

The Lakeland 100 – Ultra Tour of the Lake District

What an event! It certainly lived up to the prediction that it was going to be one hell of a tough race. It was conceived after we'd been over to the Ultra Tour du Mont Blanc for the second time in 2007. "Are we coming out again next year?" we mused over a few beers in a Chamonix bar.

"We should have a race like this in the UK", Dave Makin suggested, "how about round the Lakes?"

"Why not", I agreed, "the Ultra Tour of the Lake District; now that would be a top race". I thought little more of it until a few months later when Dave thrust a BMC map of the Lakes in front of me at the Ratti hut in Langdale. He'd obviously spent many an hour poring over potential routes. There, in front of me, marked in red highlighter was the circular course, which, with a few tweaks here and there, was to become the Lakeland 100. Dave's enthusiasm was obvious. He'd already found a race promoter willing to put in the massive effort that would be needed to make it happen. Marc Laithwaite, director of Epic Events, was keen to take it on. Dave and myself were to be the course planners.

Most of my year revolves around fell and ultra races so finding the time to recce the route wasn't easy. But, spread over three weekends in March, we managed between us to recce every leg of the route. A few minor changes resulted in a tracklogged course covering 170 km and including 24,000 ft of ascent/descent without visiting any summits. It did, however, visit some of the most spectacular valleys and stunning scenery in the Lakes. By sticking, for the most part, to some of the less visited tracks and paths which traverse the cols and visit many of the main valleys the course provides a different perspective on the Lakes to the more usual ridge orientated routes. Having prepared the Road Book and route stats for both the 100 mile race and an alternative 50 miler starting from the half way point we handed it over to Marc and his team. They put in the hard work over the next few months to turn an idea into reality. And what a reality!

I got the chance to take part in the 100 as Mandy "volunteered" to be the HQ logistics coordinator on race weekend – "She's far better at organising than me", I told Marc, hopefully. Given the green light I coerced Oz Kershaw into entering at the last minute. We aimed to set off together and only split up if the other was struggling. We stood, tingling with anticipation and nerves, on the start line in Coniston at 19.30hrs on Friday August 8th 2008 with the 28 other starters in the 100. Rain and wind were forecast to sweep in from 07.00hrs on Saturday but, for now, it was a pleasantly cool evening and relatively clear on the tops. A fast start took us over Walna Scar to Seathwaite. The first of many cheering and cheery marshalls greeted us with tea and flapjack as we arrived, a mini-peleton of five runners, well behind Steve Birkenshaw and the half dozen other top runners in the event but ahead of the rest of the field. Daylight was fading fast as we left to follow the start of the Duddon Fell Race route before peeling off west. My backside is still sporting the bruises from the descent down a rocky and very slippery trail to Boot. The CP, in the Brookhouse pub, was manned by race sponsors Petzl and the bar was still open. However, beer was the last thing on our minds as we wolfed down food before legging it off up the track. The myriad of intersecting paths made the traverse over the dark moors to Burnmoor Tarn and Wasdale somewhat interesting. This was where the reassurance of the GPS proved invaluable. Dave, who was unable to compete due to a crooked ankle, was doing a sterling job as a roving marshal. He'd been there at CP1 and was now here again, at CP3 serving up tea, flat coke and nibbles.



Phil, Oz and Steve Birkenshaw (the winner) at the start of the L100

The night was warm as we pushed on. The real climbing started as we ascended Black Sail Pass and a few more slips and falls on wet rock brought a little more caution as we descended into Ennerdale and crept past the ghostly quiet Youth Hostel. Another wet and bouldery descent followed Scarth gap and as we left CP4 at Buttermere our group was now down to four with Mark Richards and Richie Bardon having decided that I knew the way. Mad fools! The next leg was one of the bits that I hadn't reccied - thank goodness for GPS. It was a beautiful stary night as we headed up the valley and took the narrow path over Sail Pass and down through Barrow Door to Braithwaite. This would be a stunning leg in the daylight but, as we were well ahead of our 30 hr schedule, we reached Braithwaite church hall in the dark. The menu of pasta and cold rice pudding was just what we needed. Refuelled, and revitalised by the dawn, we jogged down the road into Keswick before taking the start of the BG up round Latrigg. I've done so many BG supports on leg one I could do this bit with my eyes shut. We broke off, thankfully, before the big slog up Skiddaw and took the stunning path traversing Lonscale crags before looping down the track to CP6 near Blencathra House. The forecast rain was a little late but a light drizzle now assailed us. It felt pleasantly cooling as we tackled a more complex section of paths which took us to the old

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railway line before a boggy climb up to the old coach road which undulates over the moors to CP7 at the half way point near Dockray. We slumped onto the grassy floor of the marquee. Jo and Jeff looked after us with pasta, tea and biscuits while we rummaged in the bags brought over from the start and changed into dry clothes. "Another cup of tea?" Jo quizzed me. "Oh, yes please". After several gulps of sugary liquid I spotted something in the bottom of the cup. I looked a little closer. A worm! "High protein supplements?" I asked as I pointed out my nutritional bonus to an embarrassed Jo.

