**The power of friends.**

Nine months ago I was profiled in the Cumberland Fell Runners newsletter (really, they'll take anyone!), and answered the question 'Any ambitions?'. Second on a list of 3 was the Joss Naylor Lakeland Challenge which I had down as 'doubtful' in the 55 year bracket, but 'maybe' once I became 60. So I'd had the Challenge in mind for a few years, realising that a 12 hour crossing at 50 was well beyond me, and wondering how long I should wait. Also mentioned in that CFR profile was my first foray into the Bob Graham, pacing Nicky Lavery-Hoffe on her winter round in 1999. Chatting away to Barry Johnson on that day it didn't occur to me I could manage a BG but as Barry pointed out, how would you know? I didn't, I tried, I did a BG. So it seems very fitting that my dithering about the Challenge was kicked into action when I was pacing Mick Hoffe with Nicky in October 2018 on his successful completion. After all Mick was 66, and he did it in less than 14 hours, and the pace on that last leg was so slow! If Mick could do it so could I! Funny how I ignored all the logic - when Mick races he's a good 20% quicker than me; that last leg is at about 23 hour BG pace, so the preceding 3 legs must have been considerably quicker; compare my race times to others in my age class and I'd be well over my 15 hour limit.

Of course a BG or Joss is a different beast to a race, and you really don't know until you try. I'd decided early on that the key for me would be to do lots of ascent, so off the back of pacing Mick, and a summer holiday in the Pyrenees I focused on doing 3000m+ of ascent per week, and more or less managed that from August through to February. Cross country skiing in March put a stop to that but at least had me on my feet for several hours each day for a long week. And then suddenly the date started looming up really fast. A few recces gave me confidence I could make the times, and some shuffling of the schedule gave me a five minute lead instead of a deficit on the first leg. A fantastic team of pacers came on board, with some top class last minute additions.

The day dawned a perfect blue sky day! Les and Steve Birkinshaw took me from Pooley Bridge at 5am to Kirkstone. I was very relieved to find my tinkering with the schedule put me very slightly ahead of time. Food went down OK, plenty of drinking - Les and Steve did a great job of making sure I was well looked after. Into Kirkstone, watching the Fred Whitton cyclists fly by, and 5 minutes for some rice pudding and tea. It was great to be greeted by Rainer Burchett (completer no.56 in 2005; and 31 London Marathons!), and then Mick Hoffe and Dave Appleyard of Helm Hill took me on the direct way up Red Screes - a bit of a shock after the easy slopes of leg 1, but nice to then be greeted by another friend Paul Hughes at the top. Everything kept going to plan, food was going in slowly, and I kept wondering how long it could last! Lots of chatter helped (don't often catch up with Mick) and we came into Dunmail bang on time.




Dunmail Raise

From Dunmail I knew I might not keep time to Rossett Pike and despite John Slater and Paul Jennings getting me on the best line, and doing a great job of trying to feed me (not going down so well now!) a few minutes went astray. I asked John or Paul how time was going, the answer being 'well, if you could just up the pace...'. However I was hopeful that I would get some time back, so the reply was 'let's see how I'm doing at Bowfell'. And so it proved, a couple of minutes back on each top and down to Sty Head bang on time again.



Sty Head

At Sty Head, despite 4h40 still to go I really thought I might make it. Seeing Steve Breeze, Mario Yeomans, Kate Charles and Barry Johnson all there was a boost. 5 minutes for tea and rice pudding and off we go again. Up Gable seemed a long time, down went really well.



Joss on Kirk Fell

We bumped into Joss and party on the way up Kirk Fell - brilliant to see him on the hill. The views were amazing, still blue sky and cool breeze. Kate offered me a drink seemingly every minute so there was going to be no excuse for grinding to a halt through not drinking. Food was a different matter and Hula Hoops were about the only thing I ate on this last leg. Seatallen felt so steep and went on for ages, and eventually I ground to a halt on the way up Middlefell and needed a gel to get me going again but by that time the pressure was off, and there was time for a pause at the last top. I couldn't quite believe I done it at Greendale Bridge, 14hrs 43mins, but sure enough Joss was there. 'Well done lad', and a handshake to end a brilliant day.



Leaving Pillar



Off Seatallan



Greendale Bridge

Friends eh. They put you up to it, then they get you through it better than you ever thought possible. You really don't know until you try.

I was also delighted to raise in excess of £900 for the John Muir Trust.

Thanks so much everyone!

Graham Watson, M55. Joss Naylor Lakeland Challenge 12 May 2019. 14 hours 43 minutes.