

Report of Andy Blackett's Bob Graham Round - Saturday 31st March 2012

After failing to get round the BG last year I was very keen that the outcome would be different this time. All the analysis of last year's failure came down to a few things to do differently this time which I discussed in my first blog post [<http://tickinghills.blogspot.co.uk/>]. It basically boiled down to more 8+ hour training days, setting off in the morning, using pain killers and avoiding caffeine.

3 weeks ago I saw that a good area of high pressure was developing on the weather forecast and this was enough to spur me into action, I felt strong but had a few niggling injuries which I feared would get worse with more prolonged training so I wanted to go for a round at the first available good weather window. I contacted some people who I consider reliable enough and foolhardy enough to come out for a leg or 2 of support and when I had a team, I set the date of Saturday 31st March and the start time of 6am. This was all arranged with the proviso that it would be called off if the weather was windy or rainy.

The start time of 6am clockwise raised a few eyebrows as everyone else going clockwise chooses to go between 7pm and 3am. Looking back on the day it was the right time for me to start. I got tired at about 2am, so much so that I was falling asleep on my feet. Had I started between 7pm and 3am I wouldn't have coped with the lack of sleep and wouldn't have got round. The main problem with a 6am start c/w at this time of year is that L4 is navigated in the dark, I had an incredible team for L4 of Jim Mann and Simon Noble in whom I had confidence they could find the right lines through the rocky ground at night, so I set the start time for 6am.

L1

Dave Swift and my wife, Fiona Blackett were my support crew for L1 both along to carry and banter. I can't remember ever running in the Lakes in more perfect conditions, blue sky and little wind made for a perfect start to the day. 2 minutes up on the 22hr schedule on Skiddaw and a further few minutes on Great Calva and Blencathra got us into Threlkeld 10 minutes up on my 22hr schedule.

L2

Running into Threlkeld and seeing a team of 5 support runners rather took me by surprise. I hope I wasn't rude when I asked "was I expecting you all?". As it turned out it was just a miscommunication that led to there being 5 runners rather than 4 and, as soon as I had checked logistics wouldn't be a problem for my road crew I was happy to have them all along.

The chat was good, and I don't think I will ever think of the tv show Gladiators without also thinking of all 6 of us climbing the "travellator of scree" to the top of Fairfield, while following a line which I included just for my own amusement. The clag came down, as forecast from Great Dodd to Dollywaggon but nav was never a problem and spirits remained high as we took a few minutes out of the schedule here and there to leave us jogging into Dunmail Raise 25 minutes up.

L3

Duncan Archer joined me for L3 with Andy Kirkup, Martin and Brad along for the extra miles after L2. In perfect conditions Duncan delivered a flawless support leg. He took me on good lines, fed me when I needed it rather than when I wanted it, kept an eye on the schedule and carried my clobber. We lost a few minutes on Calf Crag, gained a few here and there, lost 5 at Esk Hause eating a picnic brought up by Dom, who had walked all the way up just to deliver a bit of food and moral support – top effort Dom. We lost another 5 on Scafell, taking the Climbers East Wall traverse rather than Broad Stand bringing us down to Wasdale after the fantastic scree run descent 15 minutes up.

L4

L4 started well gaining 5 minutes on the climb of Yewbarrow as the dusk turned to dark, after that “not so well” would be my appraisal. I couldn’t get going on the descents and I slowed to an almost halt on the climbs. I honestly didn’t realise it was possible to move that slowly through the hills. My L4 team of Jim Mann and Simon Noble did a fantastic job with Jim concentrating on getting some food down my neck, which I really didn’t want at this stage, and Simon going ahead to check we were on the right line and light the way. I wasn’t in a happy place as I realised that if things didn’t pick up there was no way I was going to make it back to Keswick in 24 hours. Jim, Simon and later Dave Swift all attempted to convince me that all I had to do was keep moving, but there seemed a slim chance of managing that for the next 5 hours given the way I was feeling.

My knees were sore and every muscle in my legs screamed at me on each step. I ate energy gels fairly frequently but didn’t eat much else, preferring the risky strategy of just gels to the certainty of throwing my guts up and the subsequent time delays. Clive King met us just before Great Gable which provided a psychological boost for the climb and Dave Swift met us at the top of Gable to join us for the descent. I should take this opportunity to apologise to Dave for throwing away a Torque Bar in disgust at my inability to eat it and it hitting Dave square in the chest – sorry. A Torque Bar is quite a dense food and it must have given Dave a hell of a fright to be hit by one in the middle of the night on the ascent of Green Gable.