We left with renewed impetus after the 30 minute stop. Dockray was where the 50 milers would be setting off three hours later at midday. The next leg past Aira force and Memorial Seat was a delightful path and we made good progress to Pooley Bridge. The place was bustling with tourists, oblivious to our adventure. The deteriorating weather didn't phase us as we traversed down one of the few easy-underfoot descents to Howtown. It still amazes me that the two marshalls, huddled under an upended gazebo to shelter from the driving wind and rain, were still full of cheerful banter. We turned into the teeth of the weather and ploughed up Fusedale. Fortunately the weather abated on the boggy ascent up to Wether Hill col; the highest point of the route at 660m. The gentle grassy descent to Low Kop ended with a plummet down to Haweswater through neck high bracken. When we'd reccied the route the slope was nearly bare. Fortunately Oz, with his uncanny knack of spotting the unseen, took us down a sheep trod that carved a meandering way through the jungle. The far end of Haweswater was invisible in the clag but the pleasant path along its northern shore soon brought us to Mardale car park. Hot soup readied us for Gatesgarth Pass. It was obscured by mist. "I think the summit of the pass is just above the clag", I encouraged Oz, and our one remaining crew member Mark. Richie had dropped off the back during our fast descent to Haweswater. My memory had deceived me as the zig zag track rose well above the cloud line. The long, rocky track to Sadgill followed. Why do they lay the cobbles so that they're at the most awkward, and painful, angle for running on? We found grassy lines at the edge of the walled track when we could but it was a jarring descent. We finally turned for home with another less strenuous up and over to the welcoming interior of Kentmere village hall. It was another well needed pasta stop, manned by jovial race sponsors, Montane.

The slog over Garburn Pass, through Toutbeck and along Robin Lane to Ambleside passed in dreamlike state. We'd now been out for 24 hours and there were still 15 miles to go. We were shaken out of our somnolence when we walked into CP11 in Ambleside. The Lakes Runner, the retailer for the event manned by the inimitable Ian Barnes, was a haven of warmth, food...and disco music? Apparently we got there too early for the live band who welcomed many of the 50 milers! Ian's enthusiasm was infectious as he thrust soup, butties, gels, and bufren upon us. He even provided kit for some runners. One 100 miler's nether region chaffing had got so bad that he was struggling to carry on. A pair of shorts and some silicone Glide cream, courtesy of Ian, did the trick for him and he got to the finish. I wish we'd thought of that while still in the shop. Oz and myself didn't realize just how bad the, if you'll excuse my language, ass and bollock chaffing had become until the pain kicked in as we left Ambleside. Copious amounts of vaseline provided temporary relief. Darkness descended as we followed the Cumbria Way and Mark obviously got the craving of the jug as he shot off ahead, chasing the two front runner 50 milers who passed us just before Elterwater. It was here that the heavy rain turned to torrential deluge, paths to streams, and us to drowned rats. Dave was there again on the verandah of Chapel Stile School which provided a brief respite from the downpour. We disappeared into the night down Langdale. Just past the campsite the chaffing got too much. "I'm going to have to take my jocks off", I grimaced to Oz. "Me too", he agreed. As I stood there ass naked Oz's cursing got louder. He didn't dare take off his shoes due to bad blisters and was having to use brute force to rip off his jocks. What an engaging view we must have provided for the campers. With Oz's feet now worse than his other bits we made painful progress over Blea Tarn to the final CP at Tilberthwaite. Mick Howard's welcome banana butties were about all we could get down by now. "Come on lads, one last push and you're there", he encouraged.

I now regretted agreeing with Dave to add a last sting in the tail to the route. No easy couple of miles down the road to the finish for us. We now faced the final climb up by the savage ravine of Tilberthwaite Gill and the long slog up Crook Beck to Hole Rake We battled headlong into the storm. Even seeing the screen of the GPS in the driving rain was proving difficult. And were we hallucinating or were there frogs everywhere we looked? At last, the final steep descent to the track and flat ground underfoot, at last. We legged it down into Coniston to be cheered into the finish by the HQ crew in a time of 29hrs 44 mins and 6th place overall – not bad for a couple of mature gentlemen. I sat on a chair on the verandah of Coniston Sports and Social Club. "Tea, coffee, food?" Mandy and Janet offered. " Not just yet, I just need to sit a while", I replied...then, "I'll have some in a minute or two, just feeling a bit dizzy"....."I think I need to lie down". Fortunately the race doctor was on hand to offer me some reviving oxygen. Sitting me down on the floor he pressed the mask to my face. I breathed in deeply and slowly the world returned to normal. "Is he Ok?" Mandy peered down with worried expression, while taking photos! "Yes he's fine now", replied the Doc, "you've got to remember he's no spring chicken anymore". Bloody cheek!

So, roll up, roll up for next year's race – 30th Jul/1st Aug 2009 – bigger and better even than this year! It's got to be the toughest 100 miler in Europe, and it's on your doorstep. I reckon it'll fill up fast so, get your entries in early if you don't want to be disappointed.

Phil "Oxygen" 'odgson