A DNF: NOW, I'M A REAL RUNNER!

Posted on October 16, 2017 by Eddie

A grand day out, even if I didn't finish the race!
Category: Observations

Rites of passage are important; they mark the transitions in life and show that you are really committed to an endeavour. Generally, we mark rites of passage with some sort of ceremony, but sometimes they are purely personal events. There was something about getting malaria that said to me that I was committed to living in rural West Africa (though once would have been enough - the subsequent bouts didn't add anything to the experience).

As a runner, completing my first half-marathon was significant, as was my first (and last) marathon. I think that by the time I finished my first ultra-marathon, I could really say that I was a runner. But this weekend, I had an even more significant experience; I DNFed (did not finish) a race.

The race was the Four Passes, perhaps the best one I've ever done. It's nineteen miles and involves 5,000 feet of climbing and the terrain is tough. Now, nineteen miles isn't all that far, I ran a thirty seven mile race only six weeks ago, so I wasn't that worried about the distance.

However, I was woefully underprepared. In the intervening weeks since the St Bega's Ultra, I've had a holiday, a work trip to Argentina and a long lasting virus. During that time I've not run more than eight miles and I've done no hill training. However, I was pretty sure that my base fitness would be enough to carry me through; I wouldn't get a very good time, but I would finish.

A couple of days before the race, I started to have a few doubts as the virus was hanging around (it's into week three, now) and walking the dog quite enough exercise, thank you. However, on the day of the race, I was feeling pretty good and as I had convinced a bunch of friends to join me, I felt obliged to start - I could always walk round and still make the cut off!

I jogged along Borrowdale with our Dave and felt OK; not great, but OK. I was breathing more heavily than I should have been, but nothing to worry about. Climbing up Sty Head was fine, and I thought that my time in the gym was finally starting to pay off. Then I hit a wall. All of a sudden, there was just nothing there; my lungs were aching and my legs had no strength in them. I could have made it over Sty Head, but I really didn't want to conk out in the wilder country that lay ahead. Far better to take the couple of miles to the road and jog back to the start line. It was a little humiliating, but much less so than if I'd blown up completely five miles and a big hill from the nearest road.

So, I got back to the start, informed the safety team, changed into dry clothes (the weather was dreadful) and headed off for a pub lunch!

I spent the afternoon helping the organisers record the finishing times and handing out medals to the plucky souls who had spent hours in the pouring rain and invisible scenery. There were some very fast people in that race!

Some Thoughts:

- I had a great day. I got to run in my "happy place", Borrowdale. I know some of the paths there as well as I know anywhere in the world and I love that valley and the surrounding fells.

Helping out at the finish and cheering on the runners was great fun and I enjoyed every minute. Above all, it was fantastic to cheer Dave, Chris and Ben - my family and friends as they crossed the line. OK, I'd love to have finished, but I didn't mind too much.

- As always, in the mountains, it's important to know when to turn back. The same goes for hill walking as for running.
- The big lessons are about fitness. I worked hard through the winter and spring to get fit for this summer's races. However, in the six weeks since the St Begas Ultra, I haven't maintained my base fitness as well as I thought I would. You can't stay race fit all of the time and with the age of 60 rapidly approaching (366 days to go), I have to work harder to get fit and to stay fit. I need to think through the implications of this for next year, when I have plans for a few long runs.
- I've got unfinished business with the Four Passes, so I'll be back again next year.

If you are a runner and you are reading this, especially if you rarely venture off the roads, can I strongly encourage you to think about doing the Four Passes or one of the other events run by Ascend Events. You'll not regret it.



There was a plus side to not finishing!