

HBMR 2026

Northumberland Fell Runners Race Report. Joe Stringer

The Hodgsons Brothers Mountain Relay is a prestigious, highly competitive race and, for many people, me included the highlight of the fell-running year. After the disappointment of the 2025 edition being cancelled, the hype around this year's race felt bigger than ever.

I was honoured to be asked to captain the NFR team and in my first year at the helm in 2024, I felt we had underachieved. My goal from the outset was a top ten finish - something I thought was entirely possible with the talent NFR possesses. The difficulty, as always, is getting the strongest team together while navigating the inevitable injuries and other life commitments that get in the way.

This year I was confident we had the strongest team EVER, a bold statement when you look back at the luminaries of the early-noughties golden era. Several members of the team have also been kind enough to contribute a few words to this report.



L-R. C. Larkin, W. Robson, R. Macneil, J. Stringer, J. Crellin, A. Higgins, T. Prentice, C. Jones

Leg 1 — Joe Stringer & Andrew Higgins

I've been going quite well in the AS races this year, and we all know Hodgsons stalwart and mountain-marathon master Higgins excels on long days over rough ground. He won this year's SLMM with Mark C and finished 8th in the LDMT a few weeks before the relay. But how would he fare with the speed and intensity of something much shorter?_The answer was a resounding very well indeed.

Despite getting his excuses in a few days before the race - "chest infection...", "antibiotics..." etc. - I was struggling to keep up on the climb, dangling a few metres behind him for much of the way.

The start of Leg 1 along the road is ridiculously fast and, by the time we hit the climb and the field began to string out, I'd lost track of where we were. As it turned out, we were the 9th team to reach the Angle Tarn control.

Thanks to Higgins pushing the pace, some good line choices and a few teams taking funny lines to the east of Calfgate Gill on the descent, we made up a couple of places, clocking the 6th-fastest split of the day to the Path/Stream Junction.

A battle then ensued with a pair of Settle Harriers over the final kilometre on the track to Hartsop Sheep Pens. We had to settle for being outsprinted by the boys from Settle, but that was soon forgotten when we handed over to the Leg 2 lads and learned that we had finished the leg in 8th place.

I was absolutely delighted with how well we had worked together and that we'd been able to get the race off to such a strong start. Our time of 40:46 was a 30-second improvement on my 2024 time with Michael Lumb, and a new NFR club record for the leg.



Andy Higgins on Leg 1:

With the ambition for this years team no secret, the atmosphere before the start was a mix of nervous energy and excitement. Joe and I agreed our plan of attack while warming up and before we knew it we were off, trying to keep to a "sensible pace" on the road but position ourselves well for the climb to be in the top 20, then run as hard as my lungs would let us up to angle tarn.

Recognising ourselves as the weakest pair of a strong team, we both desperately wanted to get the team off to a strong start and pushed hard for the

whole leg,

On the climb we picked off a few teams along the way who's pairing clearly weren't as well matched as Joe and I. Despite the good weather there were some suspect lines taken by teams ahead down into Hartsop and we took full

advantage descending the sodden slippery slopes very quickly and picking up more places.

Emptying the tank on the track was immediately justified as we passed over the dibber in 8th place. Both absolutely buzzing, the club record felt well and truly on!"



Leg 2 – Ruari Macneil & Thomas Prentice

HBMR first timers Ruari and Thomas are both class acts, and star NFR signings. Ruari is having a mega year on fell and road alike and Thomas has won the few fell races he's been able to do while managing injuries.

Leg 2 is a longer leg where stronger runners can really inflict some damage and put time into the other teams. Our recce runs had been scuppered by foul weather, so nailing the optimum lines was going to be tricky. Their uphill speed managed to mitigate this and although we slipped a couple of places, their run meant the team were still in a strong position in 14th overall. Most importantly they were both were smiling as they arrived into Kirkstone pass.

From Ruari Macneils' perspective: As Thomas and I finished our obligatory 1km warm-up jog at Hartsop, watching the front-running pairs fly down the track to hand over to their leg two runners, we gathered by the changeover point, eagerly awaiting Joe and Andrew. Much to our delight, and slight surprise, it wasn't long before we spotted the purple and green vests charging down the hill towards us in an extremely impressive 8th position, teeing us up well for the legs ahead



With a few teams hot on our tails, I did my best to stick with Thomas as he dragged us up the climb, first along the track and then onto the open fell. With no breeze or cloud cover to offer any respite from the beating sun, the ascent was tough going. We lost a few places but were determined to limit the damage, knowing the strength we had in our later pairings, and managed to keep the various teams in sight as the route levelled out towards High Street.

