

Jura

The mountains are calling and I must go – John Muir.

The first time I heard about the famous Isle of Jura Fellrace, was on one cold winter evening in one of the many pubs of the Calder Valley. Settling down to a weekly post-run pub meal, snippets of conversation could be overheard as groups of seasoned veterans huddled together nursing their choice of poison. I was intrigued to find out what was so special about this Isle of Jura Fellrace. Benjamin Beckwith caught the scent and, like a well trained sniffer hound, gathered the intelligence needed to embark upon our journey. Cheques in the post, forms signed and bikes borrowed, we were off on our adventure.

The Southern Hebridean Isle of Jura, or the 'Island of the deer' is found off the West Coast of Scotland, a few miles North-East of Islay. Considered as being one of Scotland's last wildernesses, the two hundred people who permanently occupy the island are outnumbered by the three thousand five hundred deer. The folklore and history of the island is rich and deep, much alike Todmorden; from standing stones, cursed inhabitants, witches and the Corryvreckan whirlpool, Jura is seen as no ordinary destination. Some people visit the island for peace and tranquillity, gathering their thoughts and cutting themselves off to the outside world. Indeed the world famous author George Orwell wrote his famous dystopian novel '1984', in a remote farmhouse called Barnhill. Other people however, visit Jura for one purpose, to test themselves on the Islands challenging terrain.

The Jura Fellrace is a fifteen mile slog up and down the Pips and Paps of Jura. Ascending and descending 7,500 feet, this race is not for the faint hearted. My old man, like a wise prophet, passed on his wisdom before the previous year's trip. The race is just a race he said; it is the place however that gets under your skin. The race nonetheless, had my full attention. The sheer scale of the undertaking created a certain amount of anxiety. The staggering height of the first Pap as it ascends towards the heavens is certainly humbling when you're looking up from the valley bottom.

"Check them Paps out!" – Benjamin Beckwith 2014.

I remember seeing the winding snakelike procession of runners climbing up the first Pap and disbelieving the sight. Following Phil across the great plain and approaching the first proper climb is a memory I will always remember. This was proper fellrunning, the Calder Valley can only go so far in conditioning the legs for this onslaught.

I look back upon my time on the island through a halcyon haze. Unlike other events, Jura drew me like no other. A carefully mixed tapestry of racing, community and the sheer wildness of the Island had me hooked. The weather had been perfect, the atmosphere electric and Todmorden Harriers were out in full force. When it came to signing up for this year's race, however, I was a little tentative. The cause for this anxiety; injury. Mike Murray became a favourite in my contact list and travelling down the slow and weary road to recovery was frustrating and expensive. Slowly but surely I started to see results. I stuck to the regimen of the exercises like a Benedictine Monk. My broken and tight Achilles started to loosen off. Thank God.

Benjamin Beckwith being Benjamin Beckwith came up with a plan to supersede last year by adopting a theme for the trip. This theme was based upon steezy eighties hairstyles, gung-ho bravado and multi-coloured clothing. Most excellent – dude! So adopting the old Tod Harriers vest, mutton chops and brightly coloured clothes we set off. The trip is memorable, not just for the race but because of the journey to get there. Jura is in the middle of nowhere and is incredibly hard to get to. However, this is what separates it from other races lending itself to more of an adventure. Bike touring, camping and time spent in good company were the order of the day and I loved it. A hop skip and a jump from mainland to the Islands off the West Coast of Scotland. Our roster looked like this; Ardrossan-Brodick, Lochranza-Clonaig, Kennacraig-Port Askaig and finally Port Askaig to Jura our final destination. Cycling over the Isle of Kintyre is exciting as well as exhilarating with full panniers on! The first year saw us being joined by Sue and her daughter Annie whereas this year Ben and I were battling against the elements alone. Racing against the clock and seeing the next ferry coming into port creates a certain sense of immediacy and this year saw us time it to perfection. I was glad of this, due to the driving wind and the cold rain, brrrrr. Parking the car at Ardrossan and Ferry crossing sounds expensive, but I am pleasantly surprised at how cheap this mini

adventure is. Jura only has one pub, a distillery, a hotel, a cafe and a small community shop. It takes a while to adjust to the slow paced lifestyle of the inhabitants.



The start of the race brought together a hotch potch of individuals of all shapes and sizes. Ribbons of colour scattered the hillside moving steadily up the first climb, weaving in and out of the knee high bogs and ankle breaking tussocks. Route choice was just pure luck as I was trying my hardest to instil the inner deer, bounding, stumbling and falling to gain my position. The thrill of the first few miles settled to an easy maintainable rhythm. Last year I had been foolhardy and underprepared, this year led me to stick to a strict regime of a mouthful of food and a gulp of water every twenty minutes or so. I felt amazing, what a difference! Whereas last year I saw it as an ordeal to battle through, this year I gave myself time to enjoy the moment. The experience of the Haworth Hobble also led me to carry some salt to stave off cramp. I have also started to listen, begrudgingly to advice from the veterans of the club including my old man ;) The children's story of the tortoise and the hare springs to mind. The route, this time wasn't alien and I could

relax into my rhythm as I knew what was coming. The debilitating cramp that attacked my calves and quads from the previous year threatened but didn't impede my slow progress. The final descent from the last pip down to the bridge is by far the longest section of the race for me, however I did notice interesting route choices from the old guard in which I definitely will try next year.

Rosie greeted me with water and enthusiasm as I began my tortuous shuffle back along the mile long stretch to the distillery. I was aiming for a sub five hour time and I needed to get a wiggle on if I were to achieve this personal goal. The kindness from a fellow runner provided me with flapjack and the necessary energy to maintain a constant pace. I crossed the line with the time of 4hrs 58mins and 3 secs.

The Isle of Jura Fellrace will hopefully become an annual pilgrimage; it certainly has a draw unlike any other fellrace. The whisky is pretty good too 😊

