

NORTHUMBERLAND ULTRA MARATHON 4th AUGUST 2012 62 MILE/12000FT

This was the second running of this event organised by Adventure Hub, a company based in Norfolk who organise a series of Ultra races in the UK, treks and full expeditions throughout the world.

The route starts and finishes in Wooler and covers the Harthope, Breamish, Coquet and College Valley's as well as plenty of higher ground in between, it also partly follows the Pennine Way and St. Cuthbert's Way.

A relatively small field of runners congregated in Wooler for the opening of registration at Wooler Haugh at 6.30am. There was also a Marathon distance route to choose from, but the majority are entered in the Ultra.

7.30am and we get the race briefing – there are 5 checkpoints with drinks and limited food at Langleeford, Ewartly Shank, Clennell, Carlcroft and Mount Hooley Youth Hostel. The forecast is for warm and humid conditions to begin with and possibly heavy thundery downpours developing as the day progresses (which we certainly witness later on).



Race briefing for this colourful group of runners

8am approaches and we are set on our way. The first section is up to Wooler Common via Kenterdale Hill and a group of 4-5 runners soon break clear and seem to be setting a quick pace, not sure if they are doing the Ultra or the Marathon. Broadstruther is soon reached before taking a left Path then the track down to check point 1 at Langleeford. As we drop into the Valley the temperature rises and it becomes increasingly humid. Plenty of liquid on board and we head up to Housey Crag and Long Crag before the steep ascent of Hedgehope. Off Hedgehope over Dunmoor Hill and drop down from Cunyan Crag where I pass a runner (Richard from Norfolk). It's his first visit to Northumberland and is not used to hills! But he is here to get his 3 points as this is a qualification event for the UTMB.

A nice grassy path leads us to Linhope before the long drag up to Rig Cairn and High Cattle where Richard promptly leaves me behind. The heat is having its effect as I hit a bad patch and start running low on water. Luckily for me I have local knowledge and know where the tap is at Low Bleakhope Farm and refill my bottles. It seems hard work up Salter's Road before the drop down to check point 2 at Ewartly Shank – 21 mile. Here I am glad to meet my support team – Wendy and my Dad. I have a bit of a sit down, change my top and get some rice pudding, peaches, tea, coke and fruit cake down.

After 10 minutes rest I get going again and start to feel considerably better. The next check point is only 5 miles ahead and my reccyng pays off as I get a good line around Singmoor, Puncherton, and

Old Rookland, and 2 or 3 runners are pleased that I have local knowledge on this tricky last section as we arrive at Clennell CP3.

More liquid and fuel on board and we are off up Clennell Street, there are now 4 of us in a group and the banter is good and helps to pass the time. The sky is turning darker and thunder is beginning to rumble in the distance. We eventually hit the Uswayford Farm track and drop downhill to Rowhope. It is now incredibly black and the thunder and lightning has intensified, and we are right amongst it. The heavens open and we don our waterproof's as quick as we can. It is absolutely torrential and the flashes keep on coming. Don't think it's a good idea having these carbon fibre poles with me, but if it gets me at least I will go happy!!

We climb up from Rowhope and contour round to CP4 at Carlcroft. 5.30pm, 35 miles done, 27 miles to go. Here my support team – Mam, Dad, Mick and Susan are here to meet me. It is still p---ing down and they have to get out of the car, see to a change of socks and shoes, and a better waterproof. More rice pudding, peaches, fruit cake, chocolate and coke. When I leave I think they are all as wet as I was, but they seem happy and wish me luck. There are now just 3 of us, Richard from Norfolk, Chris from Wales who is also here for the 3 points, and myself. We run along the road to Blindburn to try and get warmed up. We pick up the path for the long drag up to Yearning Law and then on to the mountain refuge hut at Lamb Hill. The rain has eased off now and we are on the Pennine Way. It seems to be clearing and looks as though it will be a nice night.

We follow the stone slabs via Beefstand Hill and Mozie Law, cross over The Street, and up onto Windy Gyle. We run a bit/walk a bit/run a bit/walk a bit and the miles pass. We reach the turn off for Auchope Cairn but have to go carefully across the duck board's which are very greasy. We find a route marker and drop off steeply before the refuge hut down to the College Burn. Chris is struggling on the steep descents but is still strong on the climbs. The 3 of us have been together for 25 miles or so and it would be nice to get to the finish together. He soon catches us up in the Valley bottom and we soon arrive at the final check point – Mount Hooley Youth Hostel.



Richard, Chris and myself approaching the final check point at Mount Hooley

Here Wendy, Rachel and Richard's wife are here to meet us. Coincidentally, Wendy's side of the family are having a re-union weekend at the Hostel as her grandparents used to live and work in The College Valley, so it is nice to see them all, all be it briefly. Wendy's cousin's daughter has made a banner with Go Paul on it which spur's me on. Don't feel like eating as much but get down a jam sandwich, tea and coke. The midges here are horrendous and the marshals and supporters are having to endure them.



Wendy displaying the banner at Mount Hooley - Made by her cousins daughter Katie. How could I not finish after seeing this!

13 miles to go, so hopefully will be finished in about 3 – 3.5 hours. Not looking forward to this next road section to Hethpool, but it passes by ok. Richard's wife cycles down the valley to the car park and we say goodbye to her. We join the St. Cuthbert's Way at Hethpool for the final climb up to Black Law and Gain's Law. Head torches now on and the clag has come down. Visibility is down to 5-10m and this higher section is mostly walked as we need to watch out for a few forks in the Path. Richard's mate has come out to meet us and helps to guide us back.



Mount Hooley check point. hoods up and scratching. The midges were as bad as I can remember for a long time.

Visibility improves as we drop down towards Wooler Common. We realise if we run (trundle in Norfolk language) we might get back inside 16 hrs. Gravity helps us and we are able to run down through Wooler to the finish at Wooler Haugh. It is one minute to midnight - 15hrs 59mins 12 secs. Job done.

Handshakes all round and 3 very satisfied runners are handed out goodie bags for all their efforts. Turns out we are equal 4th. The winner was finished about 3 hrs ago, so still room for improvement.

Many thanks to Richard and Chris for your company and hope to see you next year.

I find it hard to believe that I did not know one single competitor in this Northumberland event. Personally I think the Northumberland Ultra has the potential to become a classic event. Hopefully Adventure Hub will persevere with it and with better publicity should be able to attract a few more NFR's next year.

Paul Appleby.