

Montane Spine Race 2022

The Ramblings of a 4th Place Finisher

Wow! Where to begin. The Montane Spine Race! Trying to piece together the various parts of this outrageous event has been difficult. I hoped that by writing this account I'd make some sense of it all, and to share with others what an amazing adventure I had.

My initial 'introduction' to the Spine Race many years ago was through a magazine article depicting a lone runner crossing the finish line at Kirk Yetholm. No fanfare, no crowd, just the absolute sense of achievement. The article provided description of the adventure, hardship, adversity, and endurance that competitors had experienced to complete the event. Something definitely appealed.



The sunken eyes say it all

Fast forward to the era of event tracking and I have spent four to five editions of the race addicted to watching dots every January move their way North up the Pennine Way, wondering and doubting whether I would ever have the strength and ability to endure this event. Then during the summer of 2019, I read a Facebook message asking for volunteers for the Winter Spine. I signed up. The four days I spent with Spine Safety Team Three provided an invaluable insight into the event, I met some amazing people, and I took a lot away to reflect upon.

I had trained well for the 2021 event despite a lack of races and the travel restrictions, but it wasn't to be and the return to lockdown meant a twelve-month setback. Twelve more months to train, search for lighter better kit, read blogs and race reports, and most of all to dream.

Then it arrived... the race start. Stood in a field in Edale with my fellow '2022 Spinners' trying desperately to take it all in. I had the most surreal feeling as I stood there, waiting for the 8am start on the 10th anniversary of this event. I was acutely aware of my journey to that place and time, and the sacrifice to get there, but I felt 100% ready to go. My travelling supporters Claire and Sarth (absolute legends) had come down to see us off. My friend Rob Brooks helped with some photo duties and then toed the line next to me after making an incredible effort to even get to the start line (if you heard someone who sounded like they were coughing a lung up somewhere during the event it was probably Rob – nothing Covid related thankfully). It was also great to see some familiar faces including the awesome Sabrina Verjee. Sabs had helped enormously with advice, and it was great to share a moment at the start.



The excitement builds

And then... we were off!

Start to Hebden Hey (74km, 2442m)

My priority for the first section (as was probably everyone else's) was to not go off too fast! I feel like I got my pace just about right. Coincidentally this also positioned me behind Eoin Keith and Simon Gfeller. I did not know Eoin or Simon personally, but as with all avid 'dot watchers' I had watched their exploits in previous editions of The Spine, and I knew them to be outstanding ultra-runners. I also knew that they tended to control their pace well throughout the race.

Kinder plateau was pretty wintry, with snow and ice on the ground, and a strong side wind with hail battering against us. Some of the slabbed sections were lethal as what appeared as



Day 1 wintry conditions

a puddle was actually some icy slushy horribleness. The pace continued to be steady as we headed towards the first road crossing at Snakes Pass. I had deliberately not kept track of my position and hoped no one would shout it out. I really didn't want to know where I was, I just wanted to feel comfortable and enjoy the running. On to Bleaklow and owing to some wee stops I ended up ahead of the group I'd been with. Some of this section was really rough and boggy and at times difficult to follow. Despite the additional twelve-months to train, I had not managed to

run the first sixty miles of the route, so I was still on uncharted territory at this point. On the descent down to Torside Clough I nearly missed the stream crossing, which allowed the group to catch up and overtake. At Torside I saw Claire and Sarth again who had stopped to say a final farewell, and the Spine legend Colin Green. Colin had provided great company whilst part of the Spine Safety team in 2020 and is a pretty well-known character of the Spine race.

The next section over Blackhill was pretty non eventful, though the 'group' seemed to now be reduced to Eoin, Simon and myself. Dean Clough was safely negotiated. Just after Wessenden Head Eoin stopped to sort something, and myself and Simon continued. Simon shot off in this next section and I chose not to put in any additional effort to keep up, but instead maintained my steady pace. Arrival at the M62 saw an opportunity to get food at Nicky's Foodbar. I lost some time here, but it seemed wise to take the opportunity to have a hot meal. Matt Neale arrived with a few others. I tried to depart as quick as I could and ate the meal whilst walking the next section. The pause in momentum did mean I had lost contact with Eoin and Simon for the first time.

