A Mid-Winter Bob Graham Round in aid of Cumbria Flood Recovery Appeal

Background

On January 8th & 9th me, Mario Yeomans and Mick Allen set off together on a Mid-Winter Bob Graham Round. Our intention was to start and finish together helping each other through the highs and lows. We were supported by our club-mates from Cumberland Fell Runners who provided invaluable support both on the road and from Leg 3 onwards. Following the December floods, we used the round to raise money for Cumbria Flood Recovery Appeal. We managed to raise £2, 000.

What follows is an account of how I experienced the round.

Leg 1

It's 11pm. We're off. Nice and steady. Off up Spooney Green Lane, onto Skiddaw and hitting the snow line and mist at 600m. It's misty but calm. We feel warm in our layers of clothing. Things are good, we're level-headed and in control. The night lights of Keswick remind us of the absurdity of this venture but we know we need to forget the normal rhythm of life in towns below. For the next 24 hours we are on **our** schedule: eat every half an hour, stay together, stay focused, keep it steady, keep it calm, 42 tops, one at a time, don't look beyond. Skiddaw, Great Calva and Blencathra all come easily – no dramas, no mishaps. We descend an icy Hall's Fell. It's fun and adventurous. We reach Threlkeld and meet Colin Rhodes: a change of socks, a mug of warm tea and re-supply our packs. We leave ten minutes later. It's all part of the plan – rehearsed in our minds, written down on paper and recceed many times. We leave John Parkin from Bingley AC who has been a great companion to have on the leg. We leave Colin with a mess to clear up.

Leg 1 statistics: 3hrs 52 Rest: 10 minutes

Leg 2

Off up Clough Head, it's increasingly harder in the snow but nothing too considerable. The pace is good, the banter is fun. The mist is still thick but the wind is calm and we are warm in our layers. Clough Head comes after 53 minutes then off to Gt Dodd, Watson's, Staybarrow, Raise. It's all familiar: adjust the compass, count some paces, check the watch – we lose a few minutes here, gain a few minutes there; half an hour passes, we eat, another half hour passes, we eat. We're on schedule. We're moving well together, we're focused and in control. These two legs are just the warm up, 'we're not even out of the dressing room yet' we tell each other. The few inches of snow aid rather than hinder our progress. The normal rocky paths of Raise and the scree descents of Dollywaggon and Fairfield are nice and soft. It's winter conditions but it's been easier than a summer storm. 'We'd better tell them it was awful up there' we joke amongst ourselves, 'Baltic, waist deep snow' we laugh.' It's been a fun leg. Half an hour passes, eat, half an hour, eat – it's mechanical, we're prepared, focused. 'It's just the warm up' we tell each other. We're in control; we're moving well together. It's been rehearsed many times – in our minds, on paper, on land.

We're greeted at Dunmail by a setup which epitomises the spirit of the round: Owen Mills has hiked up from Thirlmere to set up a Dunmail Camp – a couple of tents, brews, fresh water and our Leg 3 supplies. Scott White has driven up from Cambridge to navigate us round Leg 3. Phil Archer and Rob Stein have been dropped off by Phil's girlfriend, Madeleine, at Swirls. Rob and Phil ran the few miles to Dunmail. It's a swift, rehearsed changeover. Ten minutes later and we're off.

Leg 2 statistics: 4hrs 35 Rest: 10 minutes

Leg 3

Dawn starts to break. It's a murky dawn, blending into the brown, dead bracken; the ground is murky, the dawn is brown. The ground is saturated by weeks of rain. It's murky. It's brown. It's winter. Mick shows off the virtues of his vegan diet by a strong uphill effort on Steel Fell. Mario's explosive leg power cause him no problems. I'm in control and focused. Legs a bit tired but nothing to worry about. Scott is ahead focused on navigation. Rob and Phil chat when they sense it is appropriate to; two emotionally intelligent runners to have at this stage. We reach Rosset Pike with the same rehearsed mechanisms – half an hour, eat, drink, mix the carbs with the sugars, eat, drink, move, check our watches, keep it efficient. And then! After about eleven and a half hours since setting out we hit the wind and the sleet. It's cold, very cold. The wind begins to eat into us. We all pause to put on more clothing. We get cold. The Bowfell ramp is covered in snow; this makes for hard going as we kick steps into the snow but it does help to get us warm again. But the snow depth is increasing, the wind is increasing, the degree of challenge is increasing. We

