

A Challenging Day! (The Wasdale Horseshoe Fell Race 2016)



"On your marks, get set, GO!" Come with me across the 21 miles and 9,000ft of the Wasdale Horseshoe Fell Race traversing the roughest and most famous fell country in England. It's raining, windy and the mist is down to about 1,000ft. The race starts along a runnable stony track before switching uphill onto the steep, grassy, tussocky and boggy fell side of Illgill Head. We're all walking now, because of the steep gradient, and we quickly enter a world of mist and rain. The gradient eases near the summit and a 'sheep trod' takes us left of the top and on to the first check point atop of the next fell: Whinn Rigg. Visibility is down to about 20 meters and so there is no possibility of seeing the wonderful view down to Wast Water and across the fells of Lakeland. The first checkpoint is reached after about 45 mins (cut off time 1 hour) and the steep descent begins back to valley level. I start well on the thick grass underfoot but lose places on the steeper, stony, eroded path through the bracken. My well worn knees only allow a certain speed and I've no desire to take a fall on a day like this.

Were now on the only 'easy' section of the race which takes us through fields and woods across the wet Wasdale Valley to Greendale – the home of fell running legend Joss Naylor and his wife Mary. They are both there on the bridge giving out orange juice. "Well done lad, how was that?" says Joss to me. "Not too bad" I reply "do you think it'll fair up today Joss?" He scowls "oh, there's a lot of low stuff still due to come in". I thank him and Mary and head off. He's dead right about the weather of course!

Nonetheless it's mild as I begin the upward plod back onto the fells and to the next checkpoint of Seatallan (2266ft). I think of taking off the 'cag' I've been wearing from the start. As if on cue, the rain peps up and the wind increases by a few knots so the cag stays on – for the rest of the race. I cross a stream that's now in semi-spate. It matters little as I'm already soaked to the skin. The occasional runner comes and goes in the mist although a lady runner stays nearby all the way to the summit of the steep, grassy and boggy hill of Seatallan. Two marshals huddle around the exposed trig point with the wind and rain howling around them (this is why they have cut off times!) I pass over my token, tell them that number 25 has dropped out (as requested to do so by the Greendale marshals), thank them and head off towards Pillar; the next check point and some 4 miles distant.

An easy, grassy descent takes me into a boggy area glorying in the name of 'Pots of Ashness'. Navigation now becomes a real challenge. With a few other runners I pick up a trod through the thick mist and mire. With careful route finding I know I can avoid climbing the hill of Haycock, and even Scoat Fell, if I get it spot on. Ignoring others that climb up to my left I head onwards on a bearing. I do manage to miss out Haycock but the steep ground pulls me up to Scoat Fell and onto familiar and easily navigable terrain so no matter. Rocky ground is now the norm causing my foot placement to become more measured and my pace to slow. Two runners ahead of me veer off onto a narrow rocky trod that I know avoids a bit of climb so I follow. One of them is uncertain: he turns & shouts his doubts to me. I give the thumbs up and he carries on.

The narrow col between Scoat Fell and Pillar is extremely windy and it's hard to keep one's feet. I hold onto the wet rock as I begin yet another steep climb. Other runners are struggling with the conditions and the navigation but I'm confident of the route and just battle on against the elements – at least it's not cold! The summit of Pillar (2927ft), the next check point, arrives and I'm around 15 minutes inside the cut off. The marshals have some shelter here so are fairly cheery. I hand over a token, they glance at me, establish I'm fit to carry on and off I go.

It's a wet, rocky descent from Pillar down to Black Sail Pass and, because of the conditions; I can't see the easier lines that I know are there. Descending becomes slow, laborious and frustrating. Two runners pass me and I vent my frustrations into the screaming wind! Finally I arrive at the pass and look around in the mist for Susan, who I know should be there, and there she is! She gives a little jump as she's been waiting for some time and is pleased to see me! I take a drink, tell her I'm ok and head off on the traverse of Kirk Fell. This is one top we don't have to go over. Some of the runners around me though are unsure of where they are and whether they're on the correct path (or trod). I re-assure them that they are indeed at Black Sail and that this narrow, rocky trod; on this steep fell side running with water is exactly where they should be!

The traverse is out of the teeth of the gale and gives a little respite although the wet and the rock continue. I calculate that I have 55 minutes to reach the next checkpoint on the top of Great Gable and conclude, as I'm still feeling ok, that it is just about doable. The familiar ground of Beck Head is reached (the col between Gable and Kirk Fell) and the steepest, wettest, rockiest, crapiest climb of the day begins. The route finding through the rock however takes my mind off the conditions and I pass a couple of guys before reaching the top of Gable (2949ft). I'm very pleased on my arrival as I'm 13 minutes inside the cut off and, although there's still a long way to go, there are no more cut off times to contend with and I'm reasonably confident I'm going to finish!

A couple of other guys are faffing around with bearings but I know the way off and I don't want to hang around in this gale. Off I go down across the boulders onto the paved bits of path with the wind getting even stronger! On a rare grassy bit, where I'm going reasonably quickly, a big gust nearly sends me crashing into the surrounding rocks. I manage to keep my feet and crouch down until the wind subsides a little and I'm able to move again. I finally reach Sty Head pass where the wind is being funnelled between the massive mountains of Scafell and Gable. I can barely hear myself think let alone hear the comments of one or two walkers who have ventured out today – they just get the thumbs up instead! I seem to be on my own now as I head upwards to Esk Hause the next checkpoint. There are a few streams to cross and they are all raging with white water although I'm never in above my knees so there's no bother and it's still fairly mild. Because I can't be bothered with the faff of extracting map from bum bag I add a couple of hundred meters to the route in finding Esk Hause. No matter, I'm still ok. I force a bar down my neck and press on to Scafell Pike – England's highest mountain!

No runners around me now but I'm happy with that. I know the route well so the mist is no problem. The wet rocks are a different matter though and I have a few slips and a few scrapes. Nearing the top I catch a few runners up and a couple more appear behind me so, at the summit (3210ft), there's a queue at the checkpoint! I follow a bearing off the top and descend the rocky, boulder strewn path. The rain and wind continue as I hit the grassy slopes of Lingmell. My foot goes down a hole and I just about stay upright – I curse the conditions. There are a few runners around so it's a race down the final steep descent. I overtake a couple but a searing pain from cramp grips my leg and they overtake me again. Further down I recover and take a few scalps in the last half mile. I'm feeling ok and the relief on approaching the finish is tangible. Susan's there to cheer me in and take my photo. I'm moving quickly as I cross the line and have a great sense of achievement on finally finishing.



What a day! 6 hours 27 minutes – a bit slower than 12 years ago but conditions are so much more challenging today. The Wasdale Horseshoe is a race many fell runners aspire to do. It tests your fitness, experience and fell craft to the maximum. Have a go by all means but please, as the FRA requires “*you must be confident you are capable of completing any race you enter*”!

Results here: <http://www.cfra.co.uk/results/Wasdale2016.pdf>



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