Darkness descended on the way to Stoodley Pike. I was caught up by Matt Neale and James Leavesley. Both were full of chat as we descended to the road crossing together. I covered the remaining distance to Checkpoint 1 with Matt. Arrival at CP 1 presented the next big challenge. Checkpoint discipline and faffing. Matt said he was going to sleep here for a bit, which was a shame as I would have liked to have enjoyed his company longer.

I headed to the food area and got some chicken and rice. Simon was there too. We were generally enjoying some chit chat and soaking up the atmosphere. Cue the arrival of drill master Verjee! Sabs wasted no time in blasting myself and Simon for spending too long here and told us to get going. Like small school children we sheepishly looked at each other and thought best to make a move before being brandished further. On hindsight, Sabs was absolutely right, and I was probably on the wrong side of taking it too easy here. I had accepted that I would do what I needed to do in CP's and not rush in and out. But it was time to go, so we got ready, got kit checked, and left together.

Hebden Hey to Hawes (98km, 3195m)

After leaving CP1 things seemed to have settled and I spent some time chatting to Simon. Nothing much eventful happened as we crossed Withins Height, Ponden and Ickornshaw Moor. We arrived at Cowling, and finally I was on ground which I recognised. The Lothersdale feed station was perfectly positioned to provide refreshment and support (including a Caroline McCann checkup). It's fair to say, the bacon sandwich I received there was probably the best I have ever had.

We made good progress to Malham. Some detours on the road were less than ideal, and other sections were pretty wet and boggy underfoot. That said, it was dark and the time seemed to pass quickly enough. Through Malham and up onto Malham Cove. I directed us onto some sort of 'line' behind the main limestone pavement, which seemed to work well and avoided getting broken ankles. On to Malham Tarn and CP1.5. I took the opportunity to dry my socks a little and air my feet. On hindsight, not needed and wasted time, but I was really keen to make sure I looked after my feet and dried them whenever I could.

Daylight had arrived as we departed Malham Tarn and I was really pleased we'd get Fountains Fell and Pen-y-ghent in the daytime. Our pace felt good, and I was still enjoying myself. Daylight had brought renewed vigour. Through the monitoring point at Horton in Ribblesdale and onward towards the Cam High Road. About one mile out of Horton we met Sabs coming back towards us. Again, we were blasted, this time for being "too far behind" and "what had taken us so long". We parted ways laughing and continued.



Heading to Horton on Day 2 with Simon

Soon after Cam End we came across a Challenger competitor. The 108-mile spine challenger sets off the day before from Edale and finishes at Hawes. This guy said he was not feeling great and was struggling to breath. He was walking, but slowly. He'd been lying in a ditch in his bivvy for about an hour and had just started moving. I was hesitant to run straight on and took a few minutes to walk with him and offer some encouragement. He seemed okay but I phoned in to HQ to report his situation and advise them to monitor his

tracker. Simon had pushed on ahead, so I set off after him. I caught him up as we descended towards CP2 in Hawes and we were back together for this final section as it got dark.

In CP2 Eoin and James had just come down from having a sleep and were sorting their kit getting ready to go. It was nice to see them both and I remember some conversation about getting some essential sleep at this stage. I fuffed a bit, sorted charging things, sorted feet, scoffed some food, did a short interview with someone, and headed off to bed. I planned to sleep for 1-2 hours. Soon after starting to drift off, someone entered to room and went onto another bed. I could hear them fidgeting about but went off to sleep. Turns out this was Simon, who tried to get to sleep but couldn't, so got up, got ready, and headed off after the others.

I slept for around an hour and woke up feeling somewhat dishevelled. Downstairs I was greeted by Sabs and Steph Dwyer. I had met Steph on the safety team in 2020. Steph is a great character and a joy to be around. Though I was hoping that she didn't start talking to me about one of her caving expeditions... or I'd be there a lot longer than I should be. Alas, all was well, I think Steph could tell I needed to get my shit together and get going. I knew I had a couple of blisters on my right foot, so a medic lanced and taped these. A quick call home, back packed, a bit of fuffing, and I was off. On hindsight there was a lot here that used time and I could have been more efficient with. However, at this stage I was sticking to the plan of goal number one... making sure I finished.

