

HARDMOORS 55 – 55 miles & 9,000 feet of ascent

March 17, 2012

Last December at the Simonside Cairns race I had idly picked up a flyer for this race and little did I know what one simple random act of stupidity would lead to. The “55” is one of the Hardmoors series of ultras run, give or take the odd mile near the start and finish, over the Cleveland Way between Helmsley and Guisborough. Joining me on my maiden voyage into the 50 mile + category were fellow NFRs Paul Appleby, Shaun Dunlop and Dave Wiseman. We all got round in under 12 hours securing top half finishes on what for me turned out to be a memorable day of highs and lows, sun and showers but alas no beer.

Pre Race

Although I had reccied all but the first 7 miles of the race route, including a 33 mile stretch with Paul and Dave a few weeks back I was still compelled to head back to Guisborough Woods the day before the race to double check this part of the route. Consisting of six distinct turns amidst a myriad of paths which I would encounter in the dark the following day the idea of getting lost 2 miles from the finish was not one I found instantly appealing.

After a beer free Friday evening I clambered on board the coach at Guisborough at 6.45am with a mixture of excitement, anticipation amidst a buzz of chatter from fellow runners both of what lay ahead that day and of past achievements. I didn't feel going through an entire Friday evening quite matched such tales of derring-do and so just contented myself with the view out of the window of the hills I would hopefully be running back over in about 8 hours time.

We arrived at Helmsley Cricket Club under a brooding sky just after 8am. The first thing I noticed that other than Paul and Dave I knew absolutely nobody, a clear sign that I would, so to speak, be swimming with a different shoal of fish today. After a rigorous kit check, registration and the obligatory visit to the little boys room (or for one impatient male runner, the little girls room just prior to two not so little girls going in and ejecting him) we gathered outside around 8.45am in front of the pavilion to be given our final orders and instructions for the day.

Then it was round to the front to line up for the start. At such times I am always wracked with doubt as to whether I am suitably attired for the occasion and today was no different. This feeling was made worse by the fact that these people being real ultra runners would obviously know better than me. I had opted for a compression top and short-sleeved Helly and full compression bottoms. Surrounded by everything from bare arms and legs to those wearing waterproofs, hat and gloves I gave up worrying being at neither extreme and safe in the knowledge that I was carrying everything I needed if conditions demanded a change.

Helmsley – Sutton Bank (9 miles)



Three slightly anxious looking (but very smartly dressed) NFRs at the start

Photo : Wendy Appleby



Ladies and Gentlemen: Any last requests? Seconds from the start

Photo : Wendy Appleby

On the dot of 9am a reported field of 115 runners were sent on their way off down the delightfully named Baxton's Sprunt (I kid you not). My tactics were that I had no tactics so set off far too fast and found myself flirting with the top ten for the first couple of miles. The first 7 miles are a mixture of undulating field, wood road and village with the highlight being a view, through the trees, of Rievaulx Abbey.

After about 4 miles having settled down to a more sensible pace and having shipped a further ten or so places I found myself in the curious position of having no-one in my front or rear lines of vision. Was it something I had said earlier? Splendid isolation was to be a recurring theme of the day. The route then entered the village of Cold Kirby (or should that be Cold Turkey after my night of abstinence) and with it came the first of the day's rain and a noticeable cooling in temperature. Stopping to don my waterproof top meant yielding a couple of places but it was the right thing to do as the rain persisted for the next 20 or so minutes.

After 7 miles came the first "wow factor" of the day as we ran onto the Sutton Bank escarpment with a panoramic view of the Vale of York beyond even allowing for the general murkiness. The appearance of my eldest brother and his wife who had made the short journey over from Sessay to cheer me on lifted my already pretty good spirits and I negotiated the concrete steps down from The White Horse to the first checkpoint arriving in 1 hr 23 mins in 20th place.

