A Winter Bob Graham – An Interview





Three faces of a Successful winter Bob Graham- Concentration, Exhaustion, Elation!!!

Mick Allen Paul Johnson Mario Yeomans

1. Who's crazy idea was this?

Paul
Definitely not mine. Even stupid dogs wouldn't have gone out in that weather. It must have been Mario's or Mick's!

Mario

John Brockbank in 1985/6 probably. Unless one of his mates put him up to it. Doubt it even occurred to Bob, otherwise he would've done it!

Our attempt? PJ all the way.

Mick

Paul can definitely be blamed for this. I overheard Paul talking about it to another runner whilst out on our Tuesday CFR meet. I immediately told Paul that I'd be up for supporting him as long as the date tied in with my work pattern. I know Paul did a quick summer round last year and guess he wanted to strike of a winter round in the same year – not many people have done that. Following the cancellation of our first planned W BGR date (5th/6th Dec) due to the horrendous December floods it was Paul's idea to dedicate our BG to raising monies to those affected in Cumbria. So far we have raised £1400.00. We decided to re-schedule our attempt for after Christmas

2. Describe the whole experience in 3 words!!

Paul
Awful, beautiful, hard-blimin'-work.

Mario

- training
- preparation
- timshel (a Hebrew word, approximately meaning “you have a choice” - after the Mumford & Sons song with the same name, it was a very fitting song for the experience - I even found myself singing it on leg 5!

Mick

Exhilarating, Hideous, Humbling

3. How did you train for such an epic venture?

Paul

I tried to maintain the work I had done for the summer round although I wasn’t as strong for the winter round as I was for the summer round. This was mainly due to having tapered for an early December attempt. The December storms made any long days out difficult and, of course, family duties over Christmas halted any significant running.

Mario

A mixture of strength/power work and long runs out. I found the strength work invaluable in ensuring my connective tissues could stand the constant pounding. I’m talking specifically about slow, eccentric exercises such as calf lowers and weighted squats as well as interval sessions. This was particularly important for me as I’ve been injured three times this past season and wasn’t certain everything had fully recovered.

The long runs out were useful for a number of reasons; fitness obviously, gear testing and nutrition experimentation, acclimatisation.

Ultra distances, especially in Winter, require some important decisions to be made about gear/clothing e.g. layers that will keep you warm for long periods in sub-zero conditions, dry easily for the long haul, a bag that fits snugly enough to remain comfortable over long periods. You need to spend a lot of time training with the gear you’ll use to make sure it will do what it needs to on the day.

See what your body can personally tolerate nutritionally. This was a particular unknown to me, since I had never run more than about 9 hours in one go so was uncertain how my body would react to the intake of different kinds of foods after that time on my feet.

Training over long distances in awful conditions; it really does acclimatise your body so when it comes to the day, you can handle it mentally. That double Pagan’s Breakfast this year; perfect example!

Mick

Due to working on an oil platform for 3 weeks out of 6 training for me is somewhat different to other fellrunners. When I home I do a lot of hillwork mixed with speed work on local trails above my village of Great Broughton. You cannot beat time on the fells and out in all weathers certainly make you ‘fellhard’ as Billy Bland would say. When offshore its circuit training, Strength and conditioning with weights and gruelling long run on the treadmill. Anything between 10km to 60km with varying elevation – About 6 hours is the most my mind can handle! Exactly two week before the BG attempt I ran a fast Marathon on the treadmill (Christmas Day) and then started to taper down.

4. What was your worst moment? And a time during the run you felt good?

Paul

Most of leg 5, particularly the road section. I hadn't eaten properly since Wasdale and was really struggling with the wet and cold. The support from The Honister Crew was invaluable at this point. There were two moments when I felt good: 1. Eating Jim Francis's Michelin Star ham, cheese and pickle sandwiches on Scafell – that was truly beautiful; 2. clambering around Steeple with the tops covered in snow. I was feeling relatively ok and enjoying the adventure. It was one of those mountain moments which I will always remember: that 5 second glance up, gulping in the scenery and being all-consumed by the beauty and power of the mountains.

Mario

Worst moment: Great Gable ascent. I was empty physically and mentally and very tired. In my head I also thought that we were moving so slowly that we must be losing huge amounts of time and we were already behind at Wasdale. If I'd have been thinking more objectively, I'd have realised that the timings deliberately slow down towards the end to take account of tiredness i.e. it's fully expected that you get slower towards the end.

