

JURA FELL RACE – by John Preston

Mark Russell was sitting at his desk considering his next assignment, a photo-shoot with the Sugababes, when his editor shouted over the background chaos that was the GQ Magazine office... "Mark, you like whisky and you do a bit of jogging don't you, and you said you needed a holiday, well I've got this great opportunity."

I imagine that's close to how Mark landed his most testing journalistic challenge to date. He'd just been volunteered to compete in the Isle of Jura Fell Race, undoubtedly one of the toughest races in the fell running calendar.

Mark Russell is the Chief Sub-Editor for GQ Magazine – for those not in the know it's the Gentleman's Quarterly, best described as an up-market FHM with all the flesh taken out and nothing at all like Nuts or so I'm told.

Through a series of connections including the Jura Distillery, a PR agency and GQ magazine Mark was on the road if you pardon the pun, to doing his first ever fell race. He had done the odd 10k and jogged a marathon but was a complete stranger to mountains and had certainly never considered the madness of fell running. Not being one to decline an opportunity he decided to accept the challenge. A bit of a run on a remote and beautiful Scottish Island followed by a wee dram can't be too difficult he mused to himself as he looked out of his office window across the London skyline from the 31st Floor of the Canary Wharf Tower.

"Mandy, Mandy, av jus bin speaking to the Jura Distillery and thers this bloke who works down thur in London for a magazine, he's writing an article on our race and he wants to do it – awesome! You'll need to get it sorted, I'll leave it with you." That was Phil Hodgson briefing wife and Ultra Organiser Mandy Goth that a southern softie pen pusher who'd never been up in mountain in his life wanted to do one of the toughest mountain races in the UK.

Mark was invited to a weekend taster session in the Lakes, a chance for Mandy and Phil to meet him and assess his fitness. A chance too for Mark to see what this fell running lark was all about. A gentle run up the Pikes and across Bowfell followed by the Crinkles quickly convinced him that fell running was not at all like cross-country and reality began to dawn. He did however pass the first test and a training plan that included all the big hills you can get in down south was drawn up.

The Jura Fell race is officially 16 miles and 7,500ft. Actually it's 8,500ft and it feels more like 18,000ft when you are running the 3 miles of tarmac to the finish. This is no race for a novice and all entrants are vetted by Mandy and Phil to check they have appropriate mountain experience. Based on Mark's performance in the Lakes and after much discussion about the safety issues it was decided Mark could take part but only if he were accompanied throughout. That task fell to Christine Preston.

A couple of days before the race Mark met up with Chris at the Big Hoose (Jura House) for a pre-race briefing. Cut-off times were the main discussion point. Even if he ran well it was going to be close and he'd never set foot on anything like this before. In his favour was enthusiasm and he had bags of it, you could see the excitement on his face. Chris was impressed by his attitude but realistic about his chances as were many of the runners in the Tod Harriers party. "He's never done anything like this before, he's no idea of what's ahead of him, so of course he's not worried," was Chris' summary after the meeting.

The morning of the race arrived, kit was checked, clothing adjusted, and off they went with Chris leading the way. Almost immediately Mark was at the back of the field watching the race disappear ahead of him. Chris has warned him that this would happen but had told him not to worry as the objective of the day was simply to keep going at a steady pace and enjoy it.

Beautiful clear weather made the navigation simple and the views just stunning. This has to be one of the most spectacular race routes in the world never mind the UK. There's something very special about racing in the mountains with views of the sea all around and Mark enjoyed every second until the ascent of the first Pap that is.

"This is killing me, I can't believe how tough this is, what's the pace like for you" he asked. "I'm getting cold, we need to press on to meet this checkpoint time, dig in Mark, a bit more effort and you'll be there," was Chris' response. And this was the pattern for the rest of the race, constant encouragement and guidance over which line to take, when to speed up when to be especially careful.

On the summit of Pap three Mark knew he was going to complete the race and this gave him a boost for what was to follow, the long scree descent that we had cunningly avoided discussing at the briefing. Mark's technique was unusual but effective. His backside certainly got some use on the steeper sections but he gritted his teeth and clenched his buttocks very tightly and made it intact to the bottom.

"One last climb Mark then you're home and dry," was perhaps a slightly rosy description by Chris of the last stage given most people find the three miles of road alone a desperate challenge. Once again though Mark pushed hard and ran well off the final summit and he was looking forward to the road run, "it's my surface, I'll be fine when we hit the road."

The opposite was true – it was more like the road hit him and every so often the pace dropped to a walk but never when people were watching of course. Much to Mark's delight we were not last but we were being chased down by other runners as we pushed on to the finish. Pride took over and he decided he was not going to give up hard won places at this late stage and again he dug in deep and kept going.

Crossing the finish line was a huge achievement for him and an experience he will never forget. It would be fair to say Mark was delighted and summed it up by saying, "Crossing that finish line today means more to me than any road race I have ever done, that was brilliant."

Apologies for those who have already read this in the fellrunner – but it was just too good not to include Mandy