

My BGR attempt 21/09/2012 (by Andrew Charles)

Birthdays don't normally get much notice in my family, but for some reason I started this year resolving to achieve two goals, to run 60 miles on my 60th birthday, and to grow a ponytail. The second aim is still on-going, and is taking longer than anticipated, but the former has been and gone.

Somehow the 60 mile challenge morphed into a BGR attempt – the distance was right – but what I hadn't really taken into account was the 27000 feet of up and down involved – who cares - the views would be worth it!

Patrick advised me that a good marker for the BGR was to run the Old County Tops (OCT), a 12 hour, 35 mile challenge run in mid May, and I persuaded Alan to join me in this, in exchange for joining him in the LAMM in Scotland for a weekend in June. When I applied for the OCT I discovered that a requirement for entry is evidence of at least three long FRA approved races in the last three years – as I had none of these, this led to a rather frantic spring, where interspersed with the DFR club championship races, I added the 15 mile 'Teenager with Altitude' around Robinson in March, and the 15 mile Stuc a Chroin near Stirling in May. I later discovered that running BGR legs also counted – so I was well qualified when we completed the OCT in May, and we finished in just over 11 hours – so the training seemed to be on course.

I then settled into a pattern of visiting the lakes twice a week, and spending from 4 to 7 hours running parts of the BG route. For most of the route I had never been up the peaks before this year so it was a totally new experience – learning the route and the changes of weather and views. I ended up running various parts of the BGR 27 times during my 9 months of training, mostly on weekdays - an advantage of being between jobs – but on my own. I finished my training by running legs 1 & 2 at night to check my pacing and navigation in the dark, before taking a 2 week break from running.

As I had decided to run my attempt on my birthday (a Friday) I set the start time at 10pm to enable support runners to complete their day jobs before joining me.

One thing I learnt from my training is that I have a nervous disposition for a fell runner – I avoid steep drops where possible, and Broad Stand gives me vertigo just looking at it. I am afraid of the dark, and couldn't have run a solo night leg on open mountains to save my life. And getting lost in cloud or being blown over by the wind gets me scurrying back to base as quick as possible! So it is little surprise that by the Friday evening I was looking and behaving like a condemned man. As I toyed with my pasta I was convinced my cold had taken a serious turn for the worse – and I wouldn't have believed it of myself – but I could barely leave the hotel room when the time came to assemble at Moot Hall – and I imagined myself collapsing halfway across Fitz Park without even getting out of Keswick.

So it was with great relief that I found myself climbing steadily up Skiddaw on leg 1, in perfect conditions and feeling comfortable – and what a luxury carrying no bag. One downside of the previous panic was that my guts had gone into stasis – and never woke up for the whole 24 hours, so I had absolutely no appetite, and eating was forced and automatic throughout the whole event. The sweets, mint cake, flapjacks and oatcakes did their job and kept me well fuelled, but the peanuts and chopped up venison burger (a mainstay of my training diet) never got a look in.

I had chosen a schedule suitable for an old fart like me of 23.30 so any time saved would be precious. Legs 1 and 2 went better than I had hoped – in my previous test I had lost nearly 30 minutes over the two legs, but with no bag to carry, and supporters sorting out my food and clothes, I arrived at Dunmail 15 minutes up, and on leg 2 we flowed along comfortably and kept bang on the 4.30 schedule.

Leg 3 also started well - enjoying a glorious sunrise - until my knees started to become sore as we left Bowfell. This was new to me, as I had never had problems with my knees before (I had expected my feet to be my limiting factor), but then I had never run for more than 12 hours non-stop. At Scafell I lost 10 minutes going up, and then a disastrous 23 minutes coming down, which wiped out my earlier benefits and halved my spare time for the finish. However, as I arrived at the changeover at Wasdale I was overwhelmed – I had expected 4 support runners (none of whom I knew – they responded to my request on the FRA Forum), but was greeted by 8 who cheered me in to the changeover. Andy had returned from leg 1 to navigate and encourage me through leg 4, a BGR couple who were camping at Wasdale had also heard about my run and requested to join in, and one of the 4 supporters had brought their partner.

I had a quick 5 minute feed and sock change and amazingly as we set off up Yewbarrow, my knee ache had disappeared, and I started to take a few minutes out of my schedule. However, by Steeple my knees started to complain again, and although I only lost 3 minutes over the whole of Leg 4 my descending was getting desperate, and my general 'get up and go' had got up and went.

I was hoping for another miracle recovery at Honister, but despite some massage on my most painful knee by Emma who ran leg 4 with us, I left Honister finding the climbing painful for the first time. As my left knee became more painful, so my right leg started to seize up as well, and it became fairly clear to me that we wouldn't be at Little Town in time to run the 6 miles home. It was now dark and cold, and I could barely walk except on smooth surfaces. My supporters became just that, as I leaned on their arms (or necks!) for any descent, and I climbed slowly and stiffly. The drop off Robinson was pedestrian, and we skirted around the top rock step, but I was lowered over the next two, and for the steep grassy descent we took up a ceilidh formation and I reversed down with my arms linked to Alan and Stan guiding me around any obstacles.

Finally we walked towards Little Town, and were met by a relieved and thankful support team of Liz and Lucy, who had seen the torches at the top of the descent but couldn't believe how long it took us to climb down. I walked the final half mile hand in hand with Liz, my wife, excited to have completed my 60@60 and managing all 42 peaks. I gratefully had a lift back to Keswick, whilst the three support team enjoyed a jog back along the scenic route, able to warm up after their perambulations with me.

The next day I came down for breakfast like Douglas Bader on a bad day, and I experienced my 80@60 as I tottered around – but as the good weather continued we did manage a stagger to Lake Derwent and a short row on the Lake as my legs took a rest.

My memories:-

- ⤴ The strength of the dread that filled me before we set off – quite unlike any pre-race nerves
- ⤴ The fantastic support and encouragement I had throughout the run, both friends and strangers
- ⤴ The brilliant weather for the whole 24 hours (capped by the 'shooting stars' of space debris returning to earth – whilst on leg 2 – more sensed than seen as we were watching our feet)
- ⤴ Being able to climb all those hills within 24 hours
- ⤴ Seeing my wife and Lucy managing the logistics, and greeting us by torchlight as we walked towards Little Town