Sutton Bank to Osmotherley (Miles 9 - 22)

Having run through the woodland below the White Horse and back up on the escarpment bidding farewell to Team Telfer on the way the next 6 or so miles follows the ridge northwards through rough ground, field and occasional woodland but all with perfectly runnable paths. Again much of the time was spent on my own other than the odd runner languidly overtaking me looking as though they were out for a short training run. Conscious of my own rather reckless early pace I regarded this as no more than the inevitable payback for my earlier somewhat foolhardy action.



JT struggles to contain his delight on catching sight of his eldest brother at the top of Sutton Bank. Actually I am finishing a Wispa bar in a hurry so I didn't have to share any with him. Photo : James Telfer

Around the 14 mile mark I was forced to swerve first around a rather severe looking lady and her retinue of horses and then about half a mile on a less severe but more highly dangerous Tesco delivery van in order to preserve life and limb. However, on the upside, the appearance of some blue sky was enough to convince me to shed my waterproof and provided the perfect excuse to walk up a steep tarmac road which brought me out in paradise.... well High Paradise Farm actually

In the crossing of a stile the aspect changed markedly to that of moorland with a mixture good springy turf and hardcore road to run on pretty much all of it on fairly flat terrain as Dale Town Common gave way to Arden Great Moor. It also afforded a first view of the Bilsdale transmitter, which was in view from what seemed like a 360-degree perspective for around the next 20 miles.

Silently and suddenly as if out of nowhere I hit my first emotional wall of the day. The sun was out, my early morning aches had subsided and I was well up on my target time. However, the thought of another 37 miles just didn't seem to press any buttons and my mojo was well and truly out to lunch. Having treated myself to some jelly babies coupled with a rare appearance of the sun seemed to dispel these negative thoughts and although I had lost a few more place the world seemed a better place again. The long drag along the Hambleton moor road was coming to an end and a nice but stony descent off the moor beckoned and more importantly as Osmotherley came into sight.

Having negotiated some tricky twists and turns I arrived at the second checkpoint in 3 hrs 40 mins in 30th place and was greeted by Kerry and Wendy whose role of supporting Dave and Paul had taken on board an extra charge for the day.

Disappearing into the village hall I was struck by a couple of things. Firstly, in addition to our drop bags there was enough food laid on to put the WI to shame and there was definite temptation to “dally a while”. However, the more pressing issue that the discomfort I had been feeling on the sole of my right foot for the past 5 or so miles turned out to be quite red and so I set to work re-arranging my zinc oxide tape to try and afford it a bit more protection and so in the process made me forsake most of the excellent Billy Bunter spread on offer.

Osmotherley to Hasty Bank (Miles 22 - 33)

Having checked on Dave and Paul’s progress I gave warning to Kerry and Wendy (highly prescient as it turned out) of the potential to perform some foot surgery at Hasty Bank in 11 miles time. Judging by the throng in the hall when I left I reckoned my truncated lunch stop had elevated me about half a dozen places in the race standing (probably my best tactic of the day). This point was clearly verified within the next two miles as a stream of runners who had passed me on the previous stage came by having obviously enjoyed a slightly more protracted lunch stop. However, as this coincided with a descent of Scarth Wood Moor I was able to keep pace with them until the next road crossing and an ascent into the next bit of woodland.

Having seen these runners disappear off one by one I was again left in perfect solitude which was the cue for the inner gremlins to re-appear at the 27-mile mark. Looking back I think this was caused by the knowledge that the next 5 miles contained some of the bigger climbs of the day and the fact that everything I was now trying to eat had the texture and digestibility of slow setting cement.

I then turned to the last and newest weapon in my armoury.....my I Pod. I appreciate this is not quite what you would have expected of Joss Naylor but needs must and what was there to lose? The transformation was as surprising as it was immediate. Suddenly I had a renewed focus and something to lose myself in and the steep ascent onto Live Moor was taken on with renewed vigour and enthusiasm.

