

HARDMOORS 55 – March 23, 2013

52 miles and 7,500 feet of ascent

The Lead Up

On the weekend when virtually every fell race in the country fell victim to the weather Jon Steele and his extraordinary team of Hardmoors helpers put on an absolute winter epic. The only concession to the snow and ice was to remove the loop around The White Horse close by Sutton Bank, being more of an access issue for cars and marshals rather than hillhardy runners who by that stage would have clambered over monumental snowdrifts and gained PhDs in the meaning of wind chill.

Just over 140 runners took part, including two relay teams, with an incredible completion rate of just under 90%. The race was won by Duncan Harris in a time of 8h 33m with Shelli Gordon, winning it for the ladies, following up on her 2012 victory, coming home in 9h 59m, in an impressive 15th place overall.

NFRs representatives were Paul Appleby, Dave Coxon, Peter Moralee and myself. Dave came within a whisker of not even catching the coach from Helmsley to the start at Guisborough when his car failed to negotiate Sutton Bank, this after he had stopped to help push the car in front who had got stuck. However, as one good turn deserves another motorist was able to get Dave on his way.

With the benefit of my parents living 3 miles from the start line this provided Paul and myself with a somewhat more leisurely start to the day, although he did have to endure being surrounded by three generations of Telfers the night before.

The usual thorough kit check was somewhat less demanding for me this year as I was wearing pretty much everything on the kit list from the off, including long leggings, 4 layers on top plus hat, gloves and buff. This was pretty much de rigueur and there was precious little flesh on display, although one hardy runner completed the whole venture in shorts.

The decision to run the race “in reverse” was taken almost a year ago and what a brilliant decision that turned out to be. The prevailing ferocious wind of concrete shattering proportions was coming from the East and apart from the odd section where it was hitting you side on it was on our (very cold) backs for a majority of the race. Someone did mention a wind chill factor of minus 12 and I am sure by the time I recount this tale to my grand children in years to come it will have fallen to minus 25 with the odd polar bear thrown in for good measure.

The Race

After a race briefing focussing heavily on the safety aspects and our questionable sanity we were shepherded outside the warmth of Guisborough Rugby Club and up on to the disused railway line as light flecks of snow filled the air and just after 9am we were sent on our way.

I adopted my usual “bat out of hell” approach and ran with the half dozen or so race leaders for the first mile until the first climb up onto the escarpment above Guisborough saw normal service resumed as I immediately shipped about twenty places. Still it was fun whilst it lasted. Once “up top” the route follows the Gisborough Moors race in reverse for the next 7 or so miles.

Although there was only a dusting of snow on the stretch out to Roseberry Topping many of the flagstones were covered with a veneer of ice requiring minor diversions to avoid falling foul of these death traps in waiting. Keeping up a reasonable pace across the moor I encountered my first excitement of the day having to call back a couple of runners who seemed to be under the impression that Roseberry Topping had been moved a few miles to the South and that the mound everyone else was running up and down was an optional diversion.

The bitter wind meant that the summit marshal had very sensibly decanted himself to a more sheltered spot beneath the summit brow in order to avoid instant hypothermia.

Despite having run in close order up to this point I ran almost the whole way from the gate back onto the moor and all the way to Captain Cook's Monument in almost splendid isolation, save for a couple of speedsters who flew by. My next encounter with civilisation was at the Monument where some poor soul was overcome with the agony of choice as to which way to go was in need of some guidance and seemed happy to follow me through the wood to the road which heralds the end of the Moors race route. The road down into Kildale was fast but required care as every now and again a frozen stream lay across the tarmac waiting to catch out the unsuspecting runner.

Pleased to have covered the first 12 miles in just over an hour and three quarters and in about 40th position it was good to see my wife Helen, acting as support crew for Paul and myself, with all my goodies laid out ready for a quick bit of scoff and out again. Paul arrived just after me and amidst mouthfuls of cake and drink we agreed that the going so far had been good and I even ventured that maybe all this stuff about harsh conditions had been a bit overdone. I may have been eating cake at that stage but in little under an hour the dish of the day would be copious amounts of humble pie.

Departing Kildale Village Hall just as the rest of Team Telfer (brother James and wife Anne) arrived to see what exactly it was little brother got up to in his spare time, I felt the wind whipping up a bit, suggesting worse was to come.

