

Joss Naylor Lakeland Challenge, 15th June 2019.

Joss Naylor, aka King of the Fells, Iron Man or simply The Shepherd is something of a legend in fell running circles and beyond. His achievements are too numerous to mention and now, well into his 80's is still to be found running around his native Lakeland fells. In 1990 he established a challenge to traverse 30 Lakeland summits over a distance of 48 miles taking in 17,000' of ascent, starting from Pooley Bridge at the top of Ullswater and finishing at his home of Greendale Bridge in Wasdale, where he transitionally greets successful completists. The challenge is open to over 50's and is sometimes referred to as the 'old man's Bob Graham'. The time allowance varies between 12 hours and 24 hours depending upon age and sex. For a 50 year old man you have to compete the distance in 12 hours, but once you turn 55 you have an additional 3 hours to play with and have to complete the route in 15 hours. Successful completists who have raised a minimum of £100 for a charity of their choosing are presented with a tankard at a presentation each October. The charity I chose was the Northern Head and Neck Cancer Charity, a small local charity run by a team of volunteers for whom fellow Tyne Bridge Harrier Kev Cheetham has been raising funds.
<https://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/KevinCheetham>

I first became aware of the Joss Naylor Challenge when fellow Northumberland Fell Runner, Geoff Davis (twice) and his wife Susan (once) both 'did a Joss'. Having turned 50 in 2013, I briefly considered an attempt but felt the 12 hour cutoff was too onerous and made a mental note to have a bash once I turned 55. Attempts are usually made mid summer to maximise the amount of light available and hopefully catch good weather. Having turned 55 in September 2018 I set a date in mid May to 'do my Joss'. I started my training back in August 2018 with a solo run round the first 15 miles of the route. It was something of an early reality check as to how tough the Challenge was going to be as I staggered into the Kirkstone Inn in need of something (of a non alcoholic variety) to rehydrate me.

The Challenge is traditionally split up into 4 legs; Pooley Bridge to Kirkstone Pass, Kirkstone Pass to Dunmail Raise, Dunmail to Sty Head Pass and Sty Head to Greendale Bridge. The Challenge is intended to be completed as a supported run with pacers accompanying aspirants on each leg and support being provided at each changeover point. Therefore, in order to improve your chance of a successful attempt you must cajole, bribe or beg people into helping you out on your big day both running and supporting in a number of different ways. As winter turned to spring my training resumed and I started to familiarise myself with the route and sound people out to help me. My other half Vicki was invaluable in dropping me off in various locations and beetling around in our VW camper to scrape me off floor in some distant location. As well as running the whole route in various stages I took advantage of my training regime to try out running some long routes highlights of which included the St Cuthberts Way and the last section of the Pennine Way along the Border Ridge. Unfortunately, on that run, I sprained my ankle 14 miles in and had to continue for another 14 miles with an ankle resembling a small turnip, this was only made possible by industrial strength painkillers (cheers, Phil). Turning my ankle seemed to be a feature of 2019 having done it in January, then again on the Border Ridge in May but then, unfortunately the weekend before I was due to attempt my Joss, I did it again at the Flower Scar race in Todmorden which I stupidly chose to run. I stubbornly refused to accept the reality that this was going to put the kibosh on my attempt and convinced myself that it was making a miraculous recovery. However my decision was made for me 4 days before my attempt when my back went getting out the car, leaving me barely able to walk let alone run 48 miles. Emails were sent out informing my pacers and support team that it was off.

My original plan was to complete the Joss and then for me, Vicki and Finn, our short haired Collie, to take off round the Continent in the van whilst we are still allowed to do so. We decided to delay our plans in the hope that my back and (still sore) ankle would get better and a tentative replacement date of 15th June was set. Back and ankle gradually improved and more pleas were successfully made to replace the original pacers who couldn't make the new date. Game on!



5.30am start at Pooley Bridge

It was with a great sense of relief that I lined up at 5.30am with Bertie Goffe at Pooley Bridge on the appointed day of the attempt, as it had started to feel that everything had been conspiring against me. Despite the pick and mix forecast which predicted every kind of weather in one day, conditions were looking ideal; at least for Leg 1. One of the roles of the pacer (as well as navigating, carrying your kit, ensuring you are eating and drinking etc.) is to record the times each summit is attained. My game plan was to try and stick to a 14hr 40min schedule and not to go off too fast. As the first summit, Arthurs Pike, was reached I was informed I was a few minutes up on the scheduled time. This advantage was maintained and gradually increased throughout the leg leaving me 15 minutes ahead by the time I got to Kirkstone Pass. This was good news and left me feeling confident that the day was going to have a happy ending.