Hawes to Middleton in Teesdale (54km, 1871m)

Out into the night I headed... alone. It was around 7:30/8pm. As I crossed the fields leading out of Hawes, I came across Chris Haswell who was volunteering. It was great to see Chris, and it made me remember following his tracker dot some years ago when he had completed the race. This gave me a boost and began the ascent of Great Shunner Fell. It got colder, windier, and wetter. I was all alone, and visibility was down to five meters. I remember thinking about some of the Spine interviews I'd listened to where runners had described wanting to experience the isolation and be alone during at least one night section to appreciate a sense of loneliness during the event. This was that time for me. Well actually I would be alone for a while to come.

The snow and ice on the ground made things difficult at times and the sections where the path was flooded, or slabs were missing became increasingly annoying. I deployed the Vergee Poncho at some point, which was great to take the edge off the wet and cold weather. The descent to Thwaite was not as bad as I'd remembered, and I headed on to Kisdon side and then on to Tan Hill. I was certain that two head torches were closing in on me during this section, and fully expected to be caught by Tan Hill. Turns out I was either hallucinating these or they were 'non-Spine' torches. Arriving at Tan Hill felt great. It was so good to get in by the wood burner and get some wet things semi-dried off. I ate a dehydrated meal here and did try for a quick nap. However, I couldn't nod off quickly so scrapped that idea and headed out into Sleighthome Moor.

As a spectator of the Spine, I had never realised how wet and boggy this section was. I trudged and hacked my way through here to finally reach the bridge and an actual track. Concerned about keeping my feet in good shape, I changed socks here. Clearly the strategy

worked as my feet were in good shape at the end of the race, but this change was probably excessive. I was quite sleepy on this section but pushed on to God's Bridge and the A66.

I had been on this section only a matter of weeks earlier. I was really pleased to be quite well acquainted with this section, and it helped get through what turned out to be a ridiculous period of falling asleep on my feet. I had never experienced this level of sleep deprivation and I just found it so hard to stay awake. I knew there was a hunting lodge after Ravock Castle where I could get a quick nap, so I decided to do that. I really do not remember the half mile section over Ravock Castle. I must have been sleep walking. Of the entire 255 miles of the race, this is the section that I just do not remember doing. I arrived at the lodge and managed a ten-minute power nap.

The next sections past the reservoirs seemed to take an age and I was soon sleepy and nodding off again. The prospect of leaning onto a fence was very appealing. Finally, as I began the descent to Middleton in Teesdale and CP3 the sun began to rise, and I felt more awake. Arriving at Middleton I caught up with Simon. Eoin, James and Doug had already left. I scoffed an incredible pesto pasta dish and headed for some sleep. I can't remember whether Simon had slept, I think he had, but I wasn't bothered. I knew I could not commit to getting to Alston without sleep. I think I had around ninety minutes sleep with another half hour of lying resting. I got my feet sorted, ate more food, chatted with a few people, got kit checked, then headed out of CP3 feeling like a completely different human.

Middleton in Teesdale to Alston (63km, 2002m)

The legs were a little slow to get going leaving Middleton, but it was daylight, the sun was out, and I felt pretty good. The path up past Low Force and High Force was an absolute joy. I felt great (all things considered). I had some goosebump moments thinking about the enormity of what I was doing and how well things were going. This, the weather, and the location just made this section so good.

I caught up to Debbie Martin Consani, who was leading the women's race. Debbie had come into CP3 after me and left not long before. After the briefest of hello's, I pushed on to start the pursuit of Simon. Cauldron Snout was safely negotiated, and I began to push quite hard on the climbs. I had covered this section to Dufton a few times and felt confident on the route and what lay ahead. I was also acutely aware of making the most of the daylight, and I really wanted to get to High Cup Nick in daylight. I managed to get there just as the sun had set and I was greeted with an amazing sunset vista. A race highlight. The descent to Dufton was long and hard on the feet but didn't require much thought, which was good. I didn't stay long at Dufton but got some water for a meal and headed off to eat/drink this whilst moving. Next challenge... Cross Fell.