Best moment: Looking down over night-time Keswick on the Skiddaw ascent was a great feeling of setting out on something big with a couple of mates. Secondly, the head-torch lights and whooping at Honister as we descended from Grey Knotts was very special. I'd felt all the way around that there was huge support from the club and that just confirmed it. I knew we would make it then.

Mick

There were a few but I'd say coming up to Bowfell and then down to Ore Gap. I was so cold because going was so slow, there was at least a foot of snow in places and picking through the rocky terrain was murder…so hard to keep concentrating on where your feet were going. I still don't know how any of us (BG'ers and supporters) did not turn an ankle of worst.

I have to say I felt good over legs 1 and 2 and then again over Dalehead (must have been the soup from Honister)

5. A winter BG means winter conditions. We know you had rain, snow, mist, wind and darkness, what was the hardest to cope with?

Paul

Definitely the wind from Mick and Mario!
Next hardest to cope with was the wind and rain on leg 5. Because I couldn't eat very well I was finding it difficult to generate heat – the wind and rain just sapped me.

Mario

Deep snow on Bowfell and Esk was tough going, but the pacers were ahead of us stomping out footsteps to make our path easier; must have been exhausting for them as it was deep, fresh powder; thanks lads!

The wind from Bowfell to Scafell was pretty harsh too, but I have to plug some gear here; that Paramo Enduro jacket I've got is unbelievable; waterproof, incredibly breathable, quick drying, warm, pockets where you need them - I honestly never really felt the elements were getting to me because of that jacket. For Winter conditions, get one; you won't regret it!

Mick

The snow was tough but actually was better, in places, than running on scree especially up Lower man over to Dollywagon. Darkness through Legs 1 and 2 were okay but it was hard to deal with, mentally, when the darkness came around again…at about Red Pike. The driving hail coming off Great Gable was especially horrible, by that point my right knee was giving me some real problems on the descents and ibuprofen had long since stopped been effective – this meant I had to make a decision to either descend facing the hail (so as to trail my bad knee) or have back to hail and put weight onto my knee…I choose to face the hail.



Leaving Wasdale



Moot Hall -finish

6. You were on schedule most of the way and you all came in together, how did this work out?

Paul

We have all entered fell-running from walking, climbing type backgrounds. I think this has given us a mountain sense of how to look after one another and how to move safely together. We also knew each other's strengths and weaknesses so felt confident in allowing individuals to push on or fall behind knowing they would catch up on the next climb or descent.

Mario

I think this is our greatest victory; to complete as a team. We were always destined to have our individual ups and downs, which meant we always had to move at the pace of the slowest member. If we'd have run individually we would have been able to make up time when we were feeling better again; not so on our round. On the other hand, however, certainly for me anyway, during a low period I felt compelled to continue at Mick and Paul's pace anyway and grind it out, precisely because I would have been putting the whole effort in serious jeopardy had I fallen behind too much or had to bug out altogether.

We were always checking on each other, even if it was little looks over both shoulders to make sure we were all keeping up; very often it was unspoken support between us - I certainly felt we were looking after each other.

Mick

We were all keeping a track and I was taking laps between peaks on my Suunto watch which really helped.

I think having quicker stops at Threlkheld and Dunmail work well and kept us on track. By Wasdale we were about 15 mins down because we went around Foxes Tarn to Sca fell towards the end. Into leg 4 it felt great to hit each peak on schedule but I was so demoralized when we started to hit them behind schedule…this was the mental battle. Very glad we worked a 40 minute buffer into the schedule which worked out well in the end. We talked about the possibility of being split up on our BG, but only briefly.

Plan was to stay on schedule but if anyone of us dropped too far behind they would be left – fortunately this never happened, personally I'm very proud of the fact that we stuck together. There were times when each of our pace dropped off, I for one was very slow on the descents on Leg 4 and found myself well behind the guys coming off of Pillar, luckily for me a was strong on ascents throughout so would always catch up on the climbs.

