

## Helvellyn and the Dodds Fell race [AL] - 26 May 2019

The draw of this race was that it was the 3<sup>rd</sup> race in this year's Club championship. In my attempts to regain some fell running fitness after three disrupted years, I had decided to enter as many of the Championships races as I reasonably could. An attempt at motivation to get back out there.

And did I feel motivated before and after this race? Mmmmm? Read on.

I hadn't pre-entered, and I'd checked the detailed weather forecast, so there was a bail-out available, but I thought that would be a bit wimpy. "It'll be fine once you get going" was the thought somewhere deep inside my mind.

The weather was awful on arrival. The latest forecast for the day remained awful, but left a glimmer of hope that it might improve. 35-45mph winds, rain, possibly passing over by the later stages and low cloud cover throughout.

There was a full kit check for everyone at the start line, the requirement to carry or wear an additional layer to FRA regulation kit, and a recommendation to wear waterproof cover from the start. And Helvellyn is one of the lakes' Big 3 peaks, so we were going to be well-exposed to whatever the day threw at us.

I had taken the precaution of marking all of the bearings on my map to assist with the inevitable navigation, so I was about as prepared as I could be. Other than having not run anything close to that distance since August 2016 when Paul Appleby and I ventured over to the Sedbergh Hills race. It seemed an awful long time ago. I have only done the race once before, in 2011, when I finished 1<sup>st</sup> V50 in 2.43. I tried to gauge in my mind how much slower than that I was going to be today! A lot, was the inevitable conclusion.



*That's how you do it! Lee Roe descending to 4<sup>th</sup> place.* © Steve Major

Things weren't too bad until we hit the top of Clough Head, where we had been told the marshals had dropped off the summit, because conditions were too severe. And they were pretty poor to be fair. We had been quite well sheltered from the wind until we went over the top, but that was the end of the shelter for the day. From that point on we were battered non-stop. The wind direction seemed to vary hugely, from helping us significantly, to being in your face and to knocking you sideways, so that your feet never landed quite where you intended them to land. A problem not helped in my case by having to carry my glasses throughout, because I couldn't see through them due to the rain, but couldn't see the ground properly without them!

The cloud cover turned out to be more patchy than expected, so whilst it was generally misty, there were some breaks at times, and Helvellyn was actually clear, which was a welcome and unexpected surprise.

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The hoped-for improvement in the weather for the second half of the race sadly didn't materialise. It actually got worse. Most of the homeward half was run in lashing rain and the cloud cover was thicker, so viz was pretty poor. It was becoming so cold that my hands couldn't even clip the top off my Platypus to get a drink.

I was running along at the back of a loose 'group' of about 6 of us, who just about managed to keep each other in sight. I was thinking that the terrain was looking a bit different to on the way out, but just put that down to the lack of visibility, and the fact that you skirt any tops that aren't checkpoints.

Then suddenly the front runner stopped and announced that we'd missed the Great Dodd checkpoint. We were almost into the bottom of the dip before the final climb up to Clough Head by this stage, and had to turn round and go back up.

I can't think of many words that I would have liked to hear less than those. My legs were already shot by that point. But that's the price you pay when you mark up all the bearings on your map in preparation, and then don't bother getting your map out, and out of laziness and convenience, just follow others! There was another group in front of us, which it seems our group had followed, who didn't even know they'd missed Great Dodd, and carried on. Whether anyone ever established that, or whether they got disqualified, I have no idea.

By the time I eventually reached Clough Head, I was struggling even to run downhill, as my muscles were cramping with fatigue and cold. Finally I dropped out of the cloud and could see the cricket club finish. Only it was about a mile further away than I wanted it to be!

The official stats for the race are that it is 14.9 miles with 4,386 feet of ascent. My Strava said 16.5 miles and 5,528 feet! No

wonder I felt like I was running on empty. And looking at the Strava track, we'd only missed the Great Dodd checkpoint in the mist by 50 yards or so! Grrrr.

My time was 3.31, so I was right about being a lot slower than last time! Although given that this time I'd run 1.6 miles further, and climbed more than 1,100 feet more than the optimum route, it accounted for some of it. At least that's the comfort I tried to take from the reality of just being older, slower and less fit!

After about 26 years of fell racing, I have lost count of the number of fell races I've done, but it must be more than 300, with many of those being in the Lakes. I have to say, that I can't immediately remember many where conditions have been worse. Other than perhaps Blake's Heaven, of course, when I very nearly succumbed to hypothermia, but that a story already told.

And in all of those races, this was the first time I have ever finished a fell race to find that the presentation was already underway!

Speaking to H at the end, she had run most of the race with Andrew Duncan, but got slightly ahead of him at Clough Head, and knew Andrew was suffering from the cold. H tried to wait for him at the checkpoint, to continue on together, but the marshals refused to let her, as conditions were too severe to stop. That sums it up really.

Character-building stuff. And all nine NFR members that turned out and completed the race deserve credit for doing so, but special mention is due to Lee Roe for a great run to finish 4<sup>th</sup>, and to Karen Robertson for achieving 3<sup>rd</sup> lady and 1<sup>st</sup> LV50. Well done both.

Suffice to say, I don't think this is a race that I'll be rushing to do for a third time!

*Dexter*