A quick stop to vomit on the climb of Green Gable, an experiment with jogging backwards on the way to Brandreth and the agonisingly slow descent to Honister and L4 was over. Now 55 minutes down on the 22 hour schedule I had 4:05 to get to Keswick. In any normal circumstances it would have been in the bank, but I didn’t feel in the bank yet.

I met Fiona on the way into the car park and had a quick cry and told her how much I was suffering, looking back it wasn’t the pain, but the knowledge that nearly 2 years of training would have been wasted if I wasn’t able to find enough energy to get to Keswick in the next 4 hours. I had convinced myself that regardless of the outcome I wasn’t coming back for another go, so it was now or never.

L5

I didn't stop at Honister and set off with a pan of pasta in my hand (my first proper food since Wasdale) with Clive King and Patrick Bonnett, leading the way with Fiona along to retrieve the pan and change me into my down jacket as I went.

I managed to maintain a steady pace on the climb only losing another 15 minutes on the 24 hour schedule – that should just get me there so long as I can keep moving on the road. Somewhere on the climb of Hindscarth, Clive managed to convince me to take some more pain killers and an energy gel, losing another 6 minutes to the 24 hour schedule wasn't a problem - so long as I could keep moving on the road! Then on the descent of Hindscarth something magic happened in my legs and I got going again – Clive is taking full credit for this, and I am in no position to argue. I climbed Dale Head (the final hill) on the 24 hour schedule, a minor miracle given the previous 6 hours of constant losses! On the final slopes I was falling asleep closing my eyes, wobbling and then righting myself again before I hit the floor. To remedy this I started running hard up the climb to get my heart going and hopefully prevent me falling asleep. Checking my watch I was going at 3Mph, which doesn't sound much, but on the steepest part of the climb of hill 42 it had the desired effect.

150 minutes to get back to Keswick should be easy given the 100 minutes allowed on the 24 hour schedule and I briefly toyed with the idea of trying to run 10 minute miles which would give me a time of under 23 hours. This plan fell apart when I realised I couldn't hit 10 minute mile pace flat out, so I dropped to a walk and jog as I was able in order to get it finished as soon as possible with no time in mind other than being finished by 6am.

Fiona joined us at Little Town Church for the last 5 miles, which was very much appreciated. I kept drifting in and out of semi-sleep and wobbling all over the road, again fearful that I would hit the deck and damage myself I started jumping around, shouting, making silly noises and generally doing whatever I could to keep myself awake, it was a real battle. I think at some points my actions made it look like I was having a full scale physical and mental breakdown, but it did the job. Dad joined us at Portinscale – full credit to Fiona and Dad for running the last section after a full day of road support - an unbelievable effort from them both.

Turn right at Portinscale. 1 mile to go. A few silent tears when I finally allowed myself to acknowledge that this was going to happen. Avoid running into the lamp posts. Hand in hand with Fiona and bang on the doors of the Moot Hall. 23 hours and 36 minutes.

Thanks and final thoughts.

To all my support runners – Dave, Fiona, Martin, Andy, Brad, Helen, Martin, Roger, Duncan, Jim, Simon, Patrick and Clive. Huge thanks to you all. Special thanks to Dave and Clive who went above and beyond what I had asked by meeting me on L4 as well as running a leg. Apologies and special thanks to Patrick, Clive, Jim and Simon who had to deal with me in my “grumpy teenager” mode on L4 and L5. I owe you all one, please get in touch when you need me for any future supports.

Many thanks to Dom, for supplying us with a picnic at Esk Hause.

And to Fiona and Chris, for doing my road support and running the final sections with me. It takes a special person to drive round the Lake District all day and night purely for my benefit. I couldn't have done it without you.

The reason I started running 18 months ago, was because I wanted to do the Bob Graham Round. It has been one hell of a journey and along the way I have found that I am a pretty decent fell runner on the short races and that I'm not cut out for 24 hour challenges! I have met dozens of people, many of whom seem to have a life which revolves around these 42 lakeland hills and some of whom I now class as my closest friends. I have got no idea what I am going to do next, but I'm sure I will have a lot of fun finding out.

Andy Blakett

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