The "worse to come" began to reveal itself as the steep climb up the farm road to Battersby Moor, first ice on the road, then a covering of thin powdery snow and then off the road and into the full blown Arctic wastes. Runnable at first, as soon as the track to Bloworth Crossing went off on a more southerly direction then we were all caught in a chilling cross wind which had whipped up dune like crescents of snow, around 4 – 5 feet at their apex and over a foot at their tail which we were obliged to plough through.

Although fairly soft it was all but impossible to run in, and heavens knows what it must have been like for the leaders when they had "broken the trail" about half an hour earlier. Every now and again by the wonders of the wind the track appeared, scoured of snow and afforded a chance to run before turning into another deep drift, and on it went. I took comfort from the fact that the conditions had caused a bit of a coming together of runners trudging in single file and so if the worst occurred one would not be alone.

After what seemed like an eternity the Bloworth Crossing self clip checkpoint was reached and the path took an abrupt right turn onto a road where some form of vehicle had carved a path that allowed us to run again. Passing Round Hill, the highest point on the whole route at around 1,500 feet the track then started its descent down towards the road crossing at Clay Bank, gentle at first increasing to

near kamikaze proportions but with the snow ebbing away as height was lost. About half a mile from the road crossing I was joined by Paul and we trotted down to the road expressing our pleasure to be out of the rough stuff up above.



NFR formation descending : John and Paul approaching the Clay Bank crossing

© Helen Telfer

Helen, James and Anne were there to greet us with the happy news that the decision had been taken (by the Race Organiser and not them) to continue the route over the Wainstones ridge, as per the original route, rather than go underneath it as a bad weather option.

Amazingly, despite being of equal altitude to the horrors we had encountered over the past hour, there was remarkably little snow or ice over the Wainstones, Cold Moor and Cringle Moor. On the first downhill off the Wainstones, Paul demonstrated his superior descending skills to all in our group of half a dozen and was off into the distance. Crossing the road at the Lord Stones, conditions were remarkably similar climbing up Carlton Moor and over Gold Hill.

The cabaret at this stage was provided by a man sat in a Raynet van on top of Carlton Moor (goodness knows how he got there) supporting an orienteering event going on at the same time. With my brain now slightly softened by 26 miles of hard slog I pointed to the clip blowing in the wind on a cane outside said van. The occupant merely shook his head with a strong inference that I was the latest in a long line of runners to have made the same enquiry.

Although Paul had disappeared off over the horizon I was having a fine little game of my own which involved overtaking the same three people every time we came to something resembling a descent and they all returning the complement once the next uphill gradient was met.

Coming off Live Moor life got a little more sedate for the final five miles into Osmotherley but whilst the terrain is very accommodating you need to keep your wits about you as there are paths disappearing off in all directions. Fortunately, I was able to re-run last years race in reverse and forge way through the myriad of paths, somewhat to the relief of a fellow runner who seemed to be having what we might just call a bit of a compass and map malfunctionary moment.

Said person probably gave me one of the highlights of the entire day when standing in the middle of a road he has asked if I knew where I was going to which I replied, somewhat tersely I accept, in the affirmative. After about twenty yards said individual then had the temerity to then ask "Are you sure?" Many ripostes came to mind but on a split decision I just managed to hold my tongue on the matter.

The running over lower terrain and even the short climb up and over to the second main indoor checkpoint Osmotherley was runnable with only patches of snow along the way. Civilisation, in the form of Helen, Anne and the masses gathered in Osmotherley Village Hall, was met around 3.15pm, over 6 hours into the race.

I had planned to use this stop at 33 miles, with 19 remaining, to change kit, but as I was warm and comfortable and the thought of taking off and putting on four layers seemed too much like hard work, I contented myself with a dry hat and slightly thicker pair of gloves. Paul, who had arrived shortly before me was going through a full pit stop routine and so I was able to nip out ahead of him, albeit slightly more sweaty and less rested.

What struck me was just how much heat you lose in a short time even being indoors and so it spurred me to make all haste in order to warm up a bit. The two gradual climbs out of the village and then over the Oak Dale reservoirs helped achieve that goal. However, at the eloquently name Square Corner, the nightmares of Battersby Moor returned as the climb up the flanks of Black Hambleton heralded a return of ever deepening snow and those weird crescent shaped drifts making the going very, very tricky.

At this stage I was joined and soon passed by Lorraine Laycock, who would go on to finish as 2nd lady. Amongst the gathering gloom, now well after 4pm, her bright green jacket shone out like a beacon lest there be any doubt as to where the route ahead lay. Despite the gruelling conditions I managed to over take a few folk but then again without warning others would bear down on me and overtake. I even caught up and overtook Lorraine who had hit a bad patch.

