

Ramsay Round Attempt – 17th August 2021 – Mark Clarkson and Andrew Higgins.

Mark: It's funny how some running challenges seem to linger in your mind for a long period of time and nothing seems to progress with them, then suddenly with some hasty planning you find yourself stood outside a Youth Hostel in Glen Nevis at 9pm on a Tuesday evening in August, ready to set off on a Ramsay Round. Soon after the completion of a BG some 4 years ago I began to wonder whether I had what it takes to get round the Scottish equivalent. Each year I had planned to get up to recce the route, but something always came up which prevented it. Then this year, with the cancellation of an adventure race event in August, a contingency plan was developed with Andy to tackle Charlie Ramsay's round. Neither of us knew much of the route or what lay ahead.



Andrew: Mark and I both reflected on the stark contrast between the focus and familiarity we had afforded to our successful BGRs and our chosen approach to the Ramsay: low key, on-sight, limited hill support and sub optimal start time and season. Despite this, our collective experience warranted a level of confidence to deliver on what we'd promised to ourselves (and to Charlie himself):

"We won't be breaking any records, just aiming to enjoy a tough adventure in the big mountains together and hopefully go sub 24hrs".

I love the Munros; I'd done all 23 on the Ramsay Round on other occasions some years ago but that only served to make me aware of how grand and brutal these mountains are. Having excitedly made the call to join Mark I was then plagued in the weeks leading up with self-doubt. Mark is fitter than I have ever known him: His recent win at the SLMM proof of his strength, whereas I felt fit but fragile spending a large part of that weekend nursing old niggles and applying some somewhat rusty skills. It would be our first big challenge together and I wanted it to be memorable for the right reasons!

9pm arrived and off we went. We had chosen an anti-clockwise round to follow Charlie's original direction. Running down the Glen Nevis road, with the last daylight of the day, I felt excited, apprehensive, and... lost! Well not lost exactly, but "oh shit, where's the turn off through the woods" type lost. Did we miss it...? Do we go back, or continue and take a longer route... crap!

I'd read that the felled forest could cause trouble, the shortcuts are hard to find and there is a real risk of unnecessary hacking. Prior to starting, we opted for a failed attempt at some shut eye over a quick recce of this route, we had to be content with hoping for the best - that approach cost us on a number of occasions.

After some faffing, and discussion about whether we should completely start again. We decide to continue and look for a break in the forest... however none came and so we took a route up through some felled trees. Big mistake. Very slow, scrambly, and frustrating. After what seemed like an hour, we emerged onto the track we wanted. Heart rate racing, sweat pouring out, and pretty annoyed. Not exactly the optimal start to our attempt at this 24 hr round.

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Mark seemed considerably more upset by our sub optimal start than I was - he was moving like man on a mission regardless of why. I started questioning whether I was taking this seriously enough? With the last of the light, buffeting wind and thick clag soon provided the answer: serious game face on, no more room for complacency.

Before reaching the first summit of Mullach nan Coirean (10:29), head torches were donned and darkness had closed in. So had the weather. It was very windy and 'claggy'. Visibility was down to only a few metres. After a quick summit selfie, we made our way along the route, regularly checking maps and GPS. Lack of route

knowledge really slowed us down and we had none of the familiarity we would have had on the BG route in similar conditions.

Being clagged in on new mountainous terrain is a familiar sensation for both Mark and I from our MM experiences. For me in particular, whilst the increased concentration isn't ideal for a challenge such as the Ramsay, keeping in touch with the map helped me focus and break down the night. I was in my element but very conscious that we had less than 1km of opportunity after summiting Stob Ban to meet Jasmin coming towards us in the mist on the path. Despite planning for the eventuality that we missed each other, I was very eager to have her support.

Just after Stob Ban (23:09) a figure emerged from the mist. It was Jasmin. Absolutely heroic effort to get out and support us. She had finished her days work, done her parenting duties, then drove to Kinlochleven, to then run up to Stob Ban to meet us. Top class. Jasmin took some of our kit to lighten our load and we filled our bottles up next to a small lochan before doing the out and back along Devil's Ridge... which was pretty wild to say the least!



The overnight lethargy struck early for me on Devil's Ridge, spoiling slightly what would ordinarily have been a thoroughly enjoyable scrambly exposed section of mountain. Instead, I let the the combination of greasy rock, buffeting wind and midnight mist slip me into a subdued state, my sense of urgency waned until a few small nav mistakes and sub optimal lines made me grab the map with purpose and try to refocus. Despite Jasmin being an excellent safety net (and an upsettingly strong and positive mule!) I still felt responsible for the nav and it was a real boost when Mark later complimented me on the line taken to Binnien Beag (03:45) despite me being sure he knew there was still room for improvement.

