

## **Bob Graham Round report**

Thinking back I have toyed with the idea of attempting this famous challenge for several years. About 4 years ago I was supporting Paul Hainsworth on his JNLC, Andrew Higgins on his BG, and had several reccy sessions over the route and was generally feeling quite fit and ready to seriously think about going for it. A niggling hamstring problem was getting worse after every run or race I did which made me doubt it might be possible. Turns out I had a prolapsed disc and the pain in my leg was due to a trapped sciatic nerve. Game over.

After a year of excruciating and unrelenting pain, narrowly avoiding surgery, a lot of physio and very strong pain killers I began to tentatively run again but concentrated mainly on shorter races while trying to adopt a 'barefoot style' of running which seemed to prevent the shock of impact running up my leg. It seemed inevitable that it would flare up again. I began to do some longer runs mainly centred around John Telfer's BG and the preceding reccies. My back seemed ok and getting stronger due to lots of Pilates. The idea began to manifest itself that the BG might be back on but I would need to do some serious training.

In December 2014 I made a conscious decision to go for it, explaining very clearly to my wife Sarah exactly what 'serious training' would entail! To my great surprise she was very supportive.

The date was set for 27<sup>th</sup> June, the day after my 39<sup>th</sup> birthday. The decision to go clockwise with a 4am start was not taken lightly but I had my reasons! An arbitrary 20hr 20min schedule was decided.

What followed was a blur of very early Sunday morning starts, very cold runs, every weather imaginable, LOTS of head torch batteries, LOTS of driving, LOTS of coffee, and a logistics spreadsheet beyond my comprehension. There were also several brutal midweek hill rep sessions with Johnny Malley and the odd race. During this period I received unfailing support from many NFR members (BG veterans or otherwise) and experienced 2 very welcome and pleasant days out in the form of the Teenager with Altitude race and Susan Davis' inspirational JNLC. This was the tonic I needed to persuade me that this was possible. Finding people stupid enough to carry my bag for me on the various legs proved easier than I thought; NFR is well endowed with such folk and the only problem was which leg to put everyone on. I could not possibly have hoped for a better team; a perfect mix of experience, positivity, youthful exuberance, level headedness and navigational skills.

1 week to go and the sleepless nights began, it seems your body can get so used to exercise that it simply cannot relax during a rest period; to put it bluntly I was climbing the walls with anticipation! Tapering didn't suit me although the carbo loading definitely did!

Basecamp was to be Dalebottom farm campsite where my parents have a static caravan. My mum really enjoyed making this into a brilliant HQ.



On Friday evening the troops arrived from far and wide and the midges attempted to infiltrate the NFR support camp but our resistance was all but impenetrable to them.



Insert your own caption here...

Having watched the weather like a hawk all week I was amazed to find an almost perfect weather window for the Saturday, somebody up there likes me!

The mood around camp was great fun, a welcome distraction from my nerves.

I got to bed around 11pm but did not sleep a wink. Up at 3am to find Paul's van parked up (he'd driven over in the middle of the night having had little sleep), we jumped in to escape another midge barrage and waited for John Duff who had gone back to his tent for a brew. I felt very positive and strangely calm as we arrived in Keswick with plenty of time to spare. Peter Reed had seen off Peter Moralee and John Telfer on the Lakes 10 race and turned up at the Moot Hall to see me off too.



4am eventually came and we set off. The mood was relaxed and jovial as we left Keswick, hoping of course to return in under 24 hours time. We bumped into John Telfer in the middle of Fitz Park as he went for his bus. We wished each other well but I dared not stop, the climb up Skiddaw is unrelenting and I was keen to get it over with.



Trying to think of the BG in its entirety can be very daunting so I just tried to focus on having a pleasant early morning run with some good mates. I tried to maintain this mentality for each leg.



Phil Green with an eerie back drop of early morning Skiddaw cloud.



Descending Great Calva heading for the river Caldew



Final climb of leg 1 – Blencathra.

The views improved as the morning progressed; we even saw a Tawny owl rise from the heather on the descent off Skiddaw. We just concentrated on going steady, getting good lines and I was trying to run well within myself. I had no intention of being up on schedule, but with the mood as positive as it was we inevitably started to eat away at the times. Paul, Phil and John D were brilliant; very attentive, very positive and they set in motion a feeling of momentum which lasted throughout the day. The whole experience so far had been relaxed, efficient and very enjoyable. The descent of Halls Fell ridge was great, we dropped out of the cloud near the top, found some good lines and some not so good ones but it didn't seem to matter and soon the support crew came into view after a short road section. I was informed I was 13 minutes up on schedule and I hoped it wasn't too fast.

The leg 2 handover was successful thanks to Susan's porridge instructions and Geoff, Mike and John were like coiled springs ready for the challenge of the Helvellyn ridge. This leg was great; super-efficient lines from Geoff, good chat and lovely views.





It also has the benefit of knocking off plenty of peaks with a small amount of descent and ascent. Again, the positivity, support and general mood helped me round faster than I was hoping, 24 minutes up as I arrived at Dunmail.