reach Bowfell 41 minutes after Rossett – a few minutes here, a few minutes there, nothing to worry about. We're 5 minutes down on our 23hrs 20 schedule. No concern but the weather is worsening and the terrain harder. We need to muster our collective strength. Jim Francis meets us on Esk Pike with a ham, cheese and pickle sandwich. Me and Mario fall at his feet in a state of adulation; those sandwiches were so good, so so good. They are also the last substantial thing I am to eat on the round. It's hard going to Scafell Pike. The terrain, the mist and the deep snow reduce our movement to walking and staggers. Despite this we continue to roughly maintain the schedule pace losing only 2 minutes between Bowfell and Scafell Pike. We're now 7 minutes down overall. Knowing we have Foxes Tarn to negotiate and the inevitable loss of time we start to become a little concerned but nothing we can't try to fight down. We're starting to feel weary but we're ok. We're moving well, communicating effectively and looking out for one another. Mick's knee is starting to cause him problems – he's slow on the descent off Scafell. 'He's a tough cookie' I think. He'll be fine. I'm not worried. I begin to worry about myself. We reach Wasdale 15 minutes down on the overall schedule. I feel battle-weary and stunned by the harsh conditions encountered on Leg 3. Everyone around me looks the same – that was hard-going! The slight nauseous feeling I have had since the start begins to consume me.
Colin Rhodes is there to greet us. He is joined by the Leg 4 pacers. There's a hustle and bustle as we sort and resupply our packs. We're all engaged in our own organisation. I manage a matchbox size of potato and a warm cup of tea. It's not enough but I feel sick. The ten minutes is up – we need to move: it's mechanical, the clock, our movements, keep focused, one top, then the next, then the next.

Bill Williamson leads us out of Wasdale with Graham Ansell and Colin Rhodes in support.

Leg 3 statistics: 6hrs 20 Rest: 10 mins

Leg 4
Yewbarrow, Yewbarrow, Yewbarrow. Youbarrow, youbarrow, youwill, youwill, youwillgetupyewbarrow, youwill. Yewbarrow.

And we do. It's a struggle but we do. We do so in 48 minutes – a few minutes here a few minutes there; just keep the ebb and the flow going. By the time we get to Steeple we are 7 minutes up on the Leg 4 schedule and just 5 minutes down on the overall time. It's good. Colin Rhodes' irrelevant chatter is amusing and warming. We're a good team. All in good spirits. Looking after ourselves, looking out for one another. Bill Williamson takes us up and over Pillar and on a steady meander to Black Sail Pass. His route finding and knowledge inspires confidence. Mick's knee is really giving him grief on the descents but he's tough. Mick is an Ultra-runner – he knocks these long runs out all the time. Lakeland 100 with a broken toe isn't a problem to Mick. This isn't a problem to Mick. He doesn't let it bother him. Colin is doing a sterling job of herding us up. Into the darkness again and back into the shadows and beams. Mario is steady behind me; steady steps and steady breath. We have run together a lot this last year me and Mario. He's an explosive short distance runner. He hasn't done much long stuff before but he's mentally disciplined. He's fine. I know he's fine because Mario is always fine. Mick's fine – we're doing well. And then! Kirk Fell! The wind is whipping around us, the rain, sleet and snow has started again. I know there's only one proper way to get up Kirk Fell – Bill's way – Bill's gully, that gully, the red gully, Joss's gully. Mario takes the lead. It's hard work – we're grunting and working hard. It's really hard work. But it's fun, it's an adventure. It's what we signed up for. Gable happens in a similar fashion. It's hard work but it's an adventure. It's windy, I'm soaked to the skin. We're grunting and working hard; keep moving, keep warm. 'Half an hour, eat', someone feebly says. We are trying to hang onto our mechanical process but it's hard with our increasing tiredness and the battering wind. We move together, slowly together up Great, Great Gable. It's hard work and goes on and on and on. The rocks are covered in ice and snow; concentrate, focus, stay steady, keep it steady. Don't fall, Don't twist an ankle. Do Not get injured. Do Not slow down, Do Not lose heat. We're looking after ourselves whilst trying to look out for one another. I try not to become introspective. But it's hard. The driving hail is forcing me to look down and to the side. Where are Mick and Mario? A quick glance round – they're with me, they're tough. They're fine. At Great Gable we're ten minutes down on our 23hr20 schedule. It's not ideal but it's ok. 'Let's just get down safely', we murmur to each other. And on we go: Green Gable, Brandreth, Grey Knotts – familiar names, familiar lines. Rehearsed in our heads, on paper and on land many times. On we go with the wind battering us and the rain drowning our clothing. I am really struggling now. But not far to go. It's easy terrain. We arrive at Honister having taken 5hrs 04 minutes on Leg 4 (against our 5hrs 02 minutes schedule). We're 14 minutes down on the overall schedule; Foxes tarn continues to haunt us. I'm not