The following hours involved general battling of pretty grim conditions, trying to eat and stay hydrated (despite the lack of running water on this section), and trying not to stray off route. Whilst we were making okay progress, we were both aware that our speed was slightly slower than required, but hoped once daylight arrived we could speed up.

Mark's preferred approach to enduring the night was to not know how long was left to first light. I obliged by not calling out splits or progress, after repeatedly missing the splits by small margins I gave up looking at them

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altogether, opting to reassess at dawn rather than occupy my mind with potential negativity. It was great to catch up with Jasmin and distract ourselves from the burden of the task in hand with tales of our wonderful young family's adventures and hear first-hand Jasmin's modest accounts of her recent epic achievements.

We departed company with Jasmin before the final summit of this leg, Sgurr Elide Mor (04:45). Some more time lost repacking our kit and filling water bottles. Soon after dawn we arrived at the end of leg 1 support point around 30 mins down on an untested schedule (05:30). Given the conditions, that we had hopefully got through all the night running, and that we didn't know how accurate the schedule was, we were still reasonably optimistic about getting back on schedule.



We were both super grateful to Len and Louisa for their overnight bike packing adventure, carting our supplies in and out from Luibeilt and for hanging around for our late arrival. The refuel was efficient, both parties keen to crack on with our adventure's and we set off again to the best running of the round. I was very relieved to have survived the night relatively unscathed and having not let Mark down, now safe in the reprieve offered by the valley.

The valley section finally offered some decent running, and we made our way to the southern end of Loch Treig and onto the ascent of Beinn na Lap. I think we both suspected our pace was slower than what was needed here but I for one was pretty tired already.

Mark had been a rock overnight and I felt him pulling me along the valley as I tried to eat despite stomach issues, only too aware of the importance of fuelling the engine. There was very little chat, we both seemed to be wrestling with the need to generate some intensity and enjoyment again and the reality of a rough night and a long way to go. I carried / nibbled a piece of flapjack for over 3km before discreetly lobbing it to some ducks when Mark wasn't watching – it felt like a betrayal at the time but I felt so sick I just couldn't face it.

Our pace was not helped by a total lack of path or trod for most of the climb after crossing the railway track. The positive was that the weather was much improved, and it was becoming a lovely day.

After refilling our water and a caffeine gel we slogged up Beinn na Lap, a toilet stop immediately improved my stomach issues and no longer feeling on the verge of being sick I felt the climbing pace become effortless again and pulled back to catch up and confirm to Mark I had unfortunately lost my compass earlier when removing my waterproof. Mark, for the first time, seemed to be showing signs of tiredness.

We summited Beinn na Lap (08:17) and took another selfie. It had become 'a thing' to be getting a photo on top of each summit. Thinking back now, this was certainly one of the factors which slowed our speed. I remember someone telling me when I was training for my BG that if you stopped for one minute on each summit to take in the views... you'd lose 42 mins of your time. Whilst the Ramsay 'only' has 24 peaks, it still allows for losing nearly half an hour over the duration of the round.



Taking regular photos was a time luxury I knew we probably couldn't afford, again - how seriously was I taking this? However, I was loving this adventure and wanted to have a way to relive it with my friends and family. My confidence was starting to return, the lifting cloud lifting our spirits with it – things were looking good.

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The first of three peaks on this leg was done, and we started the descent towards Chno Dearg. And then... from Andy... “oh shit... that’s my knee gone... I’m done... I’ll be stopping at the Dam support point”... Andy’s re-occurring knee issue had surfaced. Oh crap. We paused momentarily before continuing at a much-reduced pace to take stock.

My worst fear had happened. ITBS pain. It hit fast and intense in my left knee as soon as we began descending, just when I was considering ramping up the intensity and recovering some time. ITBS pain is all too familiar – an injury accountable for previous DNFs on mountain marathons with Adam: for me the pain gradually builds to the point it is unmanageable, rendering downhill progress impossible. I was devastated. I still regret my outburst. Taken by surprise by the speed the pain came on I didn’t consider the impact me declaring I would have to bail would have on Mark’s motivation, in the moment I was selfish and for that I am sorry.

The descent steepened and we were ‘quite’ (read very) slow. I think both of our minds started to wonder what the options were, and where we went from here.



Simply put, downhill progress was agony. I tried everything I could to move quicker but just wanted to hide under the knee deep heather and cry. We took diverging lines down to the valley and for the first and only time all day briefly lost contact. I was glad for the space. I took my time filling my flasks before chasing Mark up Chno Dearg determined that while my challenge might be over I wasn’t going to further compromise Mark’s. I’d projected myself into the role of a support runner to get the answer we needed: In that position I’d be telling the injured runner that you have to get to the dam regardless to bail and be extracted, so just manage the pain, eat, drink and make progress where you can. Reassess at the dam.