We handled the steep descent off Thornthwaite Crag well and scrambled up the other side to Stony Cove Pike, neck and neck with another pair, before letting loose on the flowy descent towards Kirkstone Pass with several teams in our sights. As we neared the end of our leg, we did our best to fend off the fast-approaching Eden men and Ambleside ladies pairings, the latter going on to win the women's race and set an impressive new course record, before handing over to Craig and Joe on Leg 3.

The first taste of the Hodgson Brothers Mountain Relay for both Thomas and me, and undoubtedly one of the highlights of our fell running careers to date, we were proud of our efforts and satisfied with our contribution to the NFR

octet on the day.



Leg 3 – Craig Jones & Joe Crellin



Craig and Joe produced a strong response on Leg 3, running 59:29, the 12th-fastest leg 3 of the day and a new NFR leg 3 record.

They made up a place and reached Red Screes in 13th, before moving up to 12th at 'Pile of Stones' control. They continued to make progress through the lower section, reaching the Footbridge control in 12th and holding that position through to the changeover at Hartsop Hall.

The pair's run stabilised the team after the loss of a few places on Leg 2 and set up the final push for the top ten.

From Joe Crellin's perspective:

The level of excitement and anticipation for this event was on a level I'd not experienced before as a fell runner! And it surpassed all expectations! Running Leg 3 with Craig was a thrilling and gruelling honour. Thanks Joe and the whole team for a cracking day out! Neither Craig nor I had recce'd the route, which added to the nerves. And I felt that the intensity of the changeover location at Kirkstone pass, with a crowded car park and limited area to go for a nice warm up, all added to the nerves. Taking over from Tom and Ruari, I set off fairly fast pulling Craig along to catch up with Eden runners and pass them early on the climb up Red Screes, which gave me nausea and dizziness after 2/3 of the way up after just 10 mins. From that point on Craig outclimbed me, but I hoped I'd make up for it on the descents.



The first decent was great, passing Ambleside women, but early into the next climb towards Dove Crag, the Eden team were back onto us. The craziest section was the final descent, not sure of what line to take, at first following Eden's Tim Campbell, with Craig right on my tail shouting "Go Joe!"

As we met some really sketchy semi-wet mossy slabs, some of which, according to Craig, I 'suicided down' - leaping off some high drops - I looked to our right and saw the Ambleside women tearing down what looked like a superior line! At one point I enjoyed a good bog front flip but stayed free of damage. Unfortunately, the other Eden runner, Steve, took a couple of nasty falls on that decent, the second of which meant he had to hobble the rest of the leg, declining us of a tight finish (I felt somewhat responsible for this, as at the time I was leading us off the main path down a brackeney trod, which I soon regretted due to the nasty big rocks under the bracken)

For the last KM after the checkpoint by the footbridge over Dovedale Beck on easy gradients I struggled to keep up with Craig, striding effortlessly away from me, taking a direct line through a pile of wet manure whilst my legs struggled to lift from the shit! At the Handover the support was overwhelming! Having witnessed the start and finish of the first two legs and the level of effort that Joe, Andy, Tom and Ruari had given, it felt good to know I'd emptied the tank and was satisfied that we'd given Will and Chris a good chance at getting us into a top 10 spot. No chance was I jogging back to Patterdale with Craig and Emma. On Monday, when Craig mentioned his

severe DOMS in the WhatsApp group, I kinda felt relieved to know this, confirming that he was also pushing himself to somewhere near his limits ;)

Leg 4 – Chris Larkin & Will Robson

The decisive leg, and time to deploy a couple of the big hitters. Chris has had yet another outstanding season, finishing 3rd in the English Fell Championships, and Will (the teams other Hodgsons stalwart) is back to winning ways in the fells which is great to see. Chris and Will ran an excellent 1:09:40, the 7th-fastest Leg 4 of the day, and steadily moved us up the field. They were up to 11th at Hart Crag, then produced the 6th-fastest split of the day to St Sunday Crag, moving us up into 10th. From there they held their position through Thornhow End before a strong final push to Patterdale saw them gain another place and finish 9th overall. Chris has been kind enough to write a few words for us. (Will has advised that if I emphasise the beasting Chris gave him, his words will have been heard)