Climbing the stile to the road crossing at Dunmail Raise.

My auntie and uncle had travelled from Yorkshire to see me for my brief stop which typified the efforts of everyone who supported.

My wife knows me very well and had helpfully visited a well known branded coffee shop in Keswick to satisfy my caffeine addiction! The cous cous and soup (thanks for the recipe tip Andrew) went down a treat and I felt calm and relaxed, if a little overwhelmed at the fantastic reception I got.



My Uncle Keith looking on in disgust at my brunch.

Leg 3 is a big one; long, rough, big climbs and the biggest single descent of the day down to Wasdale.



Thankfully I was in good company, John Butters, Mark Clarkson and Johnny Malley (who was on his 3<sup>rd</sup> BG support in 4 weeks) were fired up and ready to go. Steel Fell is steep but it went without a hitch.



John B and Mark behind on the grind up Steel fell. The support team far below.

I knew certain sections would be tough, I had convinced myself 24 minutes was tight for this short, brutal climb but it turned out fine. This was another key part of my mentality for the day – expect world war 3 and it won't seem too bad!

As any BGer will tell you, reccying is a vital part of the whole process; there is so much route choice on many of the sections that you are constantly wondering if there is a better way. Steel Fell to Calf Crag is a perfect example. Paul and I reccied what seemed like a great line in reverse about 4 weeks earlier, we hit it plum on. This does require concentration but it takes your mind off the enormity of the task ahead, I really was only thinking about the next peak, the time and eating and drinking. The food was starting to get stuck in my dry mouth and a few mouthfuls had to be abandoned!

Eventually I just stopped and ate then carried on. I was gaining more time so it wasn't a problem. We notched up peak after peak and I felt good.





Sergeant Man.

My memories of this leg seem distant now but I did appreciate seeing Peter Reed again at Esk Hause, he was full of encouragement and along with the attentiveness of Mark, John and Johnny, really helped keep the mood buoyant.

A decision had already been made about how to approach Scafell; Johnny and John were not keen to climb a wet (or dry!) Broad Stand so they continued down to Hollow Stones from Mickeldore and would meet Mark and I at the beck crossing.

Broad Stand was indeed wet but Mark and I tentatively climbed it and scrambled up to the summit plateau without incident. I made the mistake of taking in the view down Wasdale and happened to look across to the peaks of leg 4 and what was to come. Kirk Fell looks enormous from this angle. I had to avert my gaze and tried to enjoy the long descent to the valley. The scree gulley was great fun and the refreshing wash in the beck brought me back to my positive mind set.







Approaching the Wasdale pit stop.

The welcome site of Andy and Adam who led me to Paul's camper van, a great cup of coffee and some of Sarah's magnificent egg sandwiches boosted me further, I was not counting my chickens but I did feel comfortable and more importantly refuelled! I could not believe I was 43 minutes up on my 20hr 20min schedule.

After saying my good byes to John and Mark I set off up the beast that is Yewbarrow.

Andy and Adam are elite mountain marathon partners but they kept a thankfully steady pace and we reached the summit a few minutes up. Johnny was doing leg 4 as well as 3 and was a great support, especially persuading me to eat and drink.

The powerade and gels were going down nicely but anything else had to be chewed endlessly.

This was Johnny's 3<sup>rd</sup> BG support in 4 weeks and the effort began to tell, he skipped out of Steeple and met us further on at Wind Gap near Pillar.

I was still making time even though my feet were getting sore and my knee began to hurt on the descents. The cloud had really come in by the top of Red Screes and there was a little drizzle but not enough to dampen our spirits. Andy and Adam were excellent, great navigation and very attentive. They were also very understanding of some severe flatulence which had begun to blight me, sorry about that fellas. It is a strange quirk of BGing that people who you hardly know are so prepared to

put themselves out in order to help you. I have only briefly met Adam once and yet here he was holding my crisps, carrying my powerade and navigating to boot. Which other sport would you find this level of selflessness?



Meeting back up with Johnny at Wind Gap.

There were several psychological milestones to be overcome on this leg, Yewbarrow, Red Screes (both now in the bag) and Gable. I had not banked on Kirkfell being so difficult and after struggling for a while I realised that I was just really sleepy. I calculated that I had now been awake for 26 hours! This was my worst moment but team spirit prevailed and it was soon over, this was one of the few peaks where I lost time off my schedule.





Black Sail pass selfie. Are you eating my crisps Adam?



Nearing the summit of Kirk Fell, Adam staying well back for his own sake!



Jonny skipped Kirkfell too and we successfully rendezvoused at the bottom of Gable. WW3 here we come! It turned out fine and I somehow made up the time I had lost on Kirkfell. I really enjoyed the remaining peaks even though we missed a couple of lines and my knee was giving me more trouble. The descent to Honister was great, there seemed to be hordes of people milling about in the car park far below and Riley the dog was soon running uphill to meet us. Another 12 mins gained on my schedule which was very surprising to me.