Sunset at High Cup Nick

As per the forecast, visibility was excellent, but it was very cold! On the back of Great Dun Fell I spotted two head torches coming towards me. These turned out to be James and

Harry who were out taking event photos and had just been to Greg's Hut. I had a nice chat with them both and it was great to meet someone after being alone for a while. Generally, conditions were freezing, the stone slabs were lethal, and there were still some snow drifts in gullies. I was happy to be leaving Cross Fell and aiming for Greg's Hut.



Photoshoot on Great Dun Fell

An iconic part of the race, Greg's Hunt becomes the residence of John Bamber et al., who serve up noodles and a chance to sit by a warm bothy fire. I was tempted to by-pass the hut and just keep going. But I wanted to appreciate all the Spine had to offer and so in I went.

It was amazing. So warm and welcoming. John served up some noodles and a delicious hot chocolate. Fighting the huge temptation to linger I left and headed off for Garrigill. I have never enjoyed this section and boy did it not disappoint. It just goes on forever. The relentless track is not what is needed when struggling to stay awake. The sleepiness had returned, and I was finding it so hard to stay awake again. I tried eating, drinking, singing, and even shouting to keep myself going and awake. The shouting was particularly satisfying, like some sort of activity from a mental health retreat! Finally, the lights of Garrigill appeared, and soon after that I hobbled into Alston.



Leaving Greg's Hut

Arrival at Alston was such a relief. As with all the CP's I was warmly welcomed, and nothing was too much to ask. Simon was asleep upstairs, and I was keen to quickly follow. That way at least I would have more chance of leaving with him or shortly afterwards. The usual routine followed of charging, checking feet, applying talc, scoffing food (on this occasion a delicious portion of Alston lasagne), and then I headed for sleep. I noticed Simon had used some blankets to elevate his feet... good idea that, I followed his lead, and I was asleep pretty quick.

I woke after about one hour. I think I had heard Simon leaving the room, so after a pause for thought I decided to get up. I sorted my kit, which was really just a case of swapping wrappers and uneaten food for new food. I think Simon had been speaking to one of the medics and looked to be at a similar stage of readiness, but I still needed my feet taped so a medic kindly started to tend to my two blisters. I ate more food. Simon then said he was heading off, and that I'd probably catch him up. I said I'd be out soon and chase after him.

However... the taping took somewhat longer than I had hoped, and whilst the medic was brilliant at what she was doing (she did a great job), I'm not sure she appreciated the urgency of the situation. The scene from the film *Love Actually* filled my head, where Rowan Atkinson takes an age to gift wrap the necklace... "nearly done... just one more piece of tape...". It did provide a nice opportunity to chat to Jo the checkpoint manager, again someone who I had met on the 2020 race.

Taping finally sorted, I added a couple of additional bits where my shoes have rubbed in the past. One of which was a large piece of adhesive bandage to the side of my ankle. This was despite having worn these shoes since Hawes and having had no rubbing issues, hmm... Jo kindly helped with getting my shoes back on, including some assistance from a shoe horn. Clearly my feet were starting to swell. Finally, I was off and away from Alston CP.

Alston to Bellingham (64km, 1674m)

It was still dark, but daylight was not too far away, plus I had the additional motivation of chasing after Simon. I don't mind the next section of the route. It can be a somewhat tedious and muddy, but I find it okay. I was clearly still tired, and the sleepiness returned not long after leaving Alston. I just needed daylight to return.

I was looking forward to getting to Slaggyford and meeting 'the Angel'. However, when I arrived the welcoming party was three blokes who greeted my arrival with a demand for a full kit check! I remember being somewhat confused by this, but I was kindly ready to oblige their request and empty my pack. I think my accommodating response was not the 'bite' they were looking for and they hastily retreated on their comical request.

After leaving Slaggyford I began to be increasingly annoyed and aggravated by my shoe rubbing against my ankle. I tried loosening my laces, I tried tightening my laces, I tried to land my foot slightly differently, but nothing seemed to help. These "bloody shoes" I thought! I then convinced myself I needed to pad the side of my ankle. What did I have with me that would do the job? Ah, a foam back pad, and a knife... yes let's do that. Oh yes that feels better. Five minutes later, oh no, it still hurts, I need a bigger pad, knife back out, pad back out and cut. Again, yes that feels better. This time ten minutes later, it's still hurting. I stopped again.

