

The Lakeland 100, 2011

Report by Sue Sleath

The South of England doesn't make the best training ground for an event in the Lakes, but all in all, the training from January through to the beginning of June had gone pretty well, I felt. I'd managed a good few weeks of 50-60 miles (well above the norm for me!) and a trip to the Lakes at Easter to recce the route and get some hill training in. However, the second trip to the Lakes during the June half-term had left me with niggling injuries which never fully recovered, work was getting in the way with lots of evening meetings etc and, to be honest, I'd just got fed up with the constant high mileage. The last 2 months weren't therefore the best preparation. Would it cause me any problems? Only time would tell, but it did leave me feeling very nervous about the task ahead.

I arrived in Coniston at lunchtime on Friday and set about preparing myself. The tent went up; the airbed and sleeping bag were laid out, so that I could pretty much fall into them and the bag with jim-jams, shower gel and towel was laid out ready to grab at the end of the race.

Shortly afterwards, Martin, Paul, Jeremy and the others from Hardley+ were spotted. When Martin greeted me with a hug, I had to fight back the tears - yep, definitely nervous!

By 5:30, when the race started, I'd managed to compose myself and set off up the miner's path in pretty good spirits. I passed the Hardley crowd who cheered me on enthusiastically - always a spirit lifter! One characteristic of this event is how friendly everyone is, and I immediately fell into conversations with other runners. Not surprisingly, they normally started, "So, have you done this before". One answer that sticks in the mind was from a chap who said, yes, he finished last year in 39:39, after injuring himself on the way round. The thing that had driven him to finish, was that he could then tick the event off, so that he NEVER had to do it again; but here he was back again, determined to put in a faster time!

The first few checkpoints came and went. I saw Stuart Mills (last year's winner and another Southerner) at Boot - nice to see a familiar face. At Wasdale Head, I was beginning to feel a little weary. This was where I had spent the previous evening, but instead of the hot bath and comfortable bed that I enjoyed at Lingmell House the previous evening, I had the tough climb up to Black Sail Pass to contend with. Not too bad though, stomach beginning to suffer, but legs still feeling strong.

The head torches went on for the descent down to the Youth Hostel which can be a little scary even in full daylight. Two people outside the YH cheering us on. Over the next pass and down onto the good track along the lake into Buttermere. As my various running partners will attest, I do have a bit of a history of spectacular falls

when running; however, I managed to complete the rocky descent with no mishaps. I was just complimenting myself on a job well done, when I fell flat on my face on the track - ho-hum!

I was a bit concerned about running the leg from Buttermere to Braithwaite in the dark, as there are a couple of points where it would be easy to miss the path - and that's in full daylight; I was therefore glad to see the lights of Keswick in front of me as we dropped down off the fells. That checkpoint also signified the end of the first 'third' of the event. (I'd broken the event down into 3 chunks in my mind - the first hilly bit from the start to Braithwaite, the 'flat' bit past Keswick and along to Dalmain and then the final hilly bit that is the '50' route.)

I struggled to eat anything at this checkpoint and then managed to leave my road book behind - fortunately, I realised before I had gone too far! It was during that middle 'chunk' of the event that I really began to suffer. I was feeling queasy and struggling to do much running at all. I would get caught up by a group of runners and try to stick with them for a while before I had to let them go. I was overtaken by a good few people including a couple of women and it was at some point during this stage that I decided that I was just going to have to focus on getting to the finish. I certainly wasn't going to be coming back next year to complete unfinished business!

Despite slowing up considerably in my mind, I arrived at Dalmain in good time, As with all the checkpoints, the marshals were brilliant. Full of enthusiasm and optimism and dispensing sensible advice about how to deal with blistered feet and dodgy stomachs.

One of the groups that caught me up during that stage, kept reappearing (I think they were spending longer at the checkpoints than I was...). They reappeared again on the leg to Howtown and proved to be excellent company. (A big Thank You, George, Dale, Gerry and the rest, you turned a bad patch into one of the highlights of the weekend) I was still struggling to eat, my legs seemed to lose all power and I know I would have struggled to keep going on my own; so the excellent company was a real godsend.

