

The 26 Lakes, Meres and Waters

Leg 1

After much planning, sorting, fiddling and faffing to get to this point the day started early, lying awake in bed thinking I hadn't had enough sleep, let alone extra as had been the plan for the last days leading in. However I had no nerves about starting and just accepted I was here and we were going to be going up to Loweswater soon.

We met my dad outside the campsite and settled in for the drive up, arriving at Loweswater car park about 30 mins before the start time of 7am, followed closely by Pete Todhunter and then all the support runners of Paul Swindles and Joss Dog, Matt Dunn and Tim Campbell. After loading them up with food and kit we wandered down toward the start and Rob Green Snr and Diane caught us up on the way. A couple of mins chat at the waters' edge and then 7am came round. Loweswater touched, we set off up the track for Crummock.

The first few miles ticked along easily and aside from some cows that weren't keen on Joss, without any sort of incident. Lots of chat about the day, catching up as I hadn't been racing and hadn't seen the support guys much over lockdown or since and just enjoying the company and running. Buttermere came and went in 47 mins and headed up and over Red Pike. I got a hint of grief for going over it and not skirting the scree, but I was princess for the day so we went my way. The rain started part way up and made coming off it in the clag tricker for lack of visibility but we were soon back on the greasy and wet line and down into Ennerdale a seemingly impossibly 30 mins up. From there it was steady up to Haycock, skimming under Little Gowder, skirting Haycock and picking up the grassy JNC line down and on toward Greendale. We dropped in there a minute up on schedule in 3:44.

From there after a quick change over with no milk or sugar for brews (I knew I'd forget something) but it was good to meet Tory Miller, previously we'd only been in email contact for putting maps in The Fellrunner but she kindly offered to do road support early on when I was struggling to fill those spots. It was also great to see friends and family out, I really wanted my parents to see what all this fell running stuff was about after me harping on at them for years and I think the day was to give them a good idea of it. It was also very welcome to have a Ratti representation with Rob Green Snr and Diane out to see me through.

Leg 2

A change of support to Guy Illingworth whose LMW I'd supported to Greendale a few weeks prior and John Millen and we headed for Wastwater. My first real error of the day came when I realised I'd put two men from the North East on the same leg and the question of being black or red and white came up at which point Guy nearly turned back from Irton for Wasdale (most likely Nether Wasdale and the pub). However for my sake they got along for the entire leg, thanks to both for their tolerance. Other notable events were seeing Ed Swift going the other way in his car in Eskdale Green (I both blame and thank Ed in equal measure for my Bob Graham) though I couldn't stop to talk as I wanted to stick to my schedule in order to be able to have a good go at Alan Heaton's time. The

second was Tory doing the nearest to Tour De France style road support you can have on a fell event; picking up supplies from Tim and Beth Ripper and then handing gels out of the car window to Guy as we ran along, brilliant work!

Devoke came and went with ease after jogging up the verge of the road to it. Not long after I had an unexpected and sharp pain in the groin, not issued by either support runner who'd perhaps got tired of me already but more a small niggle which had flared during training coming back on the day having not been present for months. I figured I'd grit my teeth and crack on but it was getting surprisingly bad by the time we hit Oak Bank and turned for Seathwaite. I think I consumed my first and possibly only gel that I can recall of the day at this point to keep me moving as the pain wasn't the sort of thing I needed about 25 miles in.

Leg 3

At Walna Scar, still within a few minutes of the plan, we were greeted by the road crew, food, a brew, some dryer clothes and Paul Haigh, Martin Howard and Matt Owens and Alice Swift who would be adding the initial part of cycling support for the day before doing the road support at Ambleside. Again family were out though the pain in the groin and worryingly, the feet too (so soon?) meant I maybe wasn't so chatty this time. A quick bit of foot taping from Paul Haigh to avoid a painful hotspot getting worse and a mainly red and white Calder Valley train (we'd work on signing Matt Owens up during this section) was ready to head off on the Coniston leg. The climb passed easily in some cooling clag though once over the col the rain briefly stopped and we had some views before cutting over to Goats Water then up over The Old Man and down to Low Water, Paul being sure to tell everyone we passed what I was up to. A quick if not perfect line to Levers and then an easy and enjoyable downhill through the quarries by a bemused wedding party and on to the next bit of road support. We missed a turning and added some distance on but still got there just two mins behind the plan.

40 miles and 9500 feet down and pretty much exactly on plan.

LMW Leg 4

After more expert work on brews, food and footwear options from Tory we set off from Coniston for Ambleside. Matt had been replaced by Karl Gray and I felt a bit guilty at taking one of the greatest fell runners ever over so much road on this leg, needs must though and it was great to have him there. As we arrived at Esthwaite the rain opened up on us again for one of the heaviest spells of the day and a jacket was thrown my way after the water had been touched. Paul peeled off to Ambleside not long after but having done a leg and the footcare job earlier, he'd done more than enough for the day. The next few waters were a joy to run, mainly just tucked in behind Karl and Martin and thinking just how lucky I was with all the people who'd come out for me on road and running support along with family and friends. Skelwith Force looked fantastic before Elterwater and we swapped some stories on the rest of the way over to Rydal and Grasmere, the rest was spent listening to Martin and Karl talk of fast race times so fast I struggled to comprehend them.

Martin started cramping up coming into Ambleside and to be honest I thought I must be running well if he and Paul were suffering and had dropped off. Karl ran me the rest of the way in with some great words of encouragement and I arrived to the road crew applauding my efforts and time so far; 54 miles and 11000 feet of it, and only 9 mins outside my plan in 11 hours and 54 mins. Considering how little there was to go off working the plan out and the weather on the day I was more than happy with the progress so far.

