CFR Winter Solstice Abraham's Teashop Round

by Daryl Tacon

Up until the 2-3 days before the tea round I wasn't doing it. We were staring down the barrel of Christmas, it was the last week of the school term and things had been mental as per usual. Strangely reminiscent of the previous year when we'd attempted the No Cure Always Hope Ultra in the Winter in the dark. Whose crazy idea was that I hear you say? I don't think I need to tell you but polite answers on a postcard.

So I found myself on the Friday night packing my running pack and trying to think of things that I definitely shouldn't forget, spare headtorch battery and spare gloves being foremost in my mind. Not for the first time that evening I was thinking whose bloody stupid idea was this (again).

But fortunately I didn't have too long to think about or did I? For on this particular evening as I sat in my kitchen waiting for the imminent arrival of one Les Barker the minutes began to tick by ominously. As I sat there pondering life the universe and everything I thought he's bloody forgotten me!!!!

Which he had, fortunately after a jogged memory and a few expletives he remembered and returned to fetch me and we were off to the Bridge in Buttermere to meet Sam Holding. The aim of this was to leave Les's horsebox there at the halfway point as a safe haven so if people needed to bail out they could and so we could all regroup before the second phase.

Then it was off to Keswick to Abraham's for the start. I wasn't entirely sure exactly who was taking part in this latest expedition but was glad to see Mick Allen, Paul Jennings, and Darren Parker were in attendance. Pete Walmsley, Mike Harrison, Paul Johnson, Les Barker, Sam Holding and myself made up a crack (or crack pot) team.

So after gooning for obligatory press shots watches were fired up and away we went trotting down Keswick high street past the Moot hall (A different night time start for a different run 😉). All were in good spirits, Les was filming and the weather was currently good. As we were going Anti-clockwise the first summit would be Barrow so we followed the BG route in reverse out of Keswick over the FB through Portinscale en route to Braithwaite clipping along at a nice pace.



As we began the ascent of Barrow I was struck by how different the weather was from the previous year. A moonlit night calm a marked difference from this time 12 months ago for the No Cure. After summiting Barrow I was a bit unfamiliar with the route to Causey so dropped off and let the big guns takeover.

We're fortunate in the fact we have several exceptional navigators in the group and if in doubt follow Harrison. Besides he's my paramo twin so he must be right. The only slight issue about Causey on the tea round is that you have to do an out back to bag Rowling end on the way up. So we trotted out to the summit of Rowling end and had a quick pit stop. It was a little bit likes where's Wally for a moment whilst Les did a magical mystery tour and then we were all back together again for the climb up Causey.

It's a climb I'm now pretty familiar with but challenging in the dark. From here it's fairly nice and runnable and the weather was still with us over Scar crags, and on up the zigzags onto Sail, and Crag Hill. We then descended towards Coledale and headed up Grisedale Pike. It was particularly windy by this point and we didn't hang around long on the summit.

We descended to Hobcarton and then meandered round the familiar route to Whiteless. We were going well spirits were high and there was a fantastic sense of camaraderie. There was no talk of faster runners going ahead. Pace was unimportant. This was all about us all getting round together and supporting each other. I was chuffed that my ankle
was holding up as I'd recently been injured and my ability to complete this was something I'd thought long and hard about.



We quickly made our way down Whiteless to the approximate halfway point all looking forward to the comforts of the horse box. Well what do they say 'any horsebox in a storm'. Oh no I'm forgetting myself no one says that ha ha. Having said that the horse box was a welcome respite. We had some good craic and refuelled for what would be one of the hardest climbs on the round. Food was plentiful, shared Brandy was drunk and after not too long we were ready to go again.

Les was struggling a wee bit at this stage. And I think if it was me I probably would have bailed at this point. But Les's mental toughness is second to none. So after some fodder and a Les power nap he was ready to go again his resolve renewed. So once more we headed out into the night.

Nine head torches blazing, I kept thinking of "Nine mortal men doomed to die from The Lord of the Rings". But I kept that one to myself. We headed through the Fish towards the Red Pike climb. The weather had turned by this point and it was windy and raining. Standard CFR winter conditions for a venture such as this one. After all it does often seem if there's a challenge to be had someone, again I mention no names, will think of a crazier, more awkward way to do it. 'Tis the CFR way (Laughs).