However, while going along the edge of Haweswater, I was really struggling to keep up with them and, as a consequence of trying to move too quickly on rough ground, fell over a couple of times. I now had an impressive wound on my leg and a tiny cut to my hand which nevertheless seemed to be leaking gallons. When I reached the checkpoint at Mardale Head, I told them to go on without me, it seemed unfair to make them wait and I wasn't sure I'd have any skin left on my knees if I carried on the way I'd been going. I hung around at the checkpoint for a little longer, trying to get some fuel down my throat before I also set off. However, it wasn't too long before I caught up with George and Dale from the group I'd been running with earlier. They said that they were also suffering and had let the rest of the group go

on. Their pace was much more in line with mine so I was lucky enough to enjoy their excellent company through Howtown (What a fab checkpoint!! There's definitely a business opportunity here - I'd go there for an evening out any day) and on to Ambleside.

We left the checkpoint together, but I very quickly became aware that it had gone very quiet - I turned around to see Dale and George stopped outside the chip shop. They looked to me as if they were digging out cash from their rucksacks to buy fish and chips. What the ..! I waited for a minute or two before deciding that there was no way I could cope with the smell of fish and chips, so decided to push on alone. (I later discovered they were actually getting a knee brace for Dale's knee.) There was now a steady stream of 50 mile runners overtaking me and brief chats with some of these before they pushed on ahead, brought me to the Chapel Stile checkpoint.

With only 2 legs to go, I was beginning to smell the finish. So after a brief stop where I managed to eat some vegetable stew and half a banana, before giving it up as a bad job, I pushed on up the Langdale Valley. The climb up to the road, as with all the other climbs since Pooley Bridge, was a slow struggle, but only a couple more climbs to go after this one! Going through the woods near Blea Tarn, I started heaving. 'Oh, great - just what I need now', I thought. However, once my stomach had relieved itself of said stew, I realised that, not only did I no longer feel sick, but I felt a whole lot better generally. A small group of runners had passed me while I was at the side of the path and I quickly caught them up as they had stopped to consider which gate to go through. It turned out that this was the 1st woman in the 50 and, although they did eventually pull away from me, they weren't going that much faster. Great - I've got my running legs back as well!

The next leg-and-a-half felt like my fastest stretch of the whole event. I caught up with Gerry and the rest of her group just after Wrynose Pass when they were also considering their route options. I pushed on ahead, once I had set them on the right path - feeling far too good to hang around now. A quick stop at the checkpoint at Tilberthwaite before I set off up the hill for the final climb. No problems with the legs on this one and I was quickly over the worst of the hill. I caught up with another runner who had a torch which made mine seem frankly rather pathetic. It was worth the little extra effort to stay with him, as the path is quite indistinct in places. We were soon on our way down the final rocky descent into Coniston. As we neared the bottom, my companion informed me that the woman in front was a '100' runner and in 2nd place. Decision to make - do I take it easy and settle for 3rd place or go for it and battle for second? Well, there really was no decision when it came to it! I overtook her on the final stretch of the rocky path and, not knowing whether she was going to take up the chase, sprinted the final mile-ish back down the Miner's Path and into Coniston. I hung around and waited for her to come in, a couple of minutes behind me. (I could have taken it a little easier after all...) before we walked into that amazing welcome in the hall together.

There's no doubt that the limiting factor for me during this event was my stomach and not my legs or feet. It started to play up after about 30 miles, so it wasn't just about the distance of the event. Was it the night-time running? The heat? I don't know but would be very interested to hear any opinions on this. Interestingly, I got chatting with Stuart Mills about this on the Sunday after the race. He said that it was his belief that you didn't actually need to eat that much, even on an event of this distance. Given his record in this type of event, it's certainly not done him any harm. Maybe I'll try his approach next time.

Did I say next time...

My Lakeland 100 top ten features:

1. Listening to Joss Naylor speaking at the pre-race briefing.
2. The amazing welcome given to all finishers as they arrived back in the school hall at Coniston, whatever the time of day or night.
3. The checkpoint at Howtown.
4. The fact that your tent can be pitched next to your car and within metres of the finish line.
5. The route to Wasdale Head and beyond in the evening sunshine.
6. The free pre/post race massages.
7. The friendliness and support of everyone involved - organizers, marshals, other competitors, supporters - even the general public.
8. The camaraderie with the other competitors before during and after the event. I went on my own and was there from Friday morning to Monday morning, but was never short of someone to chat to.
9. The top of Wether Hill (but not the climb to get there!)
10. The pre-prize giving speech by Marc Laithwaite. He's got quite a sense of humour!

But more than anything else .. the fact that I've now done it!