The climb up Chno Dearg looked bloody intimidating. Whilst we ascended Andy decided the best (and only) plan was to carry on as well as we could to Loch Treig Dam. Ascending was okay but descending was slow (very slow). And so, we cracked on.

Mark seemed to find his mojo and smashed it up Chno Dearg (09:49), having agreed with the plan – we made fairly good time over the plateaux and had our first summit views in now perfect conditions. The descent to the dam looked bloody intimidating.

The descent off the third peak of Stob Coire Sgrìodain (10:24) involved us again hacking through rough undergrowth. Never quite knowing if you were going to hit solid ground, a rock, or a hole. We were slow. We finally ended up at the treeline beside the train line. Expecting there to be an obvious sign saying ‘Ramsay runners this way...’ we fussed about trying to establish whether to join the train line and run along to the dam or head through the woods to look for a crossing. We went with the latter and lost more time there. Finally, we found a crossing point which looked reasonably well used. And on to the Dam of Loch Treig (11:21).



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Relatively speaking I usually excel on rougher ground, so it was infuriating to be so slow and haemorrhage time again, made worse by a really bad line through the forest to the dam.

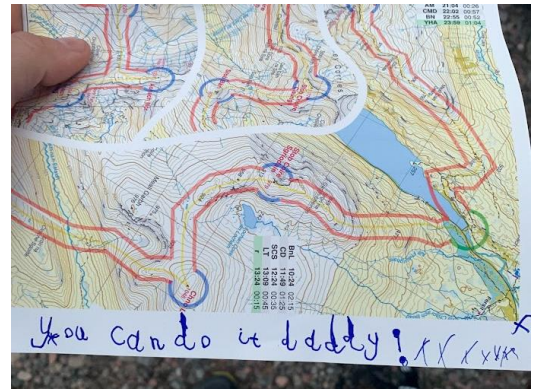
Ever since Andy's declaration of stopping at the Dam I had been thinking about what I would do... would I continue for 12+ hours by myself. I felt tired. We'd achieved a lot. When we got to the dam we were around one hour down on a 24 hr schedule. I was happy with my adventure out and decided I would also stop. Too tempted by a nice shower, hot food, and relaxing day at the campsite. Oh well, wasn't meant to be this time, I thought to myself. I did not vocalise any of this to Andy. We crossed the Dam and met my Dad and brother at the arranged support point (also immensely grateful for their support). I sat down in the sun and enjoyed the first rest since setting off. Dad and brother unawares of the situation were highly active and enthusiastic about getting us fuelled and ready for leg 3. I turned to Andy... "so what's the verdict, is that you done?" I asked...



Nearly two hours had passed since my uncontrolled outburst on Beinn na Lap, the whole time I was preoccupied wondering what Mark would now do. Martin Stone recovered a similar time deficit from Wasdale on his pioneering winter BGR, but neither of us are of comparable calibre so there were no illusions there. 24hrs would realistically be beyond Mark's reach and I figured right now Mark was going to throw in the towel too, taking advantage of the easy excuse I was providing. I wouldn't have blamed him, but in that time I'd turned a corner mentally and wondered if there was another option for us. Paracetamol was managing the pain to an extent (although I wasn't being entirely honest with Mark about how much of it I was

consuming), I was feeling really strong on the climbs and despite the pain on the rough descent to the dam we'd made reasonable time – I'd have my new poles to assist and the weather was now ideal.

I looked at my map and read Archie's beautiful scribbled message. I knew it was a decision fuelled by foolish pride, stubbornness and a selfish decision not to let Mark take the easy option, but if he accepted 24hrs was off the cards then I wanted to carry on regardless, I hoped that he would too. The prospect of a further 4500m of painful descending was not at all appealing, but I promised myself to give it my all, take each descent one at a time and enjoy the rest of the adventure regardless. After a few minutes relaxing in the sun at the dam he opened the door, asking the question so I tested the water...



...*"well it's not got any worse, so I reckon we travel light, get fuelled up, and have a crack at finishing the round"*...

...*"oh... right... (shit)... well best get my socks changed then!"*

Mark was up for it. Awesome. Time to make good on my promise and not let him down.

And so, we sprung into action to get kit changed, eat food, and get restocked ready for leg 3. I was pretty sure at the time Andy had no idea how done I was, and that my mind was dreaming of that shower, sleep, food, and beer! I wonder whether it might have influenced his decision... I suspect not. Though I did find his words of "being tired is just a shit excuse for stopping" pretty motivating!

