

Cross Fell Race

The fifth race in this year's NFR championships was the second running of this new, category long race, in the north Pennines, over the 11th highest fell in England at 2,930 feet. The only non-Lakeland fell to make it into England's top 20.

I am going to try my best to write this "critique" with some balance. More balance than I might have achieved had I written it just after crossing the finishing line!

So I'll begin by highlighting some positives. Garrigill is a lovely traditional Pennine village in which to hold a fell race. The village hall was a great base, and the people behind it had put a lot of effort in. The refreshments at the end were superb, with a wonderful range of cakes and endless cups of tea, delivered with warmth and positivity by those involved; it was a very social way to end a race. A bit like a traditional village coffee morning, where you catch up with local village friends that you haven't seen for a while.

So far so good then. Indeed. "But what about the race?" you may find yourself asking.

Well, it started in Garrigill, turned off up the Pennine Way track for about 6 miles to Greg's Hut, shortly thereafter headed left to the summit of Cross Fell and looped around over some rough and boggy terrain for two or three miles, picked up a Land Rover track for a mile or so and then re-joined the Pennine Way track to return to Garrigill by the same route.

I have to say, I found the route tedious in the extreme. The hard-pack hogging road was just awful. The surrounding countryside was expansive and remote, but fairly uninspiring, and you couldn't really take it in anyway, because you didn't want to look up from the road. That was partly because the surface was just rough enough

to twist an ankle if you did. But it was mainly because if you looked up you would see the horrible hard-pack yellow track continuing ahead of you as far as you could see into the distance, when you really wanted to convince yourself that it must surely end soon!



*Kim & Jane. Not sure why Kim looks so happy?!
© Joe Taylor*

Rather oddly, there was no checkpoint, and no marshals on the summit of Cross Fell. I had never encountered that before in a race. Consequently, when I saw a couple sitting sheltered behind the wall next to the trig point, eating a sandwich, I shouted "39" at them at the top of my voice, because somehow it seemed as though I should tell someone my number. And having battled with the hogging road and a raging headwind for the best part of 7 miles, they might just have been marshals in disguise and I wasn't taking any chances. They looked rather shocked, and must have thought I was some sort of nutter.

Upon reflection, other than fell runners being generally good-sport types, taking fell racing rules at face value, there was no requirement or reason to go over the summit at all. It wasn't a flagged route and

there was no checkpoint there. It would have been perfectly legal in fell-racing terms to contour around between the two checkpoints, before and after the summit, and miss out the summit section altogether if you wanted to. My thoughts would be that it would definitely be preferable to have a checkpoint and a marshal on the summit of Cross Fell.

The most common comment that I heard at the end was “*That wasn’t a fell race!*” mostly spoken in a slightly gruff and raised voice.

In the interest of fairness, let’s examine that oft-heard exclamation.

It was a race in a remote area, up a high hill that has the word “Fell” in its name. Tick.

It had about 3 miles of genuine fell terrain within it. Tick.

It was registered as a fell race with the FRA. Tick.

“So that all makes it a fell race, right?”

Well not necessarily. At least not if you consider yourself a traditional fell runner.

The Pennine Way track, which made up about 10 or 11 miles of the route overall, was a firm, hard-pack, yellow hogging road, of the type that you might see laid for temporary access to a building site. Another mile or two was hard track of a type that might be fairly described as a ‘Land Rover track’. The remaining three miles or so was definitely fell racing terrain.

The FRA requirements for fell races divide races into 3 categories; Category A, Category B and Category C, with the categorisation depending upon the climb per mile and the extent of road within the race route. This was Category ‘B’, for which the requirement is that the route ... “Should not have more than 30% of the race distance on road”. Even to meet the lowest race classification, “Category C”, the

requirement is for no more than 40% on road.

So what does “road” mean in this context? To be fair, after 25 years of fell running, I don’t know the answer to that! And to be honest, I’ve never felt the need to know the answer, because usually fell races are a bit like elephants. Not necessarily easy to describe, but you know one when you see one.

