

Winter BG 28th Feb 2011

I think it was Mark Smith who first told me that any Winter Bob Graham round where everyone gets home safely is a success and after an uncompleted attempt on the 18th of December last year I was ever more mindful of how quickly those Lakeland fells can turn nasty! With this in mind I had decided to wait till December 2011 for a further attempt where I would be fitter and more experienced but the BG has a strange way of eating away at you, teasing you when it has beaten you. I hadn't seriously considered another attempt until I had the good fortune of supporting Ian Taylor on his successful attempt on the 22nd of Jan. Conditions were near perfect, crisp cold but very runnable – I was extremely jealous and decided that I would go again as soon as I got a break in the weather. It finally looked like that break had come at the end of February BUT it was right on the deadline and I had a race on the Sunday before! I checked the rules over a winter round and asked Morgan Williams for clarification and sure enough I had to be finished before the end of the 1st March. Now just to get a crew and choose a time.

I started pulling a crew together on Sunday morning (Sunday 27th February, about 36 hours before I set off!). It's a big ask... 'hey do you fancy running with me up lots of big hills tomorrow in the cold?' and of course people were working etc. It was clear pacers would be very thin on the ground but I managed to get 3 nutters to join me on the fells. Leg 1 would be Rhys Findlay-Robinson, leg 3 and 4 Joe Charles, leg 5 Andy Blackett (straight from work). Leg 2 was a problem. My nav is not the best and I was terrified to be even thinking about going solo across the Dodds and Helvellyn but if I wanted to do this then that looked like the only option. I finally settled on an 11.45pm start time. I wanted to be going as late as possible to allow Andy to get to Honister after work but didn't want to end up on Gable in the dark. To ensure I was off Gable in the light I would have to be right on my 21 hour schedule – something I felt I could do but it was certainly ambitious as the fastest winter round ever was 22hours and 8 mins. I could only try!

The weather still looked great, I had my crew but I was bottling leg 2. From a car park in Keswick I called Andy so he could persuade me that I could do it - I knew it was at the edge of my ability to nav this leg in the dark, try and keep to schedule and I knew the penalty I would pay on leg 4 if I fell behind! Joe had never run legs 3 or 4 before either so most of the nav there was going to be from my memory – could I hold my mind together that long – what was going to be the effect of carrying all my own gear for the leg – only one way to find out!

Leg 1

Before I knew it we were off – Rhys was great! He had volunteered to do leg 1 as it was the only leg he could fit round his work shifts so was giving up a night's sleep to be there! He got me settled in really quickly and leg 1 was very uneventful (which was great ☺). We were up 6 minutes on the schedule at the top of Skiddaw but discussed the pace and slowed down – (my aim was to not be up or down any at the end of leg 2). We came down Doddick Fell from Blencathra as I wanted everything really safe and careful – a good round would come if I took no risks and as there was a good bit of ice on some rocks I figured it would be easier than Hall's Fell ridge. We came down 1 minute up and Rhys had managed to convince me to do leg 2 solo (I was terrified!)

Leg 2

I normally consider that Bob Graham rounds where the contestant is fit enough are made or broken by leg 3 but this wasn't a normal round – I was going to have to run leg 2 in the cold and dark on my own. I am not really sure what I was scared of but I was certainly scared. So with my bravest face and most confident attitude at Threlkeld I tell Gill that the weather is great, there's good visibility and that leg 2 would be just fine! I then set off and try to hold it together. 'So this is lonely'. I've never listened to music on the fells as I like being up there and taking it all in but tonight was different; I had to stay strong and keep my mind on it! So with The Killers and The Kings of Leon for company I started to nav my way round the leg. Clough Head 5 mins early and the breeze is getting up – let's hope that stops and take it easy there is a long way to go! Great Dodd 2 mins more up. Steady now, don't blow this, but I am really starting to enjoy it now !

'Give me rolling hills and tonight could be the night that I stand among a thousand thrills' Nice choice of lyric for tonight.

I headed for the shelter on Great Dodd before cutting the corner – no quick routes tonight just keep it safe. Watson, check. Now the tricky one, (Stybarrow) get this right and it's just a trundle along the motorway to Helvellyn a much needed relief from nav – a chance to eat and drink something – man it's getting chilly!

Being gifted a clear night made it really cold but I could see the outline of Stybarrow and went straight line to the summit. Across to Helvellyn was uneventful (that's good). I went to touch the trig point and my wake-up alarm on my phone went off – 5.45am – up 8 minutes! I knew I was tired though and was very aware that I couldn't afford mistakes. As I approached Nethermost it was just starting to dawn and I could make out the outlines of hills. Just 3 to go and after Dollywaggon they would be easier. I started to climb to Dollywaggon but it didn't feel right – no chances – remember you promised yourself! I got the GPS out and checked (I was 90% sure I was on the lump between nethermost and Dollywaggon but wanted to be 100%) sure enough wrong place – move on – yep this is Dollywaggon! Easy now find the post down the hill and tick off the last 2 – I relaxed (bad move) I missed the path round the back of the tarn in the half flight I really don't know how and only realised as I came across the wall – damn it! Contour across the grass to the col – it's going to be fine! Ohh a spring – fill water bottle! I hadn't seen anyone at all (not surprising really) so dropped my bag at the col and headed up Fairfield (half way up I realised my GPS was in the bag so I had no trace but had my mobile phone so I have some nice summit pics at dawn 😊 to prove I was there!) Just Seat Sandal and down to Dunmail – I'd done the what I thought was going to be hardest part of the round. I proceeded to again relax and, in turn stuffed up the nav, coming off Seat Sandal way South of Dunmail raise and having to contour back in – nevermind, I was there and 10 minutes early. Nice work and now I would get some company!