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I felt somewhat rejuvenated setting out onto leg 3. It was nice to get some food down and having turned west felt like we were heading to the end. However, it was a pretty long way to go! The Grey Corries were stunning, and it was nice to be back onto some paths. Water continued to be an issue on this leg, limited supplies combined with not wanting to carry too much meant we frequently ran out and regularly got dehydrated.



I absolutely loved the grey corries, the rocks and paths a welcome variation in terrain. I was aware that those watching the tracker at home would be working out that we were too far off pace, so sat on the slopes of Stob Ban (15:41) and called Rosie to explain the situation. I was really emotional and drained from managing the pain on top of the 15hrs on our feet. I was proud that I'd carried on but aware that there was still 8hrs to go at schedule pace, which we weren't meeting. I put the map away to prevent myself sobbing at Archie's message. Mark and I had previously joked that once you are on the grey corries you might as well finish the route, one could consider it as the easiest and most logical way back to Fort William – I applied that flawed logic as we made our way towards the increasingly moody looking Aonach's.

The climb onto the Aonach's went on forever and by the time we were heading for Carn Mor Dearg the daylight was done, head torches were out, and all the clothes we had were on. Descending was slow, especially on steep technical ground. We fussed about a bit deciding on where the path was up Carn Mor Dearg (21:13) and lost some time there. This section was particularly rocky and scrubby. I had never actually been over the arete after Carn Mor Dearg but had read about it and seen pictures. It was certainly on the 'to-do list'. However, I never expected my first experience to involve making my way along it at 11pm in the dark, with minimal visibility in cold, damp and windy conditions!

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Charlie's gully sucked the energy from my legs and they felt tired climbing for the first time all round, although this was one of the few target splits we beat all challenge! I was under fuelled from a few hours neglecting my eating due to feeling sick again, de-hydrated from limited water sources. Re-entering the damp cold cloud the light faded as fast as my enthusiasm – I was cold despite now wearing all of my clothes. Leaving Aonach Mor (19:57) I fuffed around to recorded a video on the move for the [#everymilematters](#) team as we entered the second night. On the climb up CMD 24hrs had passed but we still had to get the job done and concentration was certainly required on CMD arete.



Picking a good line was difficult, but Andy did a cracking job here leading us along the arete. As the ridge broadened, we made our final ascent onto Ben Nevis. With more map and GPS checking we found the summit cairn and thus celebrated our summiting of the 24 peaks in the round (22:31). We sat, and took another selfie of course, knowing that a sub 24 hour round was long gone, we briefly took in our surroundings and enjoyed the moment. Oddly, we both noticed someone camping over to our right. We could see the clear outline of a tent about 25 meters away and the figure of a man standing, arms crossed, staring at us. 'Weird' we both remarked. Then as we set off and moved a little closer, it was in fact just piles of rocks, and either our lack of sleep was showing, or we had seen a ghost camper! Either way, unperturbed we started the next 'simple' task... descending 1300 meters down into the valley below. On route, I saw a skull and some sheep, and Andy saw several small animals and a woman with a baby... All of which turned out to be rocks! It was a somewhat bizarre and eery end to the adventure.



Dropping off The Ben was not the adrenaline fuelled race with the sunset I had hoped to be sharing with Mark, but there was a strange sense of content in me acknowledging that we'd shortly have overcome the challenges together, proven our mountain craft and determination. I felt strangely removed from the situation. My imagination was playing tricks on me, my first experience of sleep monsters that was so convincing I was even doubting if the pain in my knee was real. My tiny headtorch gave up with 2km to go having not intended to need one for so long on this leg. This further slowed progress but for the final 5 hours I confess I really didn't care about the time anymore.

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The mighty Sabrina Verjee once complimented Mark on his “infectious smile and glowing inner warmth” and as much as I tease him for this, I’m glad that once again he didn’t disappoint on that front. I’m incredibly grateful that Mark indulged me at the dam and put up with my descending without so much as a comment and am actually prouder that we got round in over 27hrs than had we had an eventless sub 24hr outing. Had I not had such confidence that Mark had it in him to get round I would have stopped for sure.



Arriving back at the Youth Hostel (00:18) was a huge relief and another example of what can be achieved by just keeping moving forward. For the previous 13 hours, a key motivator was to just get it finished so that I could say I’d completed Ramsay’s round, though not inside 24 hours. I’d never need to go back and do it again, I’d had my fill. It is a beast of a route and for me, as well as others I’m sure, a significantly different challenge to a BG.

Eight hours later, after a little celebration, shower, sleep and food... I thought to myself, well we’re going to have to come back next year and do it sub 24 aren’t we... to be continued...

... My sentiments exactly.