so it is a familiar place. After a brief break, a lot of flat coke and some flapjack, Diane and I headed out towards Seatoller and the slopes of Honister Pass. The walk up to Honister slate mine starts steeply, but evens out to an easy gradient, so we made good time. At the Slate Mine, Diane's husband with their dog to cheer her on, but she soon caught up to me again after chatting to them. From the mine, we took the winding road up to the slopes of Fleetwith, it's a brutal slope and we both needed a couple of breathers on the way up. However, the very top of Honister is one of my favourite places in the world. As we walked/ran along the rising path along the side of Brandreth, we got a beautiful view, first of the Buttermere valley with its three lakes and then of Ennerdale and the long road down to the sea.



Looking up the route from the Honister slate mine.



Looking over the shoulder of Haystacks to Ennerdale and our route to the coast.

Dropping down into Ennerdale was hard going. The rock steps were wet and slippy and we both fell a couple of times. Even though we moved relatively quickly, this was still the slowest mile that we did in the whole race. It was a bit of a relief to get down into Ennerdale and onto the smoother forest track. I rewarded myself for my efforts with a mini-pork pie. The track down Ennerdale was long, too long. We ran the bits that went down and most of the flat bits, but I pretty much insisted that we walk anything that had the slightest hint of an upwards slope. Diane runs at about a minute a mile faster than I do, so it was hard work keeping up with her, but it was really good to get pushed.

Halfway down the forest road we came to the second checkpoint. For reasons, I didn't fully understand, the staff were dressed as cowboys and there was some rather cheesy Country and Western music playing. It sounds daft, but it did make for a good atmosphere. More importantly, there were cheese sandwiches, flat coke and some cocktail sausages. I fuelled up and then changed my shoes and socks. The change of shoes did me a lot of good and I avoided the blisters that I picked up on my last ultra.



Looking back down Ennerdale

At this point, we were 22 miles in with another 13 to go - just a half marathon left. We headed on down Ennerdale (which seemed to be getting longer as we ran) round the shores of the lake on and on to the village of Ennerdale Bridge. Somewhere around here, we noticed that Diane's and my GPS watches were giving different distances - mine said that we'd done half a mile more than hers - we never did work that out. In the end, I recorded the race as 37.3 miles, which is a bit longer than the advertised distance of 36 country miles. We climbed out of Ennerdale Bridge and then dropped down in a gorgeous little valley that I'd never visited before. By now, my calves were really sore an I was struggling to go uphill, while Diane had a bad knee and was struggling to go down. As long as we stayed on the flat, we'd be ok! The problem was that we now had to go over the top of Dent, one of the westernmost fells in the Lake District. We climbed up via the appropriately named Bummers Hill. It was brutally steep and my legs did not want to go up at all. To add to the fun, the sun came out and it was hot!

Dent would make a lovely walk on a summer's day; but after thirty miles, it's 'orrible!

Somewhere on the slopes of Dent, our group swelled to four people. As we got to the top, we saw the race photographer with his long lens pointing out to us. "If you've got a bit of a jog left, I can get a great picture", he said. So dutifully, we all summoned up what energy we had left and ran up the last twenty or thirty metres to the crest of the ridge. He then got us to run past the summit cairn for some more photos. I hope the pictures are really good and that he didn't get any as I was struggling badly lower down on the hill. The drop down into Cleator Moor was steep but mercifully short. Diane really struggled on this bit, but she perked up when we got down into the village and jogged along to the last checkpoint, where we were greeted by people dressed as American Indians!

A quick break for some salty snacks, something to drink and a loo break, then off we headed for the last few miles. We were back down to a group of three; I didn't get the name of the guy who joined us, but he'd been one of the people that was running in our larger group around Derwent Water twenty miles or so ago. He'd fallen behind us, then overtaken us and now was moving at the same pace. Much of the last section went along a cycle path with a hard surface. It wasn't the ideal ground for running on with tired feet, so we speed-walked much of the last section. With a mile or so to go, we got back onto paths across fields, which were much kinder underfoot. Less kind, was the fact that some of the field gates were tied closed. For the record, trying to climb over a gate after covering 36 miles on foot is hard work and certainly not dignified. I'm very glad that the photographer was not lurking there!

Five or six hundred metres before the end, we came through a gate and into the school field. In a nice touch (typical of this event), someone recorded our race numbers and radioed them to the finish line, so that as we approached the finish, our names were read out over the PA. With the finish in sight, we picked up speed and came as close to sprinting as we were capable of at this point in the day. We ran past my tent, along a route marked by flags and up to the finish. A grand day out!

At the finish, we were given our official time for the race, mine was 10 hours 14 mins. I'd hoped for ten hours, so I was pretty pleased with that. I'm not fast, but I get there. We were also given a goody bag with a t-shirt, some rather nice running socks a medal and food and beer tokens! My pint of Ennerdale Pale Ale was wonderful - though my glass did seem to get empty very quickly! A plate of fish and chips and mushy peas probably doesn't rank as ideal recovery food, but it was just what the doctor ordered.

The grass in the finishing area was strewn with tired runners (and some who looked disgustingly fresh, considering what they'd just done) and their friends. Everyone who crossed the line was given a huge cheer and the crowd didn't really diminish till the very last runners crossed the line twelve hours after the start.

The party carried on in the beer tent for another couple of hours, but I'm not as young as I once was, and I called it a day around nine pm and headed back to my tent. As I said, it was a good day.

Just a couple of closing thoughts:

This was undoubtedly the friendliest race that I've been involved in. The staff went out of their way

(even offering to lend me some kit) to make it a good day.

Even though I've not done much by way of training since my last long day out, I was still able to complete the race in a pretty good (for a slow, older bloke) sort of time. I'm not as fit as I'd like to be, but I'm not bad.