

Ian Hodgson Mountain Relay - 6 October 2013

The sublime 2012 early-Autumn weather of last year was sadly consigned very much to history, as rather more typical Lakeland weather engulfed Patterdale. As our native North East enjoyed a very pleasant Sunday, 560 hardy fell-runners enjoyed something very different.

Thick cloud down to about 700 feet covered the race area, meaning all of the higher ground was thick and claggy, resulting in some testing route-finding challenges. Persistent rain faced most of us, with brisk winds adding to the general unpleasantness.

Leg 1 started dry, leg 2 not quite, the leg 2/3 changeover was hideous, with Kirkstone totally clagged in rain-bound cloud, such that we couldn't even see over the road to identify which teams were coming in. Leg 3 runners disappeared entirely as soon as they went through the gate out of the handover area! Leg 4 was similarly horribly wet, but at least the start was below the thick cloud level. Altogether not what any of us wanted.

Despite the weather dampening spirits a little, it was not enough to dampen the usual, good-natured rivalry, in the battle to be crowned top North East team, between NFR, Tynedale Harriers and Saltwell Harriers.

Paul Hainsworth and Emma Bain led us off on the 1st leg from Patterdale, over Angle Tarn and down to Hartsop. Despite neither of them having run the leg before, or recied it in advance, they had a great run to bring us home in 46 mins, ahead of both local rivals, in 38th position. Not to mention of course, a combined age that probably was amongst the highest in the leg, and approaching 20 years more than the combined ages of either of our local rivals!



Emma & Paul taking advantage of being briefly dry!

Photo: Mark Clarkson

This set us up well for leg 2, over High Street, Stony Cove Pike and Caudale Moor to Kirkstone. We had Scott Gibson and Will Horsley at full throttle, with Scott knowing the leg well, and having reccied it only last week. This proved a pivotal leg in the North East Battle of the Giants. Scott navigated perfectly and he and Will flew round in 1 hr 19 mins, the 13th fastest time for that leg, and moved us up 12 places to 26th position.

Tynedale Harriers were our closest rivals, only 1 minute behind at the end of leg 1. Scott and Will blew their challenge away. But it didn't really matter. Their pair enjoyed the thick cloud so much that they decided to spend twice as long in it as they needed to, and then forgot that it was a relay ... and ended up back where they had started from! We were really sympathetic. ☺

John Tollitt and George Nicholson disappeared into the cloud for leg 3 over Red Screes and Dove Crag to Sykeside. It looked from the conditions that 90% of this leg would be done in 20-metre visibility. George was a leg 3 novice, but John was armed with his knowledge of doing the leg in brilliant sunshine last year. Given the distinct lack of visibility, that knowledge was not certain in its value, so we hoped for the best. They had planned to play safe and use natural features to navigate from, assuming they could find them of course.

They obviously did, as they ran a blinder, slipping only 1 place to 27th in a time of 1 hr 11 mins, so maintaining most of the gain from leg 2. In fact they ran so well that they took me well and truly by surprise at the handover, as I had just stuffed half a Snickers bar in my mouth, and hadn't even taken my waterproof off when they emerged from the drizzle. My partner, Mark Clarkson, was fortunately a little better prepared as he grabbed the dibber and set off, with me frantically following whilst trying to run, chew a mouthful of chocolate bar and pack a soaking wet coat in my bum-bag all at the same time.

Needless to say Mark got ahead of me, as I coughed and spluttered bits of peanuts, and he stayed a little ahead for the first mile or so. We regrouped on the climb to Hart Crag and got a good line over Fairfield towards Cofa Pike. Despite the cloud, I made the decision that we should take the low route below Cofa Pike through the scree. I didn't get the best line, but somewhat fortuitously, it still worked quite well, until I tripped over, smashed my compass in half, sliced my thumb on it and gave myself a dead-leg on a rock. Fortunately Mark isn't just a strong runner, he can navigate too, as a snapped-in-half compass proved a bit tricky as a navigation tool.

We saw one other team, who edged past us on the ascent to Hart Crag and who we then overtook on Fairfield. They followed us across the scree route, but when I fell over they got away and disappeared into the clouds. Those were the only other runners we saw on the leg from when we left the valley below Hart Crag. Mark led us on strongly and we finished in 1hr 25mins to finish in 28th position overall, out of the 70 teams. This was a drop of one place on the leg, being the team that passed us whilst I was lying examining the rocks!

Tynedale Harriers had aborted and adjourned to the tea tent by this time, and Mark and I were changed and also enjoying tea and cake by the time Saltwell Harriers arrived in 44th place. So we would consider that as another resounding victory in the annual North East challenge!

We were all pretty happy with the performance overall, given the conditions ... and that 4 of our team members were V50s! Hope us old folk didn't hold back you youngsters too much!

Well done everyone. It was still a good day out, despite the conditions, as is always the case with this great event.

Roll on next year.

Dexter