Even more surprisingly was the fact that the pack of runners who I had last seen about 3 miles ago came in to view and by managing to keep running up the moor I managed to catch and overtake them around 5 of them and held onto my position over Cringle Moor and the Wainstones and down Hasty bank.

The 11 or so miles from Osmotherley had taken around 2 hrs 45 minutes and represented a distinct slowing of the pace but had involved some sharp climbs

and although not much by normal fellrunning standards when encountered on this type of a venture they take on a whole new perspective.

However, despite this unexpected change in fortune it was somewhat tempered by the fact that my blister was screaming for some urgent attention and I was having to spit out everything I tried to eat as I just could not chew and swallow anything.

Fortunately, Wendy and Kerry were on hand to apply a Compeed and bandages to cover up what was quite a gruesome sight. However, this highly needed running repair was gained at the expense of all those hard won places. Still with 22 miles to go not to have done so would have almost certainly have brought a premature end to my race and after nearly six and half hours on the hoof that wasn't a risk worth taking. The other added bonus was that I discovered that for some reason I was able to eat my jelly babies and so not all forms of solid nutrition were to be denied.

Hasty Bank – Kildale (Miles 33 - 42)

Heartened to hear that Paul and Dave were going well behind this next stage began with a long slow yomp up onto Urra Moor. With the I Pod still dispensing musical therapy I withdrew into my own little world as the sky darkened and a distinct gloomy chill descended. A runner who had been shadowing me for a couple of miles made his move, found another gear and was off into the distant horizon.

The terrain took on a more austere and bleak persona more akin to a desolate and remote Pennine moor just upping the emotional ante a notch or two. However, as on previous occasions that day light followed darkness, although on this occasion it owed nothing to the weather conditions. Just as I reached the summit of Beacon Hill, the highest point of the whole race, I was joined by Dave running strongly. Disengaging from my I Pod I joked as to why it had taken him so long to catch me and after a couple of minutes of chat he sped off towards the next clip point at Bloworth Crossing and I went back to my little world.

With this clip point in sight the heavens opened and I dashed to get waterproof, hat and gloves on. The weather over the next 4 miles over Ingleby and then Battersby Moors was foul in the extreme but not foul enough for three mountain bikers to come hurtling past. Cocooned against the elements this was the time to really dig deep, dig in and focus on getting down to Kildale and civilisation. After what seemed like an eternity the moor gave way to a steep road descent for a couple of miles down to Kildale Village Hall, hot tea and a change of clothes. I arrive there in 8 hours 15 minutes around 30th position.

Dave was finishing off his re-fuelling and was soon on his way. I quickly set about changing my upper layers but still couldn't face anything to eat still sustaining myself on jelly babies but the cup of tea which Wendy had produced certainly hit the spot.

Kildale - Guisborough (Miles 42 - 55)

Emerging from the relative warmth of the village hall I was pleasantly surprised to find that the rain had relented and although the light was still decidedly gloomy my spirits were considerably lifted. The next mile or so involved a long pull up out to Kildale on tarmac until a left turn onto Coate Moor heralded the meeting up (albeit from the opposite direction) of the Gisborough Moors race route.

Up and beyond Captain Cook's monument down and back out of Gribdale in the fading light with no one in sight in front or behind coupled with that stillness that descends around this time of day brought with it a great sense of peace and tranquility. The demons were banished my foot had given up complaining and for the first time I could contemplate the end.

As I turned the corner to face Roseberry Topping I was able to catch the last vestiges of a watery orange sunset disappearing behind the summit as it was met by a stronger orange glow emanating upwards from what is left of the once mighty steel and chemical industries of Teesside.

Returning to matters more mundane 9 hours into the race I had cause to answer my first call of nature of the day (a sure sign that I had not been drinking enough). Having stopped I figured I may as well fit my headtorch now rather than faff about at the next checkpoint.

Given that I could also clearly see the summit marshal had his headtorch on I reckoned it was only polite to give him something to look at to while the time until we met up on the summit.