Right, time for shoe off and sock off, then put the pad inside the sock on my ankle. Let's try that. Then... oh, what's this piece of adhesive bandage on the side of my ankle... the piece I had stuck on at Alston, maybe it's that... I removed the tape. Sock and shoe back on, and off I set. As you might have guessed, ten minutes later... that feels much better. Twenty minutes later, that feels great, why the bloody hell did I use that piece of tape and why didn't I remove it earlier.

Clearly, I was not thinking straight, and I lost a whole chunk of time faffing about here. However, I was sorted, right, where's Simon, I set off in pursuit again. I had hoped he was being held up by 'Rastaman Ralph' at Greenriggs, but this was not the case and it appeared no one was home when I passed through. Rastaman Ralph is an avid supporter of the event and often captures videos of Spinners for his YouTube channel.

I first caught sight of Simon towards the end of Blenkinsopp Common, and as we neared the A69 crossing I was getting closer all the time. I crossed the A69 (probably the most lethal section of the whole race) and heading down towards the side of the golf course I felt great, as if on some sort of short training run. I caught Simon at the stile into the golf course and it was great to be back together. We laughed about the taping incident and talked about how we felt.

Shortly after leaving Walltown car park, I experienced a somewhat defining thirty-minute period which effected my strategy from that point to the finish. Physically I felt great

(considering), I was buoyed by catching Simon, and being able to run so much. I suddenly had a crazy thought about whether it was possible to catch Doug and James ahead. A WhatsApp message from my dad said they were about seven kilometres ahead. I'd never catch them on Wednesday but maybe if they were tired and I felt strong in the Cheviots, it might be possible to catch them by the end. But then was that reckless and if I pushed away from Simon would I be committing to another 20 hours by myself. I really wasn't sure what to do.

I remember thinking, "right, you feel good, let's just go, do it, see where you end up". So, I set off up the next few undulations and descents a bit like a man possessed. My legs felt strong, I was full of energy, I was racing. The gap between myself and Simon behind opened quickly and he clearly was not feeling as energetic. I pushed on for around fifteen to twenty minutes.

Then... I suddenly felt terrible. I felt dizzy, nauseous, wobbly legged, and at one point very close to fainting. Suddenly I got really scared. Worried that I was about to fall flat on my face. I had never had this sensation before, so had nothing to draw upon to suppress my fears. Was I in the process of sacrificing everything I had done to get to this point in the race in favour of gaining an extra place or two? I really did not like how I felt, and so almost in an instant I slipped back into conservative mode and chilled the hell out.

I had been eating and drinking well but packed more food in to make sure I wasn't having a sugar low. The fainting sensation mostly passed, but I still felt a bit odd for the next few hours. I have since reflected on what this was. I think I just ramped up the speed too quickly and pushed my body too much too soon. Added to this was clearly brain fatigue and extreme tiredness. I did find out the day after finishing that I had tonsillitis, so it could have been something related to that, but who knows.

Simon caught me up, we chatted about how I had just felt. Somewhat deflated, and chastised by my energetic surge, I went back to more gradual progress and focussed back to my primary goal, of making sure I arrived at Kirk Yetholm. A good friend, Andy Higgins had come to say hello at the next car park and a brief chat with a friendly face was just what I needed.

I felt really at home on Hadrian's wall and never needed to check the map or GPS until the diversion. Boy did that section go on for a while, and I began to feel very tired again. Then two runners approached us from ahead. As they neared, I recognised Sabs and Paul Nelson. I do not know Paul well, but we have crossed paths a few times. They provided some insight to what was going on around us with other runners.

We were very much focussed on getting through the diversion section to Hornystead, and then on to Bellingham. Neither of us were quite prepared for the next section of the diversion, which was initially difficult to follow, and then an absolute bogfest. It was dark by now and we finally reached the path junction to reconnect with the Pennine Way. Shortly after we arrived at Horneystead farm, and the 'Pit Stop'.

I was keen for a quick nap so headed straight for a chair. Simon said he would not sleep so set about making a hot drink and eating several bags of crisps. I managed around five minutes of sleep here. Again, I have wondered on hindsight whether I absolutely needed this or could have held off until Bellingham. The remaining section to Bellingham passed without incident, and it was great to see the lights of Bellingham appear and get closer.

