

The Swaledale Marathon – Is Will Horsley really Superman?

I'd been aware of this race for a few years and often fancied it. But entries open at New Year, and are closed within 2 weeks, so I've never tried seriously to get in.

John Metson's entry became available 2 days before the race and my sister lives in Brompton-on-Swale, giving me a convenient base. It was fate. So my plans for the Roman Wall Show race were quickly shelved.

Driving up the Dales to Reeth, I assumed I would see the odd face I recognised, but probably no-one I could claim to know. But within 15 seconds of arrival, was the welcome sight of Will Horsley's smiling face shouting at me out of his car window.

Will was travelling alone. It transpired he had driven directly from the Lakes, where he had just completed a night section on Peter Moralee's 60@60 attempt. He hadn't had any sleep, either before that section or after it. So he arrived to start the Swaledale Marathon, an off-road route involving almost 24 miles and 4,130 ft of ascent, having had no sleep for about 26 hours, and having just finished a 4+ hours BG section over Skiddaw, Great Calva & Blencathra. As Will got changed I was secretly looking for a glimpse of the red and blue suit under his clothes, but in typical super-hero tradition he remained very cagey.

The race is a huge event, and occurs on the last day of the Swaledale Festival. There were 471 starters, but a proportion of those were doing the event as a challenge walk. I'm not sure how many were runners, but I would guess that at least 350 were, as not many were in walking gear.

The race starts at Fremington, about ½ mile from Reeth, and immediately heads up a long climb of around 750ft on to Fremington Edge. The route goes along the Edge and then drops down into Arkengarthdale, heading on to Whaw, and then out over Whaw Moor and Punchard Moor to Great Punchard Head at its furthest point.



A challenging start up to Fremington Edge

It then goes south over Low Punchard Head, through Friarfold Rake, across Melbeck's Moor and along Winterings Edge before dropping down into Gunnerside Gill to Gunnerside. This is around 17 miles, at which point it commences a significant climb back up onto Reeth Low Moor, north of the Swaledale Valley, and then descends into Reeth by a narrow rocky track to the finish at the Village Hall.

I had no real idea how I would cope with such a race, having done nowhere near such a distance for over 2 years. So I decided to start sensibly, and see what happened as the race progressed. Superman was somewhere up ahead.

I could see runners in front of me walking up some of the hills. I decided that if they couldn't run, then they probably were going too fast and that I'd pass them later. My target was simple, and the same as it always is for

the Allendale Challenge; just run every step and see where that places me.

Sure enough, I gradually passed a few people and at Whaw, 8 or 9 miles into the race, I was told by a spectator that I was 17th. As we headed up over the moors I could see others ahead, putting in sneaky walks, and took encouragement from that. "I'll get you soon" I muttered to them under my breath.

Then, as if by magic, Will appeared in front of me and offered me a drink as we ran together for ½ a mile or so. He then decided to ease back and help others less fortunate, as I headed on, eagle-eyed, watching for any others up ahead that might dare to walk up any of the hills. I spotted a few likely candidates and managed to pass around 6 more as we climbed to Great Punchard Head.



Reeth in all its glory

From there, the next section becomes very Northumbrian; narrow and muddy paths over heathery moorland. I felt quite at home now, although the route was tricky to pick up at times, with paths being intermittent in places, and having options in others. By the time we dropped down to Gunnerside Gill, and into the checkpoint at Gunnerside, I was told I was 7th.

I could see the 6th place runner up ahead. Unfortunately I wasn't close enough, and as the route left the valley bottom, I lost sight of him at a point where the route wasn't entirely clear. I had to get my map out to check, and that probably cost me 20 seconds or so. Once I'd made my route choice it wasn't long before I could see him again, and 3 others not far ahead of him.

This was another long climb, and I was running and they were not. By the time it levelled off I'd caught them up, and there was a group of 5 of us running together trying to psyche each other out. I felt better than I had expected, and I knew they were all tired enough that they hadn't run the last hill.

I also knew we only had around 3 miles to go, and so I decided to wind up the pace a little and see what happened. Two of them quickly dropped back, and before long I managed to break ahead of the other 2, and opened up a lead on the group. This presented a problem; I hadn't done the race before and didn't know the route and couldn't see anyone ahead!

There was a mountain biker coming up the bridleway, and so I asked him if I was on the right route. He told me that I was, and so I stretched out more down a wide open track, sensing a long decent to the finish. Then I reached a gate in a wall. I knew from the route description that we had to stay above all the enclosed walls on this section, and so I stopped and looked around.

To my horror, I could see the 3 runners behind me on the skyline about 250 ft above me. And they were no longer behind me. I set off up a steep rough heather hillside back to the race route, having dropped 3 places and lost

between 2 and 3 minutes. Not to mention having to do an additional tough climb I could have done without at 22 miles. I'd c*cked up big style. It turned out that the runner that the mountain biker had seen was in 3rd place and had also gone wrong!



Ready for that sprint finish?

I was determined to regain my previous position, and managed to gradually close the gap. I passed the first 2 within a mile and got onto the shoulder of the other as we dropped down a narrow rocky track to the final self-clip before the finish. There was no prospect of overtaking until we hit the final 250 yards of road to the finish, and once we did, I eased out onto his shoulder and pushed for home. Only he did the same. And his legs were a lot younger than mine. And he hadn't done the extra climb and had to push at his limit to re-gain places. My legs just died. There was no way I could out-run him in a sprint, and he finished 6 or 7 seconds ahead.

I was delighted to finish 4th in 3:31.45. It should have been 3rd, and sub-3:30, if I hadn't gone wrong, but then if the chap in front hadn't gone wrong too, I would have been 4th anyway, because I

probably wouldn't have caught him. So fair's fair. I was very happy, all told. I also managed to secure the Ray Stevenson Shield as 1st Veteran, which was also very pleasing.

Will finished in 4:03, in 38th position. Amazing to complete it at all after his prior exertions and lack of sleep, never mind in such a time, and to be able to chat coherently at the end too.

This is definitely a race that many NFR's would really enjoy. The route is nicely varied, and with the ascent and variety of terrain, it definitely suits those with a fell running background. It has elements of many other races, and isn't unlike the 3 Peaks, in that there is a lot of good running amongst the climbs. The route was just a bit too firm underfoot overall for my liking, with just a touch too many hard tracks, and has left my ankles and toes feeling very battered. But this all means that most of the route is very runnable, and there are a few Club members who could do exceptionally well in this race.

So is Will Horsley really Superman? As with all Super-heroes, there never seems to be a definitive answer. But given what he had done, and on the back of no sleep, I concluded that he probably is.

Dexter