

26 Lakes, Meres and Waters Winter record attempt report

The 26 Lakes, Meres and Waters has always held a fascination; a chance meeting with Joss Naylor in Wasdale in summer 2020 while supporting Paul Wilson's Steve Parr Round pushed me over the edge to attempt it. Joss spoke in glowing terms about the route and later in a phone call confirmed that it would, in his opinion, make a great winter route given the lack of extended time on the high tops.

A plan was hatched to try a winter attempt, with a period of leave booked and the intention to watch the weather and find a good window. Despite the interruptions of Covid19 I was able to recce most of the route in the autumn, and with a good few months of training on top of a decent performance in the Thames Path 100 I felt physically ready. I was fortunate through the interventions of many, including Paul Wilson, Damian Hall and Tory Miller to assemble a crack crew of pacers as well as the undoubted Queen of road support, Charmian Heaton. No excuses, then.

As we rolled to the start in Charmian's smart new camper I was nervous like seldom before. The scale of the challenge, the kindness of so many to make it possible weighed heavy and I hoped I had the wherewithal to make it count. I was enormously glad to dip a toe in Loweswater at 00:00 on Sat 12 December and set off for Crummock Water in the company of Chris Swanepoel and James Halse. We rolled along to Buttermere, up and over Red Pike and after a tricky descent and bit of route finding dipped a toe in Ennerdale Water. 4 down.

Putting a schedule together had been a challenge, with so few completions of the route to compare. I worked off my recce pace, but it was clear I was moving more slowly than that, a theme that continued throughout the day. James, Chris and I climbed Black Sail Pass, and after a brief diversion towards Pillar, thought better of that and headed to Wasdale where Chris and James handed over to my Keswick clubmate Jacob Tonkin. Tonk was in great spirits as ever as we tagged Wastwater and headed past Burnmoor Tarn towards Devoke Water. I popped on road shoes for the section to Turner Hall Farm where we were accompanied by Charmian's partner Steve who expertly fed me Hula Hoops from his mountain bike. Another shoe change, then we headed up Walna Scar Road. Having felt a bit flat all the way I started to come alive here, just in time for a very cold windy section to Goat Water, around the Old Man and down to Low Water. Both Tonk and I got really cold and it was touch and go for a while whether we would have to turn back, although luckily the route we needed to take was not that dissimilar from what I would have done if I needed to bail out. After Levers Water I warmed up a bit, and was very glad to tag Coniston Water and get into Charmian's warm van.

At this point Charmian's mastery of her craft showed – I had told her it wasn't likely I'd want the hot meals I'd packed, but she just made one and handed it to me with a look that suggested this was not a negotiation! She also encouraged me to put on a complete dry set of clothes, and when I warned her that nudity was imminent, remarked without missing a beat that she wouldn't let a little thing like that bother her! I think it's very likely that her intervention at that point saved the whole attempt.

Leg 3 beckoned in the company of the irrepressible Daz Moore and Kevin Barron. It was the first time all day I was moving at the scheduled pace and feeling good as we headed to Esthwaite Water, Elterwater, Grasmere and Rydal Water. When we got to Ambleside, another hot meal and a big crew for leg 4 awaited: Carol Morgan, Simon Franklin, Robin Regan and Andy Fid. I was really concerned about being behind schedule and holding everyone up, but the pacers handled it all with good humour. A long section from Windemere to Skegges via Troutbeck and Kentmere followed, before we turned north. It had been my plan from the beginning to run this route as a tribute to Joss Naylor and so I took the route he had, including Kentmere Reservoir (as it happens, I don't think it's much further or slower than the alternative. We tagged that, and Small Water before meeting Charmian at Haweswater. She had encountered terrible trouble including road closures and had had barely any sleep, I think we both agreed that given our time again we wouldn't have had her go to Mardale Head. We continued to Blea Water, over High Street where Paul Wilson was waiting, down to Hayes Water, Brothers Water and Ullswater. I stopped only to try and manage what by now was pretty awful chafing, only succeeding in making it worse, and set off with Chili and Rice in hand towards Sticks Pass with Charlie Sproson and Kim Collison.

As it had been all day, it was a pleasure and an honour to be looked after by such classy and accomplished mountain runners, their calm assuredness and good humour made all the difference and they seemed intuitively to understand what I needed. I wasn't feeling too chatty but it was great to tag along as the two of them caught up with the latest and swapped stories. Sticks Pass was dealt with in good order, and we met Charmian at Legburthwaite for a final shoe change outside Tonk's house. Despite his promises to come out, he'd turned in for the night. Fair enough too! Charlie turned back and ran home to Patterdale, Kim continued with Alan Dorrington to Thirlmere and Derwent Water where we met an understandably very tired Charmian for the penultimate time. Kim said farewell at Keswick, as Alan and I continued along a deserted A591 to Bassenthwaite Lake and finally the interminable pull up to Orthwaite before trotting down to Overwater to finish in 29:21. A new winter best time, subject to ratification, and the third fastest ever – albeit a long way behind Messrs Naylor and Heaton!

I can now say confidently that Joss was spot on about the route. He had said, and I concur, that he wished more people would attempt it. I hope in some way I've contributed to that happening – come and have a go folks, the outright record might be a stretch but the winter one is definitely beatable!

Deepest thanks to Charmian Heaton, Chris Swanepoel, James Halse, Jacob Tonkin, Daz Moore, Kevin Barron, Carol Morgan, Simon Franklin, Robin Regan, Andy Fid, Kim Collison, Charlie Sproson and Alan Dorrington for support on the day, Martin Cox at V02 Max for coaching, James Thurlow at OpenTracking and David Thunder for getting my body in such great shape again.

Rob Allen