

THE BULLOCK SMITHY

SEPTEMBER 3rd/4th 2011

By Darren Graham

I'm sat in the community room that is Brand Top, Checkpoint 10 of the Bullock Smithy event at 8pm. Light is fading rapidly and clouds in the sky are grey with the threat of rain. I'm feeling tired and my legs are heavy as I've been on the go now for 8 hours and have run 38 miles. My aim was to finish within 12 hours and with 18 miles to go within 4 hours, it looked possible....just. So what possibly could go wrong?

But before I carry on, let's go back a bit and let me explain. Firstly, what is the Bullock Smithy? It's a 56 mile running/walking/crawling event around the Peak District, starting and finishing at Hazel Grove, near Stockport. This was my fourth year in a row of doing this event as four years ago, it was my first 'Ultra' and it took me over nineteen and a half hours to complete....as a runner! It was my baptism of fire of doing Ultra events and since then, I have tried to better my time each year resulting in a 12.37 time last year. This year I wanted a sub 12 hour time and I felt fit and strong enough to do it.

So, when September 3rd came and we all gathered at the starting line at 12pm, I felt confident. I was a little worried about my ITB as it had played up on my last two runs at Belper and Fleetwood. Normally, it flares up once in a while but for it to happen twice in a row was a little worrying, especially with a 56 mile event beckoning! Still, history reassured me that it would be ok, if I took it nice and easy. To try and plan my way around the course, I took last year's times at each checkpoint and took off 5 minutes. This plan would have got me round in just under 11 and a half hours, but as long as I got under 12 hours I would be happy.

So, off we went! Out of the park and heading for the hills. Normally it's a mass of runners, but this year I headed up a different route and soon found myself ahead of most runners. To bring me back to earth, I turned a corner and saw plenty of runners in front who obviously had done their homework and found a slightly quicker start.

I soon reached Checkpoint 1 at Bowstones and was 2 minutes ahead of my schedule (7 minutes up from last year). Hmm, I thought. Might be going too fast as I wasn't really expecting to beat my times until later. Still, I felt fine and carried on.

Checkpoint 2 at Chinley Churn was met and I was 12 minutes up from last year. At this point, I first noticed that my legs felt tired, which was a concern as I still had a long, long way to go. 6 days earlier, I had done the Fleetwood half marathon and although I said I wouldn't race it, being only an event to get some miles in my legs, I ended up racing it (bloody Grand Prix has a lot to answer for!). Not usually a road runner and definitely not used to doing 13 miles NON STOP, I was knackered afterwards, especially my ITB. This had flared up at Belper a week earlier. 18 miles of trail running was ideal for me, and so it was, until about 10 miles in and I had to hobble/walk in the rest. Another good time yet again was blown out of the window!

The climb up to Edale cross, CP3, was reached easier than I remembered and I was soon running down to checkpoint 4 at Edale. Unfortunately, this is where the cramp started in my quads. It even stopped me in my path as I climbed out of Edale, over Hollins Cross and niggled at me all the way to Castleton (CP5). I sat down here, proud, I think, of being told I was the first

runner to sit down at this checkpoint. Eer, ok, I thought. I planned to show that I was still fit by running from the checkpoint but decided on eating a jam sandwich and walk instead!

Cramp ate at my legs all the way past Peak Forest (CP6) and down into Millers Dale (CP7 and the half-way point). I took salt at each checkpoint to try and help me and even stopped for soup at Millers Dale! Once past CP7, there's a long and winding road for a couple of miles uphill, which I admit to walking most of the way. Along the way, a friend of mine, Helen Skelton (think she was 2nd lady at Noon Stones this year) spotted me as she drove past. She turned round and drove up to meet me. Not realising I was racing (which goes to show how much I had slowed down), she offered me a lift!! I must have looked tired! I had to decline and kept on telling myself that all the way up the hill.

Passing CP8 and grabbing a jammy doughnut I realised I hadn't cramped since coming down from Millers Dale, but my quads were tiring and thus, I was slowing down. CP9 at Earl Sterndale came and went and I put on a long sleeved top as evening was fast approaching. I had run in my club vest up to this point and was glad to be running for Tod Harriers this week as Belper had me down for running with some club from Hong Kong! No idea. Anyway, after climbing to Brand Top (CP10) I decided to rest, which is where the story really starts.