worried by this deficit. Let's keep the break short and swift. Let's knock the 15 minutes scheduled stop back to 5 minutes; let's knock and hammer and smash this; let's give it everything we've got. No time for weak moments, no time for doubts. Let's smash this leg to bits. But I'm cold, wet and done in!
The support at Honister is fabulous. Spiderman, Les Barker, Sandra Mason, Jennie Chatterley – all familiar faces. All good runners to have with us. Sarah Rhodes, Maria Allen, Mike Beechey and Paul Mason all ferry round us helping us with our individual needs.

Leg 4 statistics: 5hrs 04 minutes Rest: 7 mins

Leg 5
Up Dale Head. Mick and Mario are off. They are buoyed by warm food and drink. Mick is telling us all about his Buckwheat Pancake recipes, Mario is laughing and chatting. I'm done in. I'm sick, hungry and soaked to the skin; bent double like old beggars under sacks. 'Get a grip Johnson' I begin to quarrel with myself. 'This is not war, don't even begin to compare this self-induced walk to wartime; don't even start that self-piteous, whinging, hard done-to attitude – get a bloody grip.' I'm bent double like an old beggar under a sack. I want a warm bath, I want a warm fire. 'Get a bloody grip. This was your choice, your idea, you chose it – now get a bloody grip.' Dale Head in 35 minutes. Right- this is it. I'm getting a grip. This is good. Great company. Spiderman is keeping a calm a steady grip on the pace and my mood. But the wind, it's eating me, I'm I so, so cold; soaked to the skin. Keep moving – half an hour, eat, sod that, eat, eat eat, sod, sod that. I can't eat. I haven't been able to eat for hours. I want a bath, I want warmth. Get a bloody grip. But I'm in control. I am getting a grip. I'm off down towards and over Hindscarth. I take the lead. This is fine. I grind to a grinding pace up Robinson. Mick, Mario and the rest float past me. Touch the top 21hrs and 46 minutes after setting off. Bizarrely, we are only 5 minutes down on our overall schedule and we are still together. Don't get carried away. Descend safely, focus, focus, focus. Mick's knee is beyond painful for him but still be carries on: buckwheat and pancakes, ultras and broken toes. Mick is fine. Mario is singing Timshel by Mumford and Sons; we have a choice. Mario is fine. We have become a little disparate. Our team of CFR supporters is helping us individually, but we are still together. Down, down, down we go for one last time. Then homeward bound, tarmac bound, bound to tarmac for these last few miles. Spirits are high. It's wet and cold; we're down but not out. Just concentrate and keep putting one foot in front of the other. Familiar landmarks, familiar faces, familiar timings. It's slow and painful but it feels good. We signed up to this. We chose it. We wanted this. Portinscale comes and goes, then the high street, the obligatory sprint, the green door. The Green Door. That Green Door. Our Wembley Stadium. Our Lords. Our Arc de Triomphe. We have done it. We have damn well done it! All together, all one. 23hrs 37 mins later we touch That Green Door!

"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)

I would like to thank all those who supported us on the round. I would also like to thank those who helped us raise £1500 for the Cumbria Flood Recovery Appeal.

Paul Johnson