Just before arrival we discussed our plans and we both wanted to eat, sleep and get prepared for the final section. Our plans seemed to align. It seemed to me that Doug and James were now too far ahead to catch, and there was no immediate threat behind, so I was happy to take a while and get rested. This would mean less time in the dark and more daylight at the end of the Cheviots. I asked Simon how he felt about running and finishing together. He seemed initially hesitant, owing to the fact he had finished joint 3rd in 2020. He mentioned about a final one-kilometre race to decide on finish position. This made me laugh.

It is an interesting point of discussion about how relationships develop between people who are enduring similar hardship during this event. If you look at every edition of the Spine 'race' you will see people finishing in pairs or groups. The sacrifice, turmoil, or euphoria seems to bring people together. To me it seemed pointless, and wrong, to race off and leave someone who I had spent a considerable amount of time throughout the race. From a competitive racing perspective this of course is wrong, and I should have been willing to race Simon to the line. In this instance we entered Bellingham together, agreeing we would at least set off together.

On arrival into the checkpoint, we were again greeted by an array of volunteers and felt very welcome. We found out that Doug and James had left a short while ago after resting, sleeping, and eating. There was a momentary thought about what the rest of the race might be like if I didn't stay long and hot footed it out after them. But it was momentary, and I felt it was 100% the wrong thing to do. I needed sleep.

I hobbled into the checkpoint and sat myself down. The usual routine followed, socks off and talc onto my feet, put things on charge, eat food, on this occasion a sausage casserole, and



Bellingham CP - Loving life

then headed for sleep. The evolution of my checkpoint strategy had moved to a more focussed attempt to eat food and get to sleep quicker, rather than pottering about and faffing with things.

I slept for about an hour properly and then had another thirty minutes of lighter sleep and resting. Feeling slightly refreshed, it was time to get sorted and finish this thing. Simon awoke not long after. I got my feet sorted, by two medics this time, and I made a special request for a sense of urgency... they were great and

fully appreciated what I wanted. I ate whilst they did this. Then a quick kit sort and check, a change of shoes (I did not want a repeat performance of 'tapegate'), and I was ready to go. Simon was about ready too and we headed out to our chauffeur. We would be clear of incoming runners as Debbie and Mark Potts were still en route.

Bellingham to Kirk Yetholm (40km, 1525m)

Most people reading this will know, the 2022 Spine race had two major diversions in place, the first has been mentioned above, the second was around the sections of forest before Byrness. This second diversion involved a twenty-minute vehicle journey. Simon and I climbed into the back of someone's car, and we left for Cottonshopeburnfoot. Clearly, we both had the same idea of getting some additional rest/sleep on the journey and we closed

our eyes. What we were not aware of, was that Lewis Hamilton had kindly agreed to come along and drive the car!

It was around one thirty in the morning and the road/race track was empty. 'Lewis' was clearly relishing this and putting the car through its paces. There were certainly a few moments where I contemplated asking him to slow the hell down! This is probably all an exaggeration and he just wanted to get us there quickly. It was a race after all. A friend since pointed out that given the miles per hour we had been moving for the past eighty odd hours, any speed in a car would have seemed lightning fast. Anyway, I had slept, and I knew chances of sleeping in the car were slim anyway. Better to just hold on tight and get there as quick as possible. Thanks Lewis.

We exited the McLaren Mercedes and set off up the gravel road. At this point Simon said he would like to finish together if I was still okay with that, and I agreed I was. We were both clearly feeling more refreshed, and we climbed well all the way to Ravens Knowe, and onwards with a mix of running and fast hiking around the Roman Camp at Chew Green to The Lamb Hill Refuge, aka Hut 1.

The pace had been solid and the decision of staying as a pair became beneficial as we took turns leading, meaning the person behind could relax a little and just follow. We agreed not to stop at Hut 1, we didn't need anything. Someone from the Safety Team came out to check we were okay and shouted from a distance. I later found out that James Bartlett was positioned here, and it would have been nice to say hi, having spent a few days together on 2020 event. Sorry James.

We pushed on as best we could. The sleep monsters were back though, and the monotony of the slabs didn't help. I stumbled, tripped, fell a lot during that morning. I resorted to a technique I'd tried on Hadrian's wall of eating one peanut or sweet at a time, forcing myself to chew before I could reach for another one from the bag in my hand, and then repeating this for what seemed like a long time. This was somewhat effective, that is of course, until the supply of peanuts and sweets ran out.

