

**WASDALE – 21 miles & 9,000 feet of climbing**  
**July 14, 2012**

Arguably the most classic of the Lakeland Classics took place in something akin to summerlike conditions in sharp contrast to recent weekends in the Lakes and Northumberland with almost perfect visibility throughout, nothing more than a slight breeze, amazingly dry underfoot and every now again.....some sunshine !!



The loneliness of the long distance runner. Heading for Esk Hause with Great Gable in the background.  
Only 4.5 miles to go !!  
Picture : SportSunday Event Photography

At the business end Ricky Lightfoot (Ellenborough AC) won in 3h 44m 44s, some 13 minutes ahead of his nearest pursuer, Carl Bell (Howgill Harriers) with ex NFR, Steve Birkinshaw finishing in 5<sup>th</sup> place to claim first MV40. However, surely the stand out performance of the race came from Carnethy's young Jasmin Paris, fresh from breaking the Ladies record at Arrochar Alps the previous week came home in 12<sup>th</sup> place in a time of 4h 30m 54s. For good measure she had also won the Ladies race at Ennerdale in early June. Two Carnethy men, Andy Fallas and Adrian Davis also had excellent runs to finish in 6<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> places respectively. Meanwhile, what news of the other Scottish based runner who crossed the border in search of glory, failing which a decent pint?

The Wasdale Express roared out of Haddington just before 5.45am stopping en route to pick up Stewart Barrie, injured but along for a day out on the fells pulling into the NT car park at Brackenclose not that long after 9am.

As Stewart headed off to claim his first vantage point of the day I readied myself for my long day, and I mean long, ahead. With dibbers all cleared and functioning 144



runners were sent on their way up the ever steepening incline of Illgill Head, traversing round the actual summit, giving way to some good running in the only mist of the day, before a sharp pull up to the first checkpoint at Whin Rigg.



Stewart at Whin Rigg (CP1) practicing his strangling technique on some poor unsuspecting mutt in anticipation of having to take similar action when being bored to death on the way home by JT's race stories. Picture : JT

Having worked hard to gain over 1,500 feet of climb this is all cashed in with a kamikaze descent alongside Greathall Gill down to the valley below. Highly tempting though it is to really let go it is writ large in Wasdale folklore that overcook it on this descent early in the race and by Pillar you will be in a sorry state. With these wise words ringing in my ears I kept a steady pace, worried little about being overtaken and enjoyed a leisurely trot through the pastures and meadows of Greendale before crossing the main Wasdale road at Greendale Bridge.

Just under a month ago I had stood in the same place at the end of Geoff Davis's magnificent Joss Naylor Round chatting with the great man himself (Joss that is although Geoff is pretty great too) but with the downside of being bitten half to



death by a million midges. Today it was a different story, no sign of Joss and still a long way to go and a lot of hard work ahead.

The next checkpoint was Seatallan, involving some 2,000 feet of climbing, starting with a hands-on knees, derriere in the air ascent up alongside Greendale Gill before the gradient becomes less severe. However, whilst the physical pain abates the mental purgatory takes over as every time you think you are coming up to the summit, hopes are dashed as it turns out to be another cruel false dawn brought about by the deceiving angle of this hill. On the upside, the birds were singing, there was blue sky and the views were second to none. Further, I succeeded in making up a few places including a man and dog combination, more of which later.

Eventually, the fell gets tired of playing its tricks upon you and yields up its summit and provide a reward of an excellent descent off down into the Pots of Ashness and onwards to Pillar. I had heard and read many tales of well seasoned runners going hither and thither in the mist, ending up heading off to Caw Fell and beyond but today it was just a case of follow the procession in front. Interestingly, the race map has you heading for the col between Haycock and Scoat Fell but today there was a sneakier route on offer. It would be a shame to spoil it for those running this race in future years so I shall say nothing more. However, as I was always running on a trod of sorts it may well be it is no longer the secret I am making it out to be.

As the ridge in the region of Scoat Fell is reached the scenery just keeps on surpassing itself whether it is the big rocks of Pillar, Kirk Fell, Gable and the Scafells or the beautiful valleys of Ennerdale, Mosedale and Wasdale. Take your choice and you cannot help but be blown away.

The final pull up to CP3 on Pillar from Wind Gap heralded the first of the unfortunates who had perhaps gone off a little too fast and was now paying the price. A quick word of encouragement, a check to see if he wanted any food or drink and I left him to his misery. I did think of pointing out to him that he was probably less than an hour from being able to get a pint of the Wasdale Head Inn but reckoned that as not everybody is motivated by such matters I should keep my own counsel.