I declined the complimentary hot dogs on offer in favour of my own energy gels, salt, mars bar, more energy bars, electrolyte drinks, boiled sweets, liquorice, salted nuts and a prayer. Two runners came and went as I was there. It made me realise that I had been running on my own since Edale. I hadn't caught anyone up but nobody, to my knowledge, had passed me either. Using their example, I thought I'd better plod on. 4 hours to do 18 miles was realistic but I knew then that I would have to get my head down and push it a little.

So, off I went into the evening dusk. This next section to Cumberland Cottage had me slightly worried as I'm usually tired here and rely on others to navigate. But this year was different as I was on my own. Also, I had run this section for the last 3 years so I couldn't possibly go wrong! But it all went wrong fairly quickly. I followed the track from Brand Top to the road, past the hamlet of Flash and down into the valley. I took a right turn, which, when looking at the map the following day, should have been a left THEN a right! Not thinking I was wrong, I was running along a decent path until I hit a lane. Hmm! Don't remember that there last year. I'll consult the map. Nope, no lane there. Map's wrong! Ah, stop worrying. There's my path up the hill as I remember. So off I went up this path until I hit a farm. Hmm. Seem to be slightly off course, too far to the right. Bugger, I don't remember that drop to the left! Damn, why has it suddenly gone dark AND misty? I know, I'll keep going right, along this track and it should hit the main road. Then I'll head down the road until I'm back on track. No road appeared. I ran, knowing I was heading the wrong way but hoping to hit the road at any time. Again, no road appeared. In fact the track looked like it was disappearing as well! Damn! I thought. Got to go back. So I turned and headed back to the farm, then up the hill. A decent path crossed me so I followed it, heading towards the now line of torches seen on the distant hill ahead of me. Then the path turned away, following the contour of the hill and the distant lights started to fade away. Damn! Damn! So I climbed over a wall, headed down the hill, crossed a stream, took a bearing (ahead north, fool!) And climbed back up the other side of the valley until I eventually hit the main road. Thank god! I ran down to the route crossing and joined a party of runners to head down to Cumberland Cottage. I was not happy. When I arrived at the Checkpoint (CP11), my mate Alan was there and he gleefully told me that I had been at least half an hour in front of him at CP10. I had in reality

lost 44 minutes, my head and the will to try and beat 12 hours. In fact, beating last year's time at all was starting to look doubtful as well.

I Left CP11 a different person. Naffed off as I knew I had blown 12 hours but also because I went wrong! With no energy left, I plodded and walked to appropriately named Walker Barn (CP 13). It felt like I had hit that massive brick wall we all get. But this was the biggest so far! I sat down; feeling fed up and had a brew. Bugger it, I thought. Might as well enjoy what's left. So I sat there, enjoying my brew and some cake and set off with 10 miles to go. These last 10 miles are easy and straight forward to navigate, even for me. Anyone with anything left would push these last miles as they are easy to do. But not me today. I jogged and walked the last 10 miles and at Whitley Green (CP13), felt better than I did back at Brand Top (CP10).

The final run in along MiddlewoodWay and down Tower Road to the main road which leads to the finish are mentally hard. They never end but as each step is taken, the finish line draws nearer and nearer. I finished in a total time of 13.25 hours, 4.39 hours behind the winner! Not a great time for me but a good time (I train hard to be this average!). I did 12.37 last year and even with the time lost whilst wandering, I was still slower than last year. Maybe my head went after getting lost, or I set off too quick (which is usually the case with me), I don't know. All I know is that I will be back again next year to try and beat that 12 hour mark.

But, it's not just about the time. The Bullock Smithy was my first Ultra! It was an awakening! The sense you feel running whilst day becomes night is weird. The environment is different at night, even if it's familiar to you. Sheep become animals with reflective eyes and if you pass a lonely house, you can't help but think how cosy it must be sat inside watching the box!



The 3rd Hazel Grove Scouts should be proud of the work they do in organising such a great event. The checkpoints are well supported and the organisation is second to none. I'm not saying it's the best event ever, but I love this event and will keep coming back even if, one day, I do break that elusive 12 hours.

Better start training now!

Darren Graham