

Saunders Lakeland Mountain Marathon

Race Report by Sam Wadsworth

After a mid week illness, I wasn't sure that I was going to be able to run in this race, but having made a miraculous recovery, (and feeling a bit of a hypochondriac), the day had arrived.

The format of mountain marathons is generally the same, a two day event carrying all food, camping gear and clothing usually run in pairs, with a course disclosed as you cross the start line, setting teams off at regular intervals throughout the morning.

The Saunders, is undoubtedly my favourite mountain marathon, always held somewhere in the lake district, always in July, (so there is a reasonable chance of the weather being good), and unlike any other event there is the option to purchase beer and milk at the overnight camp. (Some races such as the OMM insist that you have to be self sufficient for the full duration of the race, not here, "enjoyment" is the organiser aim, rather than "pain and suffering").

I was running with my long term (race) partner Kirsty Hall, who I knew was fit having put in some great performances in the Old County Tops and 3 Peaks Race. The weather forecast was looking a bit of a mixed bag, with a dry start on Saturday turning to rain later on and then fining up again later on Sunday.

This years event was to be run around the Helvellyn area starting and finishing in Patterdale. The start of the race got us straight into the hills and the navigating. Kirsty, who usually spends her life bossing other people around, told me she enjoys the weekend of this race since she can leave the navigating to me and I can boss her about and tell her where to run. Unfortunately she seems to have forgotten the script. No sooner are we ten minutes into the race, when I try and change our bearing, only to be "corrected" by Kirsty and told to stick with our current heading. I'm left wondering where my subservient team mate is, who I can replace her with next year and....oh..no you're right, we were on the right heading. I mutter some sort of apology under my breath as Kirsty goes to register at the first checkpoint. Having been emasculated so early on, I'm hoping that my next route choice and bit of navigation is better. Luckily Kirsty has remember this is her "day off" and accepts my route choice to contour round a wall side into the next valley of Grisedale. She is soon left regretting this as I lead her through patch after patch of nettles. I must admit that on reflection I also regretted the route choice, though only because I had to listen to her moan about her stung legs for the next 24 hours!

We drop down onto the valley floor and head up the main track to the next checkpoint towards the head of the valley. In order to save our legs, we opt for a less direct route on to checkpoint 3 located above the disused Greenside Mine, near Glenridding. The main path and a lot of the competitors are winding their way up the hillside in a zig zag fashion, but as we approach the mine we spy an old water channel leading straight up part of the hill and take this saving some time.

Our next checkpoint is the source of a stream on the western side of Stybarrow Dodd. We opt for a path to Sticks Path, rather than a direct route over the Northern side of Raise. Kirsty is struggling with the climb and after hitting the checkpoint and working our way back to the main Helvellyn path, Kirsty tells me that she is not feeling great. I have been pushing her hard all morning and in the heat of the day, it is easy to forget to eat enough food. I take her bag for a bit whilst kirsty tries to get some food and water down her. The last section of the race takes us up Helvellyn, down the end of Dollywagon Pike to Grisedale Tarn and then down to the finish and overnight camp at Wythburn.

We check in, (unfortunately not to our hotel, but to Race HQ and download our times for the day). It is early on, only a few teams are in, but we are 3rd out of 12 teams who have so far come in.

Kirsty lets me pick a place to set up camp, then she lets me put up the tent, and whilst she has a recovery snooze, she lets me make her a cup of coffee and some lunch. (So much for not being another one of her bitches).

There is a new regime at the overnight camp, no longer can you buy beer, unless it has been pre-ordered. Unfortunately having not read the rules, until after the deadline has passed, I'm faced with a "dry" race.

My thoughts are appropriately interrupted by the start of the rain and we move inside the tent. It doesn't really let up all evening, and so the possibility of heading to the pub for a drink is also swept aside.

We check the updated results as more teams come in. We have dropped down to 5th place overall and are second mixed team. First mixed team is a father-daughter team, who are also first overall. Looking at the times, they are over an hour ahead of the second place team. Their lead on us, and everyone else barring retirement seems insurmountable. (Usually there is a chasing start in the morning for all teams within 45 minutes of the leaders, but this year nobody is that close).

We awaken from our slumber to a grey, wet and cloudy day. The camp soon becomes a hive of activity as all the competitors awaken, cook their dehydrated food and go for a dump in the now well used toilets, (Bad but no where near festival bad)!

We leave the camp and head over to the day 2 start, we are soon faced with a long queue in midge infested woods as each time passes through the race dibber start controls.

Having reorganised our bags, Kirsty is pushing hard and whilst she later admits that she thought she might be going off too fast, we make good progress heading back onto the Helvellyn range. The first couple of checkpoints involve a lot of contouring around the side of the hill, but we then have to pick a way around Helvellyn Lower Man and the competitors split up into different directions. We decide to cut over the ridge between Helvellyn Lower Man and Browncover Crag towards Helvellyn Gill whilst the teams around us opt for the path down White Stone Route. Having made good time we then double back over the shoulder between White Side and Helvellyn Lower Man.

We drop down into Glenridding Valley and with an hour or so of running left can smell the finish, (which at this stage smells a whole lot sweeter than me and my sweat riddled clothing). The sun breaks through the cloud and suddenly, it is red hot as we take on the last big climb of the day back up Harrison Crag and Black Crag. I can tell Kirsty is suffering and some attempts at humour with Barry Scholes impersonations, falls on either deaf or unappreciative ears. A slight navigational error costs us a minute as did the moment of horror when Kirsty realised her rucksack had come open and her brand new waterproof jacket has fallen out somewhere behind her. We are only a few minutes from the end, but the prospect of having to return after the race to search through 10 acres of neck high bracken leaves me wondering if I can stumble and sprain my ankle as we cross the finish line. Luckily another team has found her jacket on their descent and I retrieve this from them grateful that I have avoided a series of expensive physio appointments.

We hit the finish and come in in the second fastest time of the day overall. Our kit check is a mixed bag of reactions, Kirsty's torch should have been a head torch, something was apparently slightly dubious about my technical T-shirt but in the end, it was all laughs looking at our 13gram cooking stove.

Combing the results from both days we finished in 3rd place in just over 8 hours. A great result, in what was a fantastic, well organised and friendly race. If you are thinking of doing your first mountain marathon, the Saunders is definitely the one to go for in my book. There are categories for all abilities and even a parent and child (14-17) handicap category.