Physically my body felt good, and I was running quickly on the downs. The thing I continued to struggle with was the constant desire to fall asleep. Uncontrollable at times. After Windy Gyle, the long gradual climb past King's Seat and Score Head took an age. It just went on and on. I know Simon was equally struggling to stay away and it was great to have company here. At one point I think he muted the idea of finding a sheltered spot to rest for a few minutes, but thankfully we never did.

Finally, we made the path junction to turn left. One short, paved section and then we'd be descending to Hut 2. We were running here. It had started to get light and as we descended to Hut 2 the views of daylight had returned. It was a cracking morning, and the views were very welcome. On the descent I felt great and went at my own pace. Towards the bottom I turned to see Simon had dropped a short way behind. Again, a momentary, what should I do here situation. Waiting a few minutes for Simon just seemed like the right thing to do. He was having some pain in his knee and so descending was slower than he'd have liked. A brief conversation at Hut 2 with the safety team and we continued.

Across the bogs and peat, then up the Schill. At 605 meters this was the last significant high point of the race. By now, daylight had well and truly arrived, and we were both fully appreciating the spectacular views. Both now fully awake, we chatted and laughed about our

experiences during the night and what our plans were on finishing. We were nearly there. It was nearly done.

We made our way down over the last rise and down into Old Halterburnhead and then Burnhead. Just before joining the road, a runner was coming towards us. It was Glen McWilliams with his dog. It was great to see Glen, a local legend of Wooler. He jogged/walked with us for the final section to just before Kirk Yetholm. I introduced Simon and explained he should look up some of Glen's trail races... who knows, he might make a guest appearance in the future.



The final few metres



Touching the infamous wall

So, it arrived... the final few meters across the grass, under the finish banner and onto the wall of the Border Hotel. 98 hours after setting off. I have seen many people over the years greet this wall with a whole range of emotions, and now was my turn. An initial hand touch, soon followed by a hug. Hang on... was I hugging a

wall! Possibly the first wall I have ever hugged, but it felt great.

The welcoming party were gathered around, and I soon had a medal placed around my neck by Kevin McCann. What an epic journey. I was elated to have finished. I was also dumfounded by how well it had gone and the fact I had finished in 4th place. Incredible!



Chatting with Kevin McCann

Inside the border hotel I congratulated Doug, James and Eoin on their races. It felt great to



All smiles

get my shoes and socks off knowing they didn't need to go back on anytime soon. Controversially I opted for tub of cold soapy water for my feet. Next was a chicken curry. I sat, taking in the surroundings, trying to take stock of what had just happened.

It was great to speak a bit to Eoin, truly an amazing athlete who was able to draw upon a wealth of experience and a level head to execute his plan and take the victory. I managed a brief conversation with James, but he'd lost his voice and clearly talking was painful. It was such a positive atmosphere sat there in that room; it was a shame to leave. Congratulations to all who finished.

The Aftermath

The days following the finish involved lots of awkward hobbling, grumbling noises, swollen feet and ankles, eating, drinking, and sleeping. I received lots of messages from friends who had been engrossed in the event tracking and amazed by what had been achieved. I also tried to piece the various parts of the race together to make some sense of it all.

Sitting to write this 'lengthy' report has indeed helped with that, as well as speaking to others and using the brilliant race replay function on livetracking. The event for me was truly incredible and I loved 95% of it. The 5% where I was battling to keep my eye lids from closing and falling flat on my face was not, but I still learnt a lot from that aspect of the race.

To finish in 4th place was beyond what I had dreamed of. I have had lots of reflective thoughts about how I might have played events differently, including whether I should have tried to leave Simon, and whether I could have caught Doug and James. It is easy with the benefit of hindsight to think about these things and the 'what ifs'. But I am also very aware that leaving Simon may not have been so easy, and that Doug and James will have been monitoring the gap between us and if it started closing, would have increased their pace. Lots learnt and a truly remarkable adventure on the Pennine Way. In true ultra-runner style, it took about twelve hours before I was searching for more ultra-distance events to enter!