After what seemed like an eternity the big gate at the edge of Arden Great Moor was reached and as I turned round to close it Paul appeared behind me, and we ran on to the next checkpoint at High Paradise Farm. At that point we had deluded ourselves into believing that by dropping a couple of hundred feet our worst snow induced worries would be put behind us once and for all.

The path through Boltby Wood to Sneck Yate and then on the derelict farm house at High Barn gave us grounds for optimism but then as we sought progress along the escarpment less than 3 miles from Sutton Bank, the wind sculpted drifts along the edge made progress as tough as it had been all day, no doubt abetted by a degree of fatigue and a wind that was showing no signs of letting up.

Ploughing on again on my own, I was surprised to see about half a dozen runners coming at me from an angle of ninety degrees, declaring that they could not progress

on the normal route and headed off down on a sharp descent. My natural inclination was to follow them, safety in numbers etc, but knew rule one was not to lose height and stick to the escarpment. My mind was made up by the arrival of Paul and Lorraine and we headed over to run alongside the edge of the fields which had been scoured so violently by the wind that there was barely a couple of inches of snow whereas twenty feet further on the escarpment it was feet deep.

Eventually, some two and three quarter hours after leaving Osmotherley and at around 6.10pm we hit the Sutton Bank checkpoint where Helen and Anne leapt out of the car to feed and encourage us and send us on our way over the last 7.5 miles. Paul and I kept up a steady pace as what snow had been deposited earlier that day was perfectly runnable. Sadly, Paul didn't seem too keen on my suggestion of a quick half in The Hambleton Inn which we were obliged to run past and so on we ploughed.

We (I) made our only slight navigational error, failing to pick up the faint (honest) path coming out of the hamlet of Cold Kirby and headed off slightly to the left of where we needed to be, but were called back by a couple who were in hot pursuit of us before applying their jet packs and soared away from us into the twilight. Donning our head torches, we were running in total solitude as we descended out of the wind to Flassen Dale and through Nettle Dale and below Rievaulx.

At the turning off the road with just 2.5 miles to go Paul ordered me on my way as in his opinion I was going better than him, despite my protestations he insisted, and so I went on my way up through Quarry Bank Wood, trying not to be scared of the dark nor to lose my way. The previous five miles in Paul's company had seemingly been an effortless jog, but the next two miles on my own seemed to go on forever. Eventually, Helmsley came into sight and then the sounds of cars, civilisation and early evening revellers.

At the junction heralding the final turn up to the cricket club I was joined by Lorraine, who had not dallied at Sutton Bank and so was well ahead of me, but had stopped to speak to her friends who had been supporting her. Despite this slightly odd race tactic and being the absolute gent that I am I told her that she should take the lead but like Paul before she told me just to carry on at my own pace (what is it about people not wishing to be seen in my company?).

Too tired to argue and just wanting to be finished and back in the warmth I bashed on and burst through the doors of Helmsley Football Club in 30th position at just a little after quarter to eight, and a tad over ten and three quarter hours after having left Guisborough to be greeted by Helen, Anne and James. Lorraine followed a minute later to claim second lady finisher prize with Paul arriving a few minutes later.

The Aftermath

To put matters in perspective the winner (Duncan Harris – 8h 33m) had finished at just after 5.30pm, whilst the last man home did so at 1.15am, but I would venture the efforts of the latter were of equal magnitude as the former given the time spent in such challenging conditions and under cover of darkness as well.

Both Dave Coxon and Peter Moralee came home well before pub closing time, but the latter was reported to have put greater store by the restorative powers of a hot bath than those on offer at The Feathers where the Telfers decamped in order to restore feeling to all parts of their bodies (apparently standing out on the top of Sutton Bank can be a slightly chilly experience so I am told) and rehydrate.



They think it's all over.....it is now – One wanted a cup of tea, the other a pint – guess who?
© Helen Telfer

An epic day of truly epic proportions, superbly organised, marshalled and supported by Jon Steele and his heroic team of helpers who put up with some very challenging and unpleasant conditions and to whom we all owe a most sincere debt of gratitude.

On a personal note the support afforded by my long suffering (and I do not exaggerate here) wife, Helen and sister-in-law Anne who probably got colder hanging around than I did but whose efforts were hugely appreciated.

A full set of results is here :

http://hardmoors110.org.uk/cms/sites/default/files/Hardmoors%2055%202013%20Race%20Results-2%20Sheet1_0.pdf