Descending down into Kirkstone Pass I spied the white roof of our VW and made a beeline for it. Approaching the van a chap popped up and asked if I was John? He was part of the Joss Naylor Challenge Committee who traditionally welcome aspiring Challengers en-route, although I suspect he was also checking whether or not I had actually turned up on the day. After a few minutes rest and having tried to force as much pasta down my throat as I could, I left Kirkstone Pass for leg 2 at 08.43 with my new pacing crew of Cees, Stu and Dexter. Leg 2 starts with a steep slog up Red Screes before a long slog over to a high point of Fairfield before dropping down to Dunmail Raise via Seat Sandal. Having previously hit the clag over High Street on Leg 1 we re-entered the cloud on Fairfield and compasses came out and bearings were taken, all I had to do however was to keep putting one foot in front of other and eat and drink when told to do so. Descending down to the road crossing at Dunmail Raise, I again spied the white roof of the camper van amongst a host of vehicles, many of which would be supporting other Joss Naylor and Bob Graham (a 66 mile challenge) attempts.



Somewhere on leg 3

After a quick cuppa, more pasta, a change of shoes, socks, shirt and maintenance to vulnerable bits, I was off again, this time accompanied by Paul, John and Stu putting in a second shift. This leg starts with another long slog, this time up the Eastern flank of Steel Fell. After the summit of Steel Fell was reached, the drag onto High Raise seemed to go on forever and the ground appeared to become increasingly boggy and the sky increasingly wet and cold. I'm sure at one point we had a bit of a hailstorm, but I just concentrated on keeping on moving. After we got to Rosset Pike things started to get more interesting in terms of tricky, rocky terrain and continued in this vein well into leg 4. Fortunately the weather started improving and we had views down into sun dappled Langdale valley far below. We had a brief chat with marshalls huddled on top of Bowfell, who informed us that the Great Lakes Race, which had recently passed over the summit had already been won by Keswick runner Carl Bell. We continued to make our way over to Great End via Esk Pike. The descent off Great End to Sty Head Pass was always going to be tricky but we didn't manage to find the vague runners trod and had to improvise. However we didn't lose any time and in fact were nearly 30 minutes up on schedule at arrival at the Pass.



The Stretcher Box at Sty Head Pass

Sty Head is the last changeover point but isn't accessible by road so no white roof to look out for. Fortunately, however, Harry had taken on sherpa duties and had carried supplies up from Borrowdale for the final leg. The rendezvous point was the wooden stretcher box at the foot of the path up to Great Gable. Spirits were high, food was consumed, photos taken and socks changed. I felt a bit like a boxer in the ring being tended to by Susan and Harry before setting off for the last leg with Roger and Geoff.



Leg 3 and 4 pacers and helpers at Sty Head Pas

The weather Gods had deigned to provide us with a pleasant evening and the rocky terrain underfoot had dried out for the descents of Great Gable and Kirk Fell and the glimpsed views back on to the Scafell massif and Great Gable were awe inspiring. I was still feeling strong and maintaining the time banked earlier on. I was just trying to concentrate on not doing anything stupid (turn my ankle?) that might jeopardize my chances of a successful day. After reaching the summits of Pillar and Scoat Fell it was just a case of the little out and back ridge to Steeple before all the tricky rocky stuff was behind us and grassier terrain awaited in the form of Haycock, Seatallan and Middle Fell. Haycock is a big lump but has the benefit of a scree chute to descend by, which, if found, makes descent easier on tired legs, which by now, I was in possession of. In fact every bit of me was starting to feel tired but I knew today was going to be a good day. Seatallan is a pig of a hill with a never ending trudge up and a descent, which would be great on fresh legs, but sapping to weary limbs and aching knees. Middle Fell, the final hill of the day, however, is a peach of a hill with a nice winding ascent, stunning views over to the Wastwater Screes and a fantastic gradual grassy descent to the day's end.



Looking back to Great Gable on Leg 4



Ascent of Pillar on Leg 4

As Greendale Bridge came into view I could make out a cluster of vehicles and bodies awaiting our arrival. A blast of emotional fuelled adrenaline helped me to up up my pace for the final few hundred yards where The Shepherd was waiting to greet me and shake my hand. It really was the icing on the

cake, not only having completed the Challenge, that had been consuming me for the previous 10 months, but also to meet a living legend who is also a charming and modest bloke at the finish.



Me and Joss at Greendale Bridge, Wasdale.

My overall finish time was 14 hours 13 minutes which put me 47 minutes within the target I had to meet and in plenty of time to be fed and watered at the local hostelry. I have to say that I enjoyed every single minute of it as I never felt that the outcome was going to be in any doubt, largely due to the incredible support I got throughout the course of the day from a host of people who gave up their time to help me, and to whom I am massively grateful. Fell running is like that though. The sort of people who like running in the hills are generous in every respect and always willing to help out like minded people. Without wanting to sound like some Hollywood prima donna, I would like to thank Bertie Goffe, David Armstrong, Cees Van Der Land, Stuart Scott, Paul Appleby, John Duff, Roger Sillito and Geoff Davis who ran with me on the day. Louis Goffe, Matt Walker, John Telfer and Fiona Brannan for offering up their support services, Harry Ransome, Susan Davis and Kim Taylor for providing support en-route and most of all to Vicki for putting up with me, ferrying me around and making sure that everything ran smoothly on the day.

John Tollitt