7. Paul, how does this compare to your summer BG? Mario and Mick this was your first BG, why Winter?

Paul

I struck lucky on the summer round. The weather was good and I had a very strong set of available supporters. It wasn't easy but all I had to do was put one foot in front of the other. I guess for the winter round I was looking to up the stakes and see how I would cope with harsh conditions. The effort involved in the winter round was considerable and, although the summer round was not easy and is in itself a significant challenge, the winter round became a tough battle between me, the mountain and the clock. From a statistical point of view, the splits from each round are below:

Leg	**Summer Splits**	**Winter Splits**
Leg 1	3hrs 38 mins (rest 7 mins)	3hrs 51mins (10 mins)
Leg 2	4: 02 (8)	4: 35 (10)
Leg 3	5: 21 (12)	6: 20 (10)
Leg 4	3: 34 mins (4)	5: 04 mins (7)
Leg 5	2:19	3:10

Mario

In truth I was never going to attempt it unless it was very benign winter conditions; that was always the original plan. That soon went out the window with the initial attempt and realising there were precious few other opportunities to do it together in winter, so we just had to go when we were all available at the same time, irrespective of the conditions!

The real driving force behind the winter idea though, was Paul. I will both curse and thank him for the rest of time.

Mick

I always had the intention of running my own BG in the summer but it was always a case of what fit in with my work and family. I'd run/recce'd all the sections several times although mostly in daylight. I've run 20 of so Ultra's to date and completed the Lakeland 100 in just over 26 hours so I was pretty confident in doing a summer BG in under 24. With this in mind did I really want to tackle something I was 99% sure I could do?, that to me is not a challenge…I hope that did not come off as arrogant?

When Paul mentioned the date for his BG (Dec 5th/6th Dec) I knew I would be home and it wasn't long before I asked Paul if he would mind if I ran the whole thing with him and Mario. After some vetting from

Paul as to my endurance running CV Paul and Mario were happy for me to tag along – although I'm still pretty sure they wanted me for my watch more than anything else…lol

8. What was your favourite running food?

Paul
Jim Francis's ham, cheese and pickle sandwiches. Followed closely by Les Barker's cashew nuts. Definitely not nakd bars, gels, shot bloks, rice pudding, jelly babies, jelly beans, snickers, jam sandwiches…….

Mario

I'm not sure favourite is the right word. On the hill I survived mainly on Nakd bars, but after the first few hours it's difficult to want to eat anything at all. Nakd bars dissolve easily in your mouth though; you can almost drink them. Cheese and onion crisps at stops were awesome and rice pudding was a top recommendation from Mick.

But then shortly after Bowfell came Jim Francis with his dogs. Just as I was licking my lips at the prospect of Collie stew, Jim mentioned he'd brought some ham, cheese and pickle sandwiches. I hadn't realised until the words came out of his mouth, how much I needed something savoury - my stomach was beside itself! Thanks Jim.

Mick
I've experimented with all types of foods on Ultra over the last couple of years and found that I function well on nakd bars and the odd chia charge bars. We were all pretty regimented about ensuring we ate regularly. At least one of us would call out every 30 minutes 'food!' while on the hill…and we would proceed to get something down. After Wasdale think all of us were sick of eating them damn bars. Food at the road stops was consumed in a flurry, for me it was rice pudding, salty crisps and warm soup, which really hits the spot. Honestly there is no substitute for warm grub on long runs. Best of all had to be the homemade Buckwheat balls given to me by my wife Maria at Honister which most likely kick me the boost over Dale Head.

9. What do the supporters do that help the most.

Paul
They remain focused and organised. Knowing they are competent mountain runners who can get themselves out of trouble is a huge benefit. I always appreciate supporters who keep a watchful but distant eye on things. Being there with a cup of tea, a smile or a clap makes a huge difference.

Mario

Knowing when to talk and when to let you concentrate. Steep descents are tough when you're that tired; you really need to concentrate. But when you're just slogging away, there's nothing like Col Rhodes chirpy voice going off for hours on end to distract you from the pain. Cheers Col!

Obviously everything else supports do to help is invaluable too; just trusting that someone will be there at the appointed time. It's really important you can depend on them.

Mick
I would say just having someone there who is fresher than you and can set pace is the best thing. We navigated ourselves through Leg 1 and 2 as were pretty fresh but having our supporter take over the rest

of the nav to the end was invaluable – this meant we could knuckle down and push and concentrate on eating and drink on the move. Towards the end it was great to have someone nattering in my ear, even if I didn't say much back!

10. Any tips for future Winter BG-ers?

Paul

Train at all hours of the day; get used to the dark and train in harsh conditions. Get used to running tired. Know the route the best you can. Have your rucksack organised so you know exactly where everything is. Listen to people's advice. Seek constructive criticism, avoid negative criticism. Be prepared to suffer. Buy the best kit you can afford. And, in the words of Mike Harrison, 'prepare, prepare, prepare!'