Running off Pillar I fell (geddit?) in with a group of four and we took in turns to lead the charge down to Looking Stead and to the summit of the Black Sail Pass, the pecking order being dependent on who was feeling the bravest in descending down over the succession of little rocky knolls or who had just found a cunning way of avoiding them altogether. Onward and onto the traverse around Kirk Fell up to Beck Head this game continued. Every now again we would catch and runner or be surprised as someone played the same trick on us.



Oooh...that looks like an awkward stone to step over. JT applies the technical approach on the Kirk Fell Traverse.  
Picture: Andy Holden

The piece de resistance was then before us, the scramble up Great Gable, which after nearly 4 hours on the hoof is not a pretty venture and one or two were suffering big time. The Pillar "four" had become the Gable "two" as one had shot off and the other had dropped off. Having eschewed my usual early sprint tactics I had made steady progress (by my limited standards) and had progressed from 120<sup>th</sup> on Whin Rigg to 95<sup>th</sup> by the summit of Gable. Hardly sufficient to get me inducted into the Fell Running Hall of Fame but overtaking people rather than being overtaken certainly does wonders for my mental state.

However, the pain, gain equation was brought into equilibrium as the descent down to Styhead began. Now, I have only ever ascended Gable by this route and other than the odd opportunity to cut a corner or two it had always struck that there was just a single route. Today, the options, in descent seemed limitless as grass, scree,



rocky path and then further variations thereof presented themselves and were gratefully lapped up. There was also a group of youngsters at Styhead cheering wildly every time a runner appeared.

Surprisingly there is nigh on 1,000 feet of climbing between Styhead and Esk Hause and even more surprisingly even for an old plodder such as myself there is quite a bit of running in it so long as you tell your brain to start running whenever the gradient slackens off a bit.

From Esk Hause the route up to Scafell Pike has become a very dear friend this year what with reccies for the Old County Tops and Steph's Bob Graham and the real things themselves. Spurred on by happy memories I dipped on a still remarkably busy Scafell Pike summit 33 minutes short of 6 hours on the go.

I began to entertain some vague notion of a sub 6 hour race and aided by the fact that a fellow runner who I had caught around Little Narrowcove was upping the ante on the descent down to the Lingmell Col I did my best to keep up with him and whilst I succeeded on the rock the minute we began the grassy traverse down Lingmell he was gone in a flash and out of sight within a minute.

Then, out of nowhere, came the man with the dog who trotted by looking as fresh as the proverbial daisy (the dog not the man). Probably not the most noteworthy event of the day but a great excuse to show this fantastic photograph of said pooch traversing Kirk Fell earlier in the race.



Dog on a mission, hunting down JT (and eventually succeeding)  
Picture : Andy Holden

All that apart the descent was a sheer delight until the 1,700 foot contour is reached and then the angle steepens to something akin to 1:2, the path becomes more eroded with some denuded scree (if such a thing exists) thrown in and it all becomes an altogether more painful experience. Relief eventually comes in the form of the last checkpoint at the ladder stile, strategically placed to avoid people sneaking down the Brown Tongue pass.

From here the race field and car park come into sight and despite my best efforts never seemed to be getting any closer. On reaching the kissing gate at the bottom of the fell I made the fatal mistake of looking at my watch and worked out I had roughly 2.5 minutes to get in under 6 hours (I know - pathetic isn't it considering the winner had finished well over 2 hours previously, but we all need our little goals in life, just try supporting Queens Park Rangers for 44 years and you'll know what I mean). Cue a mad sprint for the finish line and some bemused looks as to why the person finishing 92<sup>nd</sup> with no one within catching distance either in front or behind felt compelled to finish in this matter. After a final dib and a wait whilst the final print coughed back into life confirmed that I had achieved my sub 6 hour goal by 79 seconds, a stunning margin of comfort compared the 21 seconds I had to spare at Ennerdale last year to achieve the same outcome.

Another grand day out, all made possible by the many good folk from Cumberland Fell Runners Association, both down in the valley and up on the summit checkpoints who were unfailingly supportive both with words of encouragement and various goodies along the way.

Tremendous though it had all been there was still the rather bitter (in many meanings of the word) irony that on reaching the road turning out of Brackenclose the choice was either turn right and in two minutes arrive at real ale heaven in the form of the Wasdale Head Inn. Turn left and it would be 4 hours and 160 miles before any form of the "sustenance of life" would pass my lips. Being the dedicated family man that I am I made the right choice and turned.....left.

Sad but true.

Race results and split times are here (<http://cfra.co.uk/results2012.php>)

Meanwhile, the outcome of letting Stewart loose with my camera can be viewed here ([http://www.flickr.com/photos/john\\_telfer/sets/72157630585247722/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/john_telfer/sets/72157630585247722/)). As can be seen Stewart is a keen student of various forms of stonecraft, dogs, tarns and the occasional fellrunner.

**John Telfer**  
**July 19, 2012**