

High Peak Marathon 2007 – Beware the Bog Monsters

I am convinced that if you imagine the outcome before the event then it probably will not happen. Like the time when I finish 2 minutes ahead of Ian Holmes on the Shepherd's Skyline. Everyone truly impressed, the lads buying me beer and the ladies offering to bear my children. Will this ever happen, probably not.

The High Peak Marathon was not to be different. Indeed, I'll be blunt, it was a cock-up. Days before I was having trouble with my bruised heel. I'd even thought about dropping out of our team of four. I didn't want to let the team down, but then it is a long way with a dodgy foot. I went through loads of different scenarios, and certainly didn't expect what happened.

I had expected to drop out somewhere along the course. The lads forcing me to stop, my ankle blown up like a balloon. Everyone saying they couldn't believe that I got so far given the pain (not that I was showing any pain, obviously). I was trying to convince the team that I'll be okay to continue once the morphine kicks in, and if only they could help me up. They were having nothing of it. But for the team, I kept on telling them, I must continue. The marshals call a halt and I'm in hospital for weeks recovering.

But no, what actually happened was that my feet were okay, and I had to run the bl**dy thing all the way round. As I say a complete cock-up.

The route comprises of 42 miles up and down the boggiest parts of the peak district (which in my mind means the world). This is all done overnight (yes in the dark). There is a stretch that is referred to as the longest 4 miles on the planet. One hour into it you are wishing you never started. Two hours into it you are not certain whether you are half way through it or not, but you want it to finish. Best bits, so to speak, are when you are contouring huge towering peat hags, fighting to stop sliding in to the deep bogs below. You couldn't pay someone to do it.

The appetite of the bogs was unrelenting. You can't walk properly, never mind run, sliding all over the place. Surrounded by hungry bog monsters, and in the dark, and I wanted my Mummy.

During a particular tricky navigation bit, Phil recognised a lad in another team, who according to Phil was a local lad and an excellent navigator. He was obviously new to the game as he was wearing a bright orange fluorescent jacket. His mate wasn't that much better with a huge orienteering lamp that lit up half the hillside. It wasn't that hard to cling to them like limpets, and Phil did an excellent job of rounding us up like a flock of sheep whenever this expert navigator was disappearing into the mist.

This year everyone in our team took 'stability' poles. I'm becoming a keen advocate of poles following the tour of Mount Blanc when almost everyone had them. During the race, a couple of running teams were a bit anxious when they thought they were being overtaken by a walking team. Nonetheless, the poles helped with stability in a skiing kind of way when your feet are sliding all over the place, and proved to be an effective weapon against bog monsters should your body start to be devoured. They saved my life that night.

It wasn't planned but as we got eaten by the bogs, one by one, the next team member would gingerly take pole position, only to be eventually 'got'. Phil, being Phil, and desperate to keep the expert navigator within view, took the most punishment. Yards ahead, and in between the swirling mist, I saw him up to his waist. After poking the monster in the eye Phil broke free. Phil was lucky that night, which is just as well as we would have struggled to get to him in time. I'm sure we would have jumped in to save his poles though.

We decided to have a 'pork pie stop'. Great really looking forward to it, I thought. So much for looking - I couldn't even find it. On these events I tend to carry a lot of stuff - extra food and clothes. My pork pie was there but there wasn't sufficient time to explore the inner confines of my sac. Apart from that I was trying to listen to a colourful conversation the student marshals were having about dogging (what ever that means - and I'm sure I heard it right). Last year I wandered round with a water bottle full of solid water as it was so cold. This year I wandered round with an uneaten pork pie. So next time I'll hang my pork pie from a bit of string tied to my insulated water bottle - a bit of careful planning is all you need.

A bit like getting a speeding ticket, slipping on your backside was a matter of time. We were comparing our falls when we approached one of the ladies team (not Tod Totty - otherwise I wouldn't dare mention this for the chance of getting a good slapping), when all our lights (well okay, mine) were drawn to their backsides. Believe me I was just looking at the amount of mud on their legs. For fear of digging myself a deep hole at the moment I apologise (no let's be honest, I was happy, very happy, in my delusional dysfunctional de-hydrated state) for lighting up their arses in rotation like some light show on Top of the Pops. What I am apologetic about, in hindsight (no pun intended), is being really obvious about it. Nice arses though, and I'm pleased to say that I don't remember lighting up any of the bloke's arses, even though I was tired.

I'm still coming to terms with this run, even after doing it twice. It is completely different from anything else I've experienced. A few hours before setting off I was at home with my foot in a bucket of cold water. Tracey gave me that look like 'I didn't believe you're doing this', and really I would have sooner not at that time, but hey I'm very pleased I did, very pleased that my foot was no problem, and ~~happy to do it next year~~ sorry happy for someone to take my place next year.

Cheers to the team, the Tod Bats, Phil Hodgson (our leader), Richard Leonard, John Preston (who bravely stood in right at the last moment), and myself. Congratulations to the ladies team, Tod Totty, (Kay Leigh, Chris Preston, Mel Blackhurst and Sally Ward [dark peak]) for coming in 1st again. And lastly but not least, our Kath Brierley who ran under the Rucksack Club Ladies Team and came 2nd. What a good do.

Rhys Watkins

NB Extra cheers for John for whistling the Snowman theme tune on the night. It snowed an hour or so later, and the tune is still rattling around my head. Cheers John, great move.