Legs 5 & 6

Another change of crew here with Alice and Matt doing this stop before it switched over to Sara Hollins. Ready for the next two legs of running were Josie Greenhalgh who I'd helped on her LMW, Rob Green Jnr (whose grandfather Leo was the first to ever complete LMW), Tom Hollins and by no means least John Kelly who'd only been back in the UK a few days after spending some time back over in the US. I'd opted not to hassle Sara with going to Mardale and in a way merged these legs in to one, plus I figured this crew were more than capable of carrying enough of what was needed for the legs so loaded them up with food and drinks and set off through Kentmere and Troutbeck to possibly the best of the day, Skeggles Water. If you've not been, it's worth a visit! On the way we mused over the differences between Lakes, Meres and Waters though I didn't have an adequate answer for John then and still don't. I think I was still going well as I was running climbs and some folk couldn't quite believe it, surely a good sign?

When I'd got through all the water we had, I had the chance to "taste the run" as John sorted out some filtered Skeggles for me to drink, which was a huge help. Tory reappeared and joined us from Kentmere for a run having already done a series of road support during the day, it was great to see her again and a real lift.

What felt like slow progress once we were on headtorches seemingly wasn't as I got to Haweswater still roughly on schedule (23:45 as I haven't mentioned it yet) and maybe added 500m trying to find where the significantly drained res actually began. No stop here then on toward Small Water which is where the rain became very heavy once again and where my lack of sleep leading up to the day probably caught up with me. I slowed, I stumbled, the wind and rain hurt, I went quiet and wasn't eating as I had until this point, real food and in particular pizza had done a great job so far but now little was appealing and my body just wanted to stop and sleep. I had to dig in to stay awake and keep moving. It all hurt but failing and letting everyone down wasn't an option but I sensed there was concern from those around me at how much I'd faded.

Small Water to Blea Water was the section I was least comfortable on the nav for which in part was the reason I had Josie on this leg even though she'd only done it in daylight before. However the lines were perfect and despite the tiredness I remember smiling that swe'd gone so well on that section. After that it was over and off High Street to Hayeswater where Dougie Zinis had run out from the change over point to meet us. I was pleased to see him as it meant I was getting nearer Hartsop and Leg 7 though the climb over High Street had taken over twice the time I'd planned. The stop took longer than planned too while a few hallucinations were dealt with, Tom sorted my feet out and Sara

made sure I ate. All the right things done for carrying on but my sub 24 plan was as good as gone and I switched to a lesser aim of under 30 hours as I wasn't sure I'd come back round before the end.

Legs 7 & 8

On 7 for Brotherswater I had Dougie and Charlie Parkinson running with me and we soon tagged Brotherswater before turning North to Glenridding and Ullswater. Quite a simple leg as once you're there, it's up and over Sticks Pass to Legburthwaite. Josie drove by to offer yet more support and we pushed on before slowing to a walk on the climbs. I thought most of my plans other than finishing the job had gone by this point but also didn't want to think too much. About half way up Sticks and after a chat with Dougie about Alan Heaton's 25:16 time, it was silently acknowledged that we needed to get running again in order to try and beat it and that's what we broke in to in all the rain clag. It was a slow and slippery descent but we again pretty much ran the leg on schedule.

Once in to Legburthwaite and the final road stop I took on a bit more food and started getting mentally set for the final leg. I set off with Dougie Ambi Swindells and Andy Slattery, the latter on his bike and armed with the very best local knowledge. We got going along to Thirlmere and I didn't feel too bad; the sun was coming up, there were banks of clouds butting up to the Helvellyn massif; it all looked very picturesque and tranquil. However, just as I thought that, I asked what time it was and Ambi told me it was 5:14am. Still capable of simple maths I worked out and announced we had 3 hours and 2 mins to cover the 17 miles to Over Water and better Alan's time, the fire started up again and so did the pace. I'd scheduled 3:30 for this leg but that wouldn't do it so the pace had to be quicker. We zipped up the A591 and through some quiet streets in Keswick at under 8 min miles, not bad 85+ miles in!

Derwent came and went with nobody else around, it felt a slog to Bassenthwaite and I was constantly willing it to appear. Once it had and we were quickly coming away and heading back to the road, with some horse charming thrown in by Slats. I was now far beyond the point of being able to do simple maths and knew it just had to be hammer down and hope it was enough but I expected at best it might be five mins quicker than Alan, the plan reduced in my head to "just keep running".

Where the road splits for Orthwaite I was determined to run the whole climb because not only did I think it was going to be very close but Josie told me that only Joss and Tony had managed it and I wanted to add my name to the list. While doing that the 100 mile mark passed and a couple of miles later Over Water was in sight. With a "there it is, go get it" from Dougie we headed down the road as fast as we could but I felt like I was going to collapse in a heap with every step.

We turned the last corner, cheered on by a larger than expected welcoming party as we came down the road. All that was left was to find the edge of the water which wasn't as bad at Haweswater but it was far from the bank. Getting there I stopped the clock at 24:42, a full 34 mins faster than Alan's time. I turned around to be congratulated by Rob Snr on the second fastest ever LMW and "Leo would be proud of you" and I can't put into words what that meant to me. I didn't think it was possible to pull that much time out of the bag on the last leg but having put 3:30 in for it, we took almost a full hour off that. Without that it would've still been a good day out but with it, it capped off

what had already been a great run with breaking the record on the original route for the 26 as Leo and Peter Schofield had devised.

In the end I clocked 102.6 miles and 21800 feet of climb to make a great day out with great people. Thanks to all those who supported on foot, road, came to see me through stops and everyone who put up with me during all the months of training and planning. I simply couldn't have done it without you all.