Leg 4 in Chris Larkin's words: Without veering too much into a tangent straight away, I can remember the very first race I did in a NFR vest back in 2023 at Simonside Cairns. As a new member it felt important (to me at least) to make a good first impression via running pretty much as hard as I could the whole way round. Sat in the corner with my cup of soup in hand post-race, I distinctly remember Joe S lumbering up to me with a sparkle in his eyes as if he'd just spotted a winning lottery ticket on the floor. I don't remember what

his very first words were, but I am very sure that the second sentence he ever spoke to me was along the lines of “do you want to be in the Hodgson’s team”, and less than 10 seconds later I was already being added to the WhatsApp chat and signing my soul to the devil. At the time I wasn’t really aware of the prestige of the Hodgsons (as I’d only raced small fell races in North Wales or Northumberland up until this point) but I could tell from Joe’s enthusiasm that this was something that meant more than just turning up and having a go. Despite the early excitement, life and the weather got in the way of both the 2024 and 2025 relays for me, so this year was finally the year to make good on the commitment from back in the Rothbury Jubilee Hall almost three years ago.

We’d been out to recce legs 2 and 3 the previous weekend in dreadful conditions, and as I knew I was to be on leg 4 I rather foolishly carried on the run to get familiar with the lines. The weather only got worse (didn’t know that was possible) and it’s safe to say I didn’t nail any of the lines, so race day was going to be a bit of a trial by fire. Paired with the very fast and dashing handsome Mr Robson, I was hoping our combined hazy memories of where to go would be good enough to at least not go straight over Cofa Pike come race time.

We watched the excitement of the first two legs with the rest of the team, before jogging down from the leg 2/3 changeover to the leg 3/4 changeover as our warmup. One of the beauties of the race is that you don’t really know what is going on until runners come through, which makes warming up at the right time an interesting challenge in itself, but also gives plenty of room for speculation as to what is happening up on the hill. Craig and Joe C came through pretty much bang on expected time (as much as there can be one) and just shy of the top 10 overall, and the job was now handed over to Will and me to try and (A). cement our gap over Durham, and (B). pick off as many other teams on the way.

The first path on the leg is a very narrow and technical one, which fortunately we didn’t run into any traffic on. It felt like we were moving well and could see in the very distance a couple of fluorescent Settle Harriers vests which acted as good rabbits to chase. After crossing the stream below Black Crag, we chose to stick to the trod which hugs the beck rather than going wider to take the more conventional rocky path. No idea if it is faster or not but it certainly looks shorter on a map. We seemed to take good lines up Hart Crag, with the Settle vests getting closer and closer, especially after the fast descent of Hart Crag. I probably led us a little too far to the north of the Fairfield plateau (again, a recce in good weather would’ve been useful) but the speed we were moving more than made up for it, as it felt like on the flatter gradients is where we had the biggest advantage over the other runners. We passed the Settle runners just prior to the scree descent of Fairfield, where again we didn’t take the best line (cutting Northeast a little too soon) but still made good use of the scree to do most of the descent.

We made good progress up to St Sunday Crag, as a pairing it was the ups and false flats where we were best matched, and started to close in on a pair of Macclesfield vests which had once been a speck in the distance. Despite Will's brand spanking new iRocks fresh out of the Pete Bland van, we didn't eat into the gap much on the steeper part of the St Sunday Crag descent, but once on to the flatter section below Birks we started to flow more, taking good lines to shortcut the small bends in the path and avoiding some of the more pointy looking rocks. The pass on Macclesfield was less dramatic than I had hoped, as we cut past them whilst on a much better line, but now with no one else near in front to chase it moved to a race against the clock to try and punch a NFR PB. We successfully didn't die on the steep descent from Thornhow End and dropped some nasty road speed back down to the playing field, where we got to soak in the glory of running into the finish funnel in 9th place overall – the best NFR finish to date (and being awarded “2nd best pair of shorts” by the commentator, shout out to Dave from Dark Peak for having even more outrageous green shorts than either me or Joe S). Cue the over-the-top words of self-congratulation from all involved, but it did feel like as a team, we'd pulled off an excellent race with excellent runners. Great day out, and a huge thank you to Joe for putting it all together and bringing the hype, and Emma and Jeffrey for the crewing support and transport! Glad to finally experience the unique and brilliant event which is the Hodgsons.



To 2027 and beyond

I briefly floated the idea of retiring from my captaincy at the finish, going out on a high and leaving the team to someone else. Then Andy posed the question to everyone: could you have gone any better? The unanimous answer was yes, which, I suppose, means I might stick with it for now!

I'll finish by saying a huge thanks to the whole team for sharing in my enthusiasm and working so hard to get the result we did. There was a real sense of belief in the team this year, and everyone played their part, both on and off the hill, in turning the ambition of a top ten finish into reality.

There are few things as satisfying as achieving a goal like this in a race you value so much. Being able to captain the NFR team and contribute to our success on the hill was one of the proudest days of my life in sport.

Joe