Leg 3

The first thing I said at Dunmail was along the lines of 'yes I'm great – but I haven't eaten or drunk enough – I need to get that sorted on this leg or I'll be in trouble'. I'm sure this sounds crazy – I was clearly aware I needed to eat more but was too focussed on nav etc to actually act on it. I ate a small feast at Dunmail, sat on the verge (we forgot chairs in the rush to get things ready) and stayed a little longer than the planned 5 minute break but felt better for it. Leg 3 was really smooth – I ate and

drank well and we generally cruised round, gaining a few minutes here and there on the schedule. Joe was great, he kept me well informed and took over the map reading, taking bearings and checking stuff when required. Bowfell was a little tricky due to ice and snow on the ascent and we were a little slow at times across the Scafell ridge where the snow and rock mix proved very hard to run on but to be fair for a winter round this was great weather – yes it was cold still and I spent a long time in the dark but basically the weather was as good as you can get at this time of year. I always worry about Scafell Pike to Scafell – Joe's a good climber and wanted to go up Broad Stand (not a chance! I have been up it but only in summer and on the end of a rope!) I wanted to go West Wall traverse so as not to lose the height but the rake was full of snow and after Bowfell we thought this might be tricky so went Foxes – what a big height loss that is! Anyway it was the last summit then down the screes and into Wasdale – 10 minutes up on schedule – very much game on – I really wanted the fastest winter time ever now which was 22:08 set in 1989 – all I had to do was hold it together and stick to the schedule and leg 4 was about letting the breaks off and trying to gain some time.

Leg 4

We had a great feed at Wasdale; Bill Williamson had offered support but couldn't run due to injury so was going to prepare a bit of cake and a coffee for us so Gill didn't have to trek to Wasdale. He had gone to the extreme! Coffee, lentil soup, fresh bread rolls, walnut cake, bananas, rice pudding, tropical fruit - wow! Gill had made the trip anyway and it was good to see her jumping up and down again as we came in early and it meant I could get a change of clothes which I really needed. We feasted until Bill finally told us we had been too long and need to get moving again but not without a promise of more of the same at Blacksail Pass – now that was something to look forward to. Banana in hand we set off up Yewbarrow to conquer the big ones.

I loved leg 4 on my September round. I did the leg in 3h43m and it was almost certainly the most enjoyable time I have ever spent on the fells. Today would be different – my legs were heavy and I was tired and I had a job to do. Keep the focus and come into Honister on time and I would have the round I really wanted sub 22 was definitely on the cards if I could hold it together! We set to eating into the schedule, 6 mins under on Yewbarrow, a further 10 on Red Pike but I was struggling to lift my feet – this hurts! Steeple another couple of mins and on and on! Bill, true to his word, was at Blacksail with all manner of goodies. We stopped for a few minutes and scoffed what we could then filled our pockets and set off again – despite the stop we were dead on target for the section to the top of Kirk Fell. By the time we got to Honister we were up by 30 mins and I didn't dare stop as I really wasn't sure that I would be able to start moving again. My feet were killing and I really wanted to change my shoes but could feel that one of my nails had dislodged and was now resident in the toe next to it! I didn't need to see that so no shoe change!

Leg 5

It was all about just holding it together now and it was getting dark – this was going to really test me! All I remember is just keeping moving – that was about all I could think and for the first half I chatted a little with Andy but then just closed in and really focussed. The cold had now really taken its toll and I was heading into a second night section –so soon! The three hills were pretty straight forward but we messed up the descent and ended up down all the crags on the main path – agony!! I was stiff all over! Once we got down we started to get moving again and once on the road we

started to wind it up – we were working it out and thought a sub 21 might just about be on the cards but with some great encouragement from Andy and lots of mind over matter we started to shift a little bit. My overriding memory of the road was Andy just rolling out anecdote after anecdote to keep me entertained with just the odd word (or grunt) from me – he was fantastic! Joe had been back to Keswick to get changed and then ran back up the road to join us for the run in which was brilliant! Final time of 20 hours and 39minutes – a decent day's work! 😊

Rhys came back to see us finish after work but we were a little too fast for him to make it. It was only sat in the pub afterwards that I realised what a tiny team we had done it with: Gill, Rhys, Andy, Joe ... and Bill. Only 3 runners supporting!

I enjoyed a really nice pub meal, (real solid food is such a great thing!) and half a pint of beer (thanks to Simon Noble for coming to meet us in the pub afterwards and stepping up to help me with what I couldn't drink 😊) then my mind and body finally gave in. I rambled absolute nonsense on the way home whilst hallucinating horse drawn carriages and people hurling push chairs into the A66! A good night's sleep sorted that and back to work the next day!

Huge thanks to everyone who helped on the day, has shown me the route and helped with my previous unsuccessful winter attempt – you all contributed to this success – I am really humbled by your selflessness! Thank you!