Amazingly within the next five minutes the light disappeared altogether and I reached the summit in almost pitch dark having been passed by two runners on their descent. The marshal typified the kindness and encouragement which had greeted me every part of the way. He had an amazing array of goodies that would have done your average corner shop proud. Making do with a glucose tablet I started my own descent only to be met by a couple of runners nearing the summit suggesting I was far from alone. Passing another couple on their way up to the summit in quick succession on the lower flanks gave me fresh impetus to get a move on.

Back up on the moor a bright lantern shone on top of Highcliff Nab, the penultimate checkpoint some two miles away. By this stage I had gone onto the fellrunning equivalent of autopilot. Knowing the route well the main challenge was to keep my head down and follow the beam from my headtorch whilst all the time being guided in like a ship seeking port.

Another warm and generous reception awaited on Highcliff Nab a little after 7pm. With a little over 5 miles to go I even allowed myself to believe that I would beat my 12 hour target so long as I avoided any navigational mishaps in the woods the potential for which there were a plenty.

Doing a reccie in broad daylight is one thing running for real in the dark with no perspective your headtorch was both a new and slightly intimidating experience. So much so that I allowed myself the minor luxury of stopping at each of the key five turning points to double check where I was before ploughing on.

With this last piece of navigational quicksand behind me the final descent began down a very steep concrete road, just what aching leg muscles need after nigh on 11 hours. Reaching the disused railway which heralded the last mile to the finish all my calm and serenity dissipated as I searched in vain for the clip at this unmanned and final checkpoint.

Around ten seconds later I was joined by another headtorch who let fly with a volley of verbal displeasures questioning the parentage of those who had seen fit to remove the clip. It was only 48 hours later from reading the official race report that I realized that at that point I had been joined by the race organizer Jon Steele, who had run the race after 2 hours sleep and with the company of a raging tooth abscess.

Despite those many handicaps having followed me for about 400 yards, maybe possibly feeling sorry for the fact that I had wasted a bit of time looking for the non existent clip, Jon found another gear which I most certainly didn't have and shot off down to the finish.

The chimes of 8pm were peeling out from Guisborough Church as I started my run down Belmangate down to the new finish at the Sea Cadets arriving into the hall to a round of spontaneous applause (afforded to every runner) from those who had already finished and their various supporters. Somewhat surprisingly I had managed round in a few seconds under 11 hours and 3 minutes in 27th place.

Dave had been in for about 20 minutes with Shaun finishing about 20 minutes later and Paul another 15 or so minutes after that having shown real character in overcoming some aches and pains along the way.



Thank goodness that's over. Easy to smile now.

Without taking anything away from our collective efforts we were reminded at the prize giving of the type of company we were keeping or trying to keep when it was announced that the winner, Oliver Sinclair (8 hr 27 mins) had set a new record as did the first lady, Shelli Gordon (9 hrs 9 mins).

It would be remiss not to mention all the marshals stuck out far flung places who were unstinting in their support, kind words and extensive range of sustenance whose sole concern throughout was with the welfare of each runner. On top of that the organization of such an epic was brilliant from start to finish.

Family commitments (I know it's hard to believe that Mrs Telfer would rather entertain her best friend from school on a flying visit over from Singapore rather than massage my wet and sweaty feet) meant that I was hugely indebted to Wendy and Kerry for their support and encouragement not to mention the dressing of "that blister".



Paul, obviously overcome with joy and happiness having been given the good news that he has won the Spot Prize – a free entry to the Hardmoors 110 with the reccie starting in 10 minutes.
Photo : John Telfer

As I gathered my thoughts and began to think about the first pint I fell into conversation with one of the race organizers who asked me how I had got on. In my unusually sober state (by now 9pm on a Saturday night) I had ventured how would I ever eclipse the events of the day. Quick as a flash and in a semi serious tones he said that being the case I should waste no time in submitting my entry for the Hardmoors 60 race to be run over the rest of the Cleveland Way in September.... at least he spared me the '110' in June !!

John Telfer
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