

No County for Old Men

Back in January when Spring still seemed like something that might start sometime in April, plans were made for recces of the 10 Peaks course, taking in the two sections I didn't really know, up Wythburn and from Honister to Skiddaw.

However, as the snow continued through March and April, it was time to be creative, and seeing the route of the classic Old County Tops race I realised I had a chance to cross off a classic race from my list as well as trying out the route from Helvellyn to Angle Tarn. The race is named for the old English counties of Westmoreland, Cumberland and Lancashire (actually, that one might still exist) and visits the highest points in each of the counties, Helvellyn, Scafell Pike and Conistون Old Man. This makes it 36 miles long and it takes in 10,000ft of ascent. The race has to be run in pairs.



The sought after OCT finishers' T-Shirt

Plans were made but then dashed by injury to my original partner. A couple of weeks before the race though, a former clubmate also lost his partner to illness, and therefore I got the chance of being paired with Andy from Barnoldswick, a hugely experienced Lakes runner who had completed this race 6 times before. I shoved my map and compass to the bottom of my rucksack and prepared for a long day out in the hills.

After a 4am start, the bad weather that had been forecast was waiting for us when we arrived at the New Dungeon Ghyll in Langdale.



A typical Langdale morning

We therefore got fully kitted out for the wet and it wasn't long before we were off along the flat valley section, with some runners bizarrely trying to dodge puddles as we ran at speed along the track and then over the first climb up and down into Grasmere. I followed Andy as he took short cuts away from the main path, making up places all the time. A short road section and then it was into the first proper climb of the day, up the Tongue Gill path towards Grisdale Hause.

I had decided I would try and keep up a good pace for as long as I could, hoping that the stamina I'd got for running the Fellsman would be enough to get me through. 'What's the worst that could happen?', I thought. Read on to find out.

Reaching Grisdale Tarn, the bulk of Dollywagon Pike rose up into the low clouds, with a long string of runners making their way slowly up it. I lowered my eyes to my feet and crawled up, occasionally looking up to see Andy bounding on ahead. Eventually we made it to the top, and started to run along the ridge in worsening rain towards Helvellyn. Somewhere near Nethermost Pike I suddenly tripped over one of the lethal vertical slivers of rock along the path, and lay on the floor for a second to work out the damage. My left shin seemed to be the worst, but after a few strides it stopped hurting and soon we were at the first top of Helvellyn.

I'd checked Andy's previous times, and knew that last year (when he and his partner had got second in the same age category that we were running in today) he had made it to here in only 4 minutes less than we had today. I think I knew that we'd gone too fast, and that I should have been asking Andy to slow down, but I was still feeling OK.

We shot off from the checkpoint, heading for the first of Andy's special route choices. As we plunged off the summit, it became obvious that my shoe choice of Walshes had not been the best one. As Andy romped ahead showing me all the best lines I alternately slipped and tiptoed down the fantastic descent through the rain to the first roadside checkpoint at Wythburn. Stuffing malt loaf, sandwiches and cups of tea down, I met Chris from Dallam AC, my Fellsman shadow, for the first of many times during the day.

The rain was getting heavier now and we headed off up the increasingly boggy Wythburn valley. As we came to a bluff overlooking the wettest section, Andy looked for inspiration. 'Look, there's Yiannis. If he gets washed away by that river, we'll go round it'. We watched as he waded safely through and so set off after him and his partner.

It was getting colder and wetter by the minute. Andy was really cold, and I had put my new waterproof gloves on for the first time. The wrist bands acted like a funnel, channelling the freezing rain water inside the gloves and making them weigh 5 times as much. Eventually I worked out a method of emptying them by lifting my hand above my head and squeezing them. Some of the time

the water didn't even go down my sleeve.

It was a hard slog up to Greenup Edge and round High Raise, but as usual Andy took us round it perfectly. He could tell I was struggling now and asked if I wanted to give in, but this didn't seem like a choice. I was just thinking about getting to the next check point at Angle Tarn, and not about the climb up England's highest mountain that would follow immediately after. At least the rain had stopped.

The cloud was very low, but there were great views of waterfalls across to our right in Langstrath valley and as we approached Angle Tarn, Bowfell filled the sky briefly in front of us. A quick check in and we were off, up to Esk Hause, and then the long familiar climb past Ill Crag and Broad Crag to Scafell Pike. This ascent never seems as bad to me as others in the Lakes; I think I like the rock hopping compared to some of the grassy grinds.

At the summit we've done two of the three tops, but it's only just over half way.

There are two route choices here; backtracking and taking the established Little Narrowcove route down to the Eskdale valley floor, or throwing yourself off the edge of Scafell Pike through the cliffs of Rough Crag and Pen. No guessing Andy's preferred route and we drop quickly off the summit, followed by Dallam Chris and his partner, sliding down through grass, rock and scree with rocky crags looming out of the mist on either side. At one point Andy points back to where we've come from and it looks like a sheer cliff face.



Rough Crag and the route we have apparently just come down

We come out on the valley floor ahead of groups who left the summit at the same time as us, despite me having had to stop to empty the scree from my Walshes. We track over Great Moss and into Mosedale. I have slowed down even on the flat sections, the early pace, the climbs and the wet ground all having sapped my energy, and Andy is worried we may miss the final cut off at the Cockley Beck checkpoint. The rules here are weird, as it doesn't matter when you arrive at the checkpoint, if you are still eating there when the cut off time arrives you are timed out. Andy coaxes me into what I am now calling a run, and we get there with 7 minutes to spare to force sandwiches and tea down, then it's off.

All day, Andy has been warning me about the climb away from Cockley Beck up Grey Friars. I vaguely remembered the name from a Wainwright's guide but imagined it would just be a short steep ascent. After a long slow slog upwards into the cloud we paused at a fence. I guessed we had

climbed about 2,500ft and asked Andy if we were near the top. 'No, about half way I think' he replied. What? Somehow, there was a 5,000ft peak in the Lakes I'd never heard of? Off again and eventually we made the top and started along the ridge to Coniston Old Man, seeing pairs who'd already visited the checkpoint looming towards us out of the thick mist at intervals. After the first few shouted 'well done's it became a bit monotonous and I reverted to a quick nod at them. Eventually we reached this last summit, checked in, and as we turned to retrace our steps, bumped into two or three groups who had overtaken us much earlier. Andy's navigation had saved the day again!

I now felt the best I had for ages as we jogged back long the ridge, but it wasn't to last. Andy again expertly contoured us round to Wet Side Edge and the drop down to Three Shires Stone, but I could only slip and carefully pick my way down the runnable grassy slope, and even once on the road and path down to Blea Tarn was alternating between a slow run and a walk.

By the final section I couldn't even pick up to a slow run. I felt I was going to be sick and my legs had given up. A few pairs overtook us, but even that couldn't get me moving. Andy had one last clever short cut and then we were back down on the road and I finally broke into a jog again for the last few hundreds yards to the finish, arriving in 11 hours 24 mins.

A lentil soup, a chat to the groups who finished around us and then it was off for a Guinness in the Old Dungeon Ghyll. Already I was starting to try to find positives in a poor run from me. My mental list included lots of climbing, getting to know some of the 10 Peaks route, not retiring, and a fantastic bright blue exclusive t-shirt. I know my 10 Peaks run will be very difficult, but this great day out definitely helped my preparation. A pity I can't take Andy along with me on that too.