

Duddon Revisited

It may seem slightly illogical to choose the Duddon Valley fell race as my first GP race of 2005. At 20 miles with 6,000 feet of climb, it does require a certain commitment, but it has many desirable features – it's in the Lake District, it follows a superb, totally logical route, it ends at a pub, and it represents great value for money. I had done it before, about 3 years earlier, and enjoyed it immensely. On that occasion the sun shone and sunburn was the main problem I encountered – apart from the usual one of getting up and down the hills.

It also fitted well into my calendar; the LAMM followed two weeks after, then a trek along the Corsican GR20 two weeks after that. It was time to test out my fitness, which had been generally deficient for most of the year.

The weekend started off well. John and Cath had booked some places in the Rucksack club hut at High Moss, situated in an idyllic spot, just a mile from the Event Centre in Seathwaite. Cath also promised a communal meal on the Friday night, an excellent incentive for arriving early. So that evening ten Harriers with 3 children sat down to a fine feast; much carbo-loading and suitably moderate (for Tod) drinking took place. It was a beautiful evening, warm sunshine, and we all looked forward to a fine day on the hills.

It was not to be. During the night the weather changed, the rain came, and the wind blew. The mist in the morning had descended to the valley floor. T-shirts were discarded, thermals and waterproofs pulled out.

A decision to drive to the car park at the start was unanimous. The rain had eased off as we entered the crowded village hall, for registration. The officials had been surprised by the size of the entry, and had run out of forms, and electronic dibbers.

We eventually started fifteen minutes late. I was still without dibber (“just shout out your number, lad”). The first couple of miles was flagged, a gentle climb through the forest. I had a plan to take this bit slow and easy. I was certainly slow, but I didn't find it easy. At the fell gate, before the steep climb up Harter Fell, most of the field had disappeared into the mist. From this point on there are no flags, but there is a good path up to the summit. Mandy and Sue were just in front, and we all ended up at the summit checkpoint together.

We all three stayed together for the next leg, down to Hardknott Pass, and up to Hardknott summit, the second checkpoint. The descent from the summit is a bit tricky, especially as the visibility was about ten yards. Mandy and I picked a route, and Sue agreed. It was about right, but as we dropped into Mosedale, below the mist, most runners were disappearing up the other side. There were not too many behind us.

Mosedale beck was in good spate, and combined tactics were prudent to cross it. The rain was getting heavier, and colder. Before the summit of Little Stand I stopped to put on my gaiters. Mandy and Sue disappeared into the mist – I was on my own now, relying on memory, the advice of John Crummert the night before, and map and compass to find my way around.

From the summit of Little Stand the best route heads for a waterfall, which I homed in on by sound, then follows a fine track all the way to the Three Shires Stone.

The rain had eased, and this was the pleasantest section of the race.

Cath was waiting at Three Shires, with food and drink, and encouragement. What a welcome sight! Mandy and Sue were about five minutes ahead. I had actually got ahead of several runners, but only because they had got lost.

It was homeward bound then, on more familiar territory, and I felt in good spirits after the refreshment. The slog up to Swirl How is the last tough climb, and does go on a bit, with several false summits emerging from the mist – especially if you go over the Carrs, as I did. Towards the top the wind became fiercer, and the rain came down harder. It was cold, and hard to believe it was June. The marshals at the top were having a really miserable time.

The route from Swirl How to Dow Crag is usually straightforward but high and exposed. Today it was a pretty dreadful leg, buffeted by the wind and driving rain. I joined up with two other vets for the climb from Goats Hause up to Dow. We were probably bringing up the rear by then, and it seemed sensible to stick together, and pool resources, so to speak.

I chose a good route through the rocks from Dow, and the others followed. Crossing the Walna Scar road, I was confident we were going to finish. The penultimate checkpoint on White Pike appeared soon after.

One of our trio knew the route off White Pike, which needs prior knowledge to avoid the quarry. He also seemed confident he knew the route to Caw, our last checkpoint. However after a short while it became obvious we were off route. We both knew there was a wall to follow, but no wall had appeared. It was time to put aside memory, and pull out the map. I decided on a safe bearing to hit the wall directly, and it soon loomed out of the mist. We were back on course, with only a few minutes lost, unlike Richard L, who lost half an hour on this leg.

Caw is a stiff climb to end with, and we were past the cut-off. No time to dawdle about. The (amazingly) cheerful couple at the summit were a very welcome sight. They were probably pleased as they could go home then.

The final descent to the stile over the fell wall is not straightforward. We decided on a gully a short way back from the summit, which had been well trodden. It gave a good route down, and one of our trio shot off ahead. However, with the stile in sight, he inexplicably veered off course, and I reached the stile ahead of him, so managed to finish third from last.

On a good day, the finish field behind the Newfield Inn is a delightful place to take refreshment, but today the bar was more attractive.

In the evening Cath again provided a great feast, but this time the drinking was more serious, and carried on at the pub until late. What an excellent weekend.