Fortunately or unfortunately it had been recently concluded by the good folk at Fishers that you couldn't see Red Pike from the tea shop so we didn't have to go up there. But we did have to climb High Stile which is a bugger. We climbed as far as Bleaberry tarn and then again it was a case of follow that man Harrison, he didn't let me down again choosing an optimal line onto High Stile. We coalesced again as we approached the summit Les guiding us to the right spot as it was blowing a gale and raining intermittently at this point and we were a little undecided.

I think I made some terrible Les Dawson joke at this point something about persistent wind and a kite. But it made sense at the time or so I thought. And the only thing worse than the ascent of High Stile is the descent of High Stile.

Ultimately I'd say High Stile is the trickiest part of the round, however we were all still together and looking out for each other a proper CFR team effort. But the sense of relief coming off High Stile was palpable. It was a fairly technical descent and fairly slow going as we headed down towards the far end of Buttermere.

It was at this point for whatever reason Paul's headtorch began to fail and for some unknown reason his spare battery didn't work either. Luckily a couple of weeks before when we'd recce'd this section a similar thing had happened to me and I'd bought a spare. I was just happy to be able to help Paul as we have the same headtorch and mine was still going strong. This was the ultimate bench test.



After what seemed like an age we started spotting recognisable landmarks indicating we were nearing Warnscale beck and the valley bottom. As we hit the road we came together and started on the approach to Hassness along the road. I was blissfully unaware of what was to come. After a brief pit stop we started to climb and boy was this a climb?

Everyone was beginning to feel it at this point. Pete Walmsley, Sam and Mike leading. Les, PJ and Mick bringing up the rear. The climb up Hassness beck is brutal I'll make no bones about it and in the early hours of the morning on tired legs after several hours in the dark and poor weather well you can probably guess how it feels. We reached a stile over a wall and I had a measure of how hard this was going to be when Sam said "Oh god are we only here".

PJ and Mick were feeling broken at this point. But it's at times like these where the characters of the group really shone through. We'd discussed earlier that the making and/or breaking of something like this was all to do with the makeup of the group. One cross word or fall out could have derailed the whole thing. But thankfully that was never going to happen. The weather had been improving steadily from High Stile and it eventually dried out as we approached the summit of Robinson. It seemed to finally blow itself out.



Again another milestone was reached the penultimate climb had been put to bed and arguably the last tough one. Only Catbells to go. As we descended off Robinson PJ[1] decided he needed a little power nap. Could have only been 5 mins but it seemed to really do the trick for him. As we headed on towards High Snab and Little Town it began to get light. After 10.5hrs in the dark with only the window of a headtorch this was a massive lift for us all. Conversation struck up again and we all debated how extended periods of either dark or light could send you crazy.

We approached and passed the familiar walls of Newlands church and the mood of the group was further elevated as we headed into the familiar territory of the Newlands valley in the light. We could see the slopes of Barrow where we'd been only a few short hours earlier and I think there was also a realisation we were going to get this done. I personally felt quite good and wakeful which was a massive relief as the furthest I'd run recently was about 5 miles.



As we headed up Catbells I was chatting to Darren Parker and we were discussing Winter Bob Graham rounds and I was reaching a conclusion that maybe I didn't really want to do one of those after all. Les was flagging a bit at this stage but like a dog with a bone he just would just not give up. As we approached the summit the mists finally cleared revealing beautiful views of Derwent water and our final destination Keswick which kind of made it all worth it. It's one of the many reasons we do these crazy things.

[1] Ed – Not me - the other PJ!

The group were in good shape with Darren taking the high path to the summit of Catbells and Mike and myself and others contouring to meet him. We all gathered at the viewpoint for a congratulatory
group hug and then headed down Skelgill bank for a job almost done. We joined the road at Hawse end and cut through the wood to Nichol end and then hopped back onto the road to Portinscale. We were then steady away on BGR final approach trajectory over the foot bridge en route to Keswick.



As we hit the high street in Keswick our long dark tea time of the soul had almost ended. Mick and myself picked up the pace a bit in an effort to reach the door to Fishers first and it all felt a little odd to be running past the door to the Moot hall after a long run such as this. But in the end nine of us started and nine of us finished .... together which seemed and stills seems massively important. And afterwards there was much rejoicing 😃

PS the breakfast in Little Chamonix was awesome well done Irlams.