Mario

Don't just run the BG route on long training runs, you'll get bored of it. Run with friends and a variety of routes. It'll also reduce erosion on the BG route.

Wear the gear you'll be running in in training and become slick at using it.

Prepare, prepare, prepare (PJ's mantra!) - even down to which socks you're going to wear on each leg. No point wearing SealSkinz on leg 1 if you're going through the Caldew anyway!

Mick

Get plenty of support – there are the one who'll get you around. Whether road supporters or on the hill…you are only as strong as your support team.

11. Anything else you want to tell us?

Paul

I was pleased but not particularly surprised that we all stayed together. It was always our intention to stay together and help each other through the highs and lows. I think what I am most proud of is best summed up by Apsley Cherry-Garrard:

"We did not forget the Please and Thank You, which means much in such circumstances, and all the little links with decent civilisation which we could still keep going. I'll swear there was a grace about us when we staggered in. And we kept our tempers – even with God." And finally, to Mick and Mario:

"As we began to gather our gear together to pack up for the last time, Bill said quietly, 'I want to thank you two for what you have done. I couldn't have found two better companions – and what is more I never shall." (Apsley Cherry-Garrard, The Worst Journey in the World)

Mario

Prepare for post-BG. Make sure there's someone to look after you; have important things next to your bed; bottles of water, protein shakes, phone and chargers, painkillers, crutches!

I personally found it to be an amazing, and very emotional, experience, all the more enriched for it having been such a significant CFR club effort with so many people involved. It feels so much more meaningful than if I'd attempted alone, so thank-you all for your involvement and I'm very much looking forward to helping out with future CFR attempts!

Mick

It was hard work pushing for that long but I'm very proud to stand next to Paul and Mario and say we did it as a team. From a physically point I put the Winter BG difficult right up there with my bottled oxygen free summit day (approx. 16 hours) of Cho Oyu 8201m in 2013 but from a mental point I'd say it's the hardest thing I've done to date. I really had to dig deep to push myself through those last hours. I hope this experience will carry me through my next challenge as I plan to summit Everest later this year, also with the use of supplementary oxygen.

Winter BG: Thanks

The Winter Round would not have been successful had it not been for the selfless and wonderful support of the following:

Colin Rhodes for driving us to the start, providing Leg 1 and Leg 3 road support, and running with us on Leg 4; for his wonderful sense of humour on Leg 4; for his organisation and efforts at each road support; for cleaning our kit at the end. To Sarah Rhodes and children for their support at Wasdale, Honister and at the end; for their photos and positivity. I'm sure they had the loudest whoops and claps!

Les Barker for his moral support in the run up to the day; for his PR skills; for his cashew nuts; for his infectious enthusiasm; for Being Les.

John Parkin from Bingley AC for helping us on Leg1; for carrying a water bottle or two; for the chat and banter.

Scott White for driving up from Cambridge and expertly guiding us round Leg 3.

Phil Archer and Rob Stein for being solid on Leg 3; to Madeleine Jones for giving Phil and Rob lifts to Thirlmere.

To Jim Francis for **those** sandwiches on Esk Hause.

Owen Mills for his mammoth efforts at hauling our gear to Dunmail and setting up camp to provide us with a brew and food.

Bill Williamson for his expertise on Leg 4. He is the main man to have on this leg. To Graham Ansell for pacing us round Leg 4. To Jeff-not-Jeff-but-Steve for helping out with the Leg 4 logistics; for meeting us on Gable and for the jelly babies. To Jean Williamson and Jenny Stein for their road support in ferrying runners around.

Maria, Reuben and Oliver Allen for their road support at Honister and their organisation and efforts – that soup was good; for seeing us off at the start and for being there at the end. Mike Harrison for knowing those lines off Robinson; to Ange Jackson for the recees and the leg 5 road support. To Sandra Mason for turning out and running Leg 5 with us; for her banter and chat. To Paul Mason for the road support and the loan of his gloves. To Jennie Chatterley for providing Leg 5 support and helping sort our rucksacks out. To Tom Chatterley for providing road support and for his photos. To Dot Patton for being there on the road section and guiding us along. To Mike Patton for road support.

We are all extremely grateful for everyone's efforts and enthusiasm. We apologise profusely if we have missed anyone off this list. It quite literally would not have happened without you all!

Paul, Mick and Mario