Arriving at Honister – what a welcome party!

| Location          | Daylight | leg time | clock time | notes                  | actual time |
|-------------------|----------|----------|------------|------------------------|-------------|
| Wasdale - Depart  | Daylight | 5        | 17:04      |                        | 1626        |
| Yewbarrow         | Daylight | 45       | 17:49      |                        | 1707 (-4)   |
| Red Pike          | Daylight | 45       | 18:34      |                        | 1750 (-2)   |
| Steeple           | Daylight | 21       | 18:55      |                        | 1807 (-4)   |
| Pillar            | Daylight | 30       | 19:25      |                        | 1834 (-3)   |
| KirkFell          | Daylight | 45       | 20:10      |                        | 1922 (+3)   |
| Great Gable       | Dusk     | 38       | 20:49      |                        | 1954 (-6)!  |
| Green Gable       | Dusk     | 13       | 21:01      | 810 LINE OFF G-G       | 2009 (+3)   |
| Brandreth         | Dusk     | 16       | 21:17      |                        | 2023 (-2)   |
| Grey Knotts       | Dusk     | 7        | 21:24      | KNEE PAIN + STRETCH    | 2032 (+2)   |
| Honister - Arrive | Dusk     | 12       | 21:36      | light 4hr 32mins total | 2045 (+1)   |





Things went a bit strange when I stopped; firstly, there were far more people there than I expected and my Mum came to see me, I must have looked a state because she gave me a funny look! Geoff put a very tasteful blanket over my legs, several people helped peel off and change my rancid socks, someone found some Vaseline for my feet (I wouldn't use that on your lips now!) and Sarah kept feeding me crisps. I really felt very emotional and overwhelmed by the care and support. It was great to see Dexter who wasn't sure if he was going to be fit enough to support and Phil was raring to go on his first BG support run. Andy gave them some firm instructions to keep feeding me. I said my thank yous to Adam and Johnny (who'd put in a heroic stint) and with a huge cheer and a massive surge of adrenaline I raced through the gate and up Dalehead. Andy came on for a while, still feeding me crisps and then ran back to Honister, he and Adam were a big support and did a great job navigating in the thick cloud on leg 4.

We ambled up the remainder of Dalehead and reached the top exactly on schedule. I allowed myself a very brief celebration; was this actually happening? I felt very relaxed and ticked off Hindscarth gaining a little more time. I handed over the challenge of the 'test of manliness' (running all the way up Robinson at the end of the BG) to Phil who obliged by disappearing rapidly over the skyline. Robinson is psychological, it is peak number 42 and it is literally downhill all the way to Keswick. I felt great, the cloud broke to reveal some lovely views and I couldn't resist looking back at the fells I had run over. Dexter and Phil got me safely down the scrambling section and down to the valley. Dusk was falling but I was jogging along nicely and I began to realise that this once in a lifetime challenge was all but done. Meeting Paul, Steph and Katherine at Newlands church was a real boost. I put my road shoes on and jogged on feeling great. There were a few undulations in the road which seemed much bigger than they actually were. The hill past the Swinside Inn proved hardest and I used the excuse of a toilet break to get my breath back but Steph was wise to such tricks and back tracked to sweep me up. Something astonishing then happened; I began to speed up, over taking a couple of Lakes 10 competitors near Portinscale and blasting over the suspension bridge. Dexter is not one to turn down a challenge and earlier on the road section we realised that 19 hrs 30 mins to finish was achievable; he took it upon himself to set the pace. We reached Keswick and I kept getting faster and faster (7 min miles were mentioned but I can't run that fast when fresh!) Steph said "Don't worry if you drop your pacers!" I put in a spurt past the Coop and was immediately over taken by Steph with the others close behind; they finally dropped back as I approached the Market place at full speed. The area around the Moot Hall was packed with drunk people and my support team were mixed in among them. Someone helpfully pointed which way round the stage I should run.

I touched the Moot Hall steps at 11.25pm, 19 hours and 25 minutes after I left.



We stood around drinking fizz and soaking up the atmosphere, what a surreal moment. This is undoubtedly the single greatest challenge I have ever completed but it would not have been possible without my support team and family. Words cannot do justice to what they did and those who know me will realise what it means to me.



Leg 1: Paul Hainsworth, John Duff, Phil Green with Susan Davis doing transport.

Leg 2: John Tollitt, Mike Hughes and Geoff Davis.

Leg 3: Mark Clarkson, John Butters and Jonny Malley with Paul Hainsworth making the long trek to Wasdale in his van.

Leg 4: Jonny Malley, Adam Stirk and Andy Higgins with Katherine Davis on transport.

Leg 5: Dexter and Phil Smith with Katherine Davis and Steph Scott from Newlands church (Paul again doing transport, better plant some trees mate!)

Catering, hugs, coffee, sun cream and unending support: Sarah

Others: My Mum (and Michael for babysitting), Auntie Lynne and Uncle Keith, Emma Bain, Rosie Higgins and the person who donated their Vaseline to the cause. The experience, inspiration and encouragement from various NFR members. All the people who took photos (sorry for not crediting you all individually) I will treasure these.

What an awesome day out on the fells.

THANK YOU SO MUCH!!



