

APRIL FOOLS

Initially it was an attempt to get a full team out to the 2006 British Championship race Slieve Bearnagh in Northern Ireland but with only 3 takers, Andrew Wrench, Andrew Horsfall and myself this fell apart at the first hurdle. Shame, because it was a brilliant race and weekend.

Hoss and myself had previously ventured to the Mourne 's to complete a 2 day marathon with former Tod Harrier Rob Glover (now P&B) and Graham TIFF (Pudsey Striders) in 2004, it was a very enjoyable weekend, with great scenery.

With this experience we knew what to expect with regards to terrain and logistics of getting there and back.

Approximate costs for the swarvey to Ireland including air fare, car hire, fuel, bus fares and digs was a measly £70. Obviously this didn't include the post race refreshments and the purchase of beer goggles.

James Logue (Horwich R.M.I.) now resident in Todmorden and good friend of the Barmy Bear family contacted me in the week leading up to the race. He wanted to cadge a lift from Belfast International to the start. Flying from Liverpool and due to land 10 mins before us from Manchester. We arranged to meet in the arrivals lounge at about 8 am

Bev transported the three of us to Manchester at 5 am and we boarded the BMI Baby aircraft at around 7.30am along with Wendy Dodds (CLEM), whom we met in the departure lounge.

Quite surreal, board plane at 7.30 am in Manchester and landing in N.Ireland 30 minutes later, why did they bother with the drinks trolley? come to think of it, why bother buying a drink. By the time you had bought it, the seatbelt light was back on and we were descending !

James met us, as arranged at the Budget Car hire desk. We presented him with a prepared disclaimer written on quality paper ; a BMI Baby sick bag. This stated that if he was to be carried in our vehicle he must vow to join Tod Harriers ranks by signing the note. He laughed, muttered something about contacting the athletics association and stuffed the sick bag in his luggage, OR he had travelled in a car before with Hoss as driver.

We set off for the venue at about 8.30am via Belfast City centre, with our local guide James pointing out places and structures of interest including the mammoth dock side cranes Samson and Goliath and areas of well documented atrocities took place.

Sunny spells throughout the journey promised a good day of racing ahead

We arrived at the race start at approx. 10.30 am in Happy Valley, sun still shining but with a chilly wind. We warmed up with a run on the first climb Slieve Meelbeg, we realised this was going to be tough, rough ground and extremely wet. Studying the map earlier revealed a long intense climb up Sl. Meelbeg from a forest corner, descend rapidly into the head of Silent Valley, a very steep climb up Sl. Bearnagh turn at the first Tor, return down the same side using the Mourne Wall as a hand rail into the Col and up the final climb of Sl. Meelmore to a tower and fast descent . In total 2400 ft in 4miles, 1000 ft more than Flower Scar in the same distance, so you can imagine the severity of the climbs if you have done the latter race.

Always one for tried and tested methods Wrenchy surprised us by producing brand new, never been worn Walshy's from his kit bag, white socks and his Adam and the Ants outfit..... a plaster for his nose, he added that it was to help his breathing and therefore his performance, I've not seen anything wrong with his running of late ! He stated that once applied his nostrils magically flared, thus allowing more oxygen pass. Not a good idea when Hoss is currently in a rich vein of form in the flatulence department.

We were sent on our way at 12 noon, Wrenchy off with the lead group (maybe we took the piss too soon) Hoss and James following on with myself picking out a local, to follow a slightly alternate route up Sl. Meelbeg. I caught Hoss halfway to the summit and James on the descent to the foot of Sl. Bearnagh, it was very slippery and difficult to stay upright. The 700 ft climb to the Tor on Bearnagh was steep, lots of heather and rocky. I put my head down and after a few false summits I reached the top along with the eventual first lady Natalie White (Bingley). I caught sight of Wrenchy flying down the mountain in the opposite direction next to the Mourne Wall. I turned at the fantastic rock formations and plunged down the rock and scree into the Col, then started the long 600ft steady climb up Sl. Meelmore, again using the wall as a guide. (James had told us earlier that the wall was built around the water catchment area of Silent Valley Reservoir by locals who were unemployed years gone).

An impressive stone tower is passed on the top of Sl. Meelmore before you leave the wall for the last time and descend quickly to the finish on tussock, and rock with an added contour to make it extremely difficult.

Wrenchy finished an impressive 24th and 4th Vet 40 myself finishing next followed by James and Hoss. All agreed that it was a classic route, no flat running, it was either up or down.

Wrenchy believed that his fashion accessory assisted him significantly but because his nostrils were wider, there was a constant flow of mucus from his hooter.....thanks for that Andrew.

Race over with by 1 pm, James departed for the airport, he had met an old school friend of his from Derry and managed to blag a lift back to Belfast.

We changed and travelled to the east coast and Newcastle, set at the foot of the highest peak in the Mourne's Slieve Donard, rising almost 3000 ft from the town. Booked into our digs, quickly changed and a quick chat with other runners from Ambleside and Dark Peak, before we attended the venue for the presentation at O'Hares on the south Promenade, a traditional pub at the front with a restaurant and night club at the rear, it was now 3 pm.

Copious amounts of Guinness was consumed from this point on.

Rob Jebb along with his partner Sharon Taylor joined us in the bar area and immediately quipped that he had been the soul Male Bingley runner today, pissed off about it and asked if Tod Harriers wanted a new member. All 3 of us almost choked "WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE LAKE DISTRICT CLUBS ?" Jebb replied, "I'M A YORKSHIRE MAN"

Crikey..... James Logue and Rob Jebb possibly recruited to the Tod ranks, we'll get life time membership for this.

At 5.30 pm dinner was served, they described is as Veggie curry but all we got was a bowl of dishwasher with rice and veg thrown in for good measure.

Presentation followed soon after, winners being Rob Hope (P&B) and Natalie White. The mayoress gave a small speech but I couldn't understand a word being said, maybe the alcohol had taken control now.

We remained at the pub for the rest of the evening exchanging banter with runners and continuing our onslaught of the dark nectar.

At 11 pm the pub hosted a live band, they were excellent (I don't remember their name though) playing a vast range of popular tunes from the 70's to present day, from Undertones to Arctic Monkeys.

You can imagine the scene, inebriated runners, away from home and bean poling about (Ranter would have been proud of em), on mass in front of the band.

Several doorman had to be recruited to the front of the bar to prevent the maddening crowd falling into the bands equipment, although the band members appeared delighted with the attention. Wrenchy always the sensible one and Hoss bouncing about in amongst the throng.

Have we got enough club funds to get this band to the Tod Harriers doo, book now and the flights are 00.01p !!

2 am and 22 hrs later we were now burning candles at both ends, we crawled into our bunks, which I swear were built for midgets, head and feet hanging over each end.

We woke 7.30am quick cold shower followed and left for Belfast, dropping the car off at the city airport, visiting Maggie Mays for Breakfast and the Famous Crown for a pint and yes it was Guinness. (I think we'd had our iron intake for the year by this point) The pub is apparently owned by the National Trust.

At 3.25 pm we returned to a drenched Manchester and collected by Wrench's wife Amanda.

All in all, a memorable 48 hrs with great company, classic race, loads of beer and not too harsh on the bank balance.

Anyone for next year ?

JONNY LEFT