If “road” means tarmac, then fair enough, this qualifies. If “road” means a surface upon which you could comfortably drive most UK road-legal vehicles”, then this definitely was *not* a fell race. I certainly could have driven my car, without risk, around 11 miles, i.e. 70%, of the route.

So leaving as inconclusive, whether it technically was, or was not, a fell race, my own opinion was that the route was not in the *spirit* of what most experienced fell runners would expect from a fell race.

For me, it comes down to a straightforward analogy, linked to that simple definition of whether or not an activity is a ‘sport’. If you have to change your shoes to do it, it’s a sport, and if you don’t, it isn’t.

Fell racing is similar to me. A fell race is on a route that you wouldn’t want to do without fell shoes. This was a route that you wouldn’t want to do *in* fell shoes. So that decides it for me.

If you are pushing your boundaries a bit, and in that transition stage from road and tracks onto fells, then maybe this is a good race to help you do that. But it wasn’t a race for me, and I can confidently predict that I won’t be doing it again.

Although maybe that’s just me, as I was chatting to one purist fell runner that I have run with and against for 20-odd years. He had run it last year, and had actually returned to do it again this year. And no, apparently he had not suffered any recent nasty bumps on the head.

He is in fact a very experienced Lakeland runner, with a very high pedigree in his day, and holder of a number of fell race records in the past. Sorry Colin, but you won't see me there next year if you return for your hat-trick!

It is good to see new races spring up, and I know what goes in to the organisation. This was a positive thing for the village, and even though it wasn't for me, I hope it succeeds and continues to be a valuable contributor to local amenities, as those behind it deserve it.

I will conclude this general race critique, with a few other observations.

The organisation was generally good too, but I do have a couple of minor negatives. The organiser announced at the start that there was a water station, which because of its location, would be accessible twice by the runners, once before you went onto the fell and again after you left the fell.

Now, personally, I don't expect water stations on fell races, as I am from the school that feels that one of the challenges of fell racing is self-sufficiency. But on the back of that given information, I know runners that discarded some of the water they were going to carry, because 15 miles is a long way to carry water, when they could get two fill-ups en route.

I was only about a third of the way down the field, and I never saw a water station. I was told later that it was in the back of the Land Rover, but there was no sign of it, or water, or cups or anything in fact, when I passed it on the way out, and on the way back, the Land Rover passed me driving up the hogging track, in the direction of Greg's Hut, so quite how most runners were supposed to access it on the return section is a little unclear.

It didn't affect me personally, as I carried water, but others acted upon the information given. So my message would be, if you announce that there are two water

stations on the route, you really do need to ensure that they are there, they are obvious and the runners can access them easily.

And the prize giving was rather too long after the race ended. The wait was eased by the convivial atmosphere and the copious supply of tea and lovely cakes, but most runners, including many prize winners, had left long before it happened, so it turned out to be a bit of a non-event.

NFR had some good performances, particularly from Matt Hetherington, Roger Sillito, Gary Mason and Geoff Davis, who I think won the V60 category. I haven't seen the results since the village hall, but I believe they are out, so everyone can check for themselves. Well done to all.

NFR won the team prize too, although the first counter announced wasn't actually in NFR! I'm not sure who eventually turned out to be the correct three Club counters, but it seems we won it anyway. Somewhat unusually, the team prize was free entry to next year's race. Apparently there is no truth in the rumour that the prize for the second-placed team was free entry to the next two years' races. Thankfully, I was far too slow to be one of the counters.

One of NFR's founding fathers, and one of the best fell runners ever to come out of our area, Angus Tait, was born and bred in the Pennines, around Nenthead and Allendale. 20-odd years ago, in the early NFR days, Angus used to lead monthly training runs out over those Pennine fells. I once said to him.

"How about one of these training runs over Cross Fell, Angus?"

Angus wasn't one to waste words, and I always remembered his response.

"There's no running worth doing on Cross Fell."

There wasn't much Angus didn't know about fell running, and it has to be said, he was spot on there too!

Dexter