Joss Naylor Lakeland Challenge
John Fletcher

Having lived in Wasdale for a few years and being fortunate to often bump into Joss when running on the fells, as I turned 50 years, he kept suggesting that I should attempt his “crossing”. Knowing about the 12hour schedule, some of those who had completed it, and my abilities (or lack thereof) I kept muttering poor excuses to him, attempting to stall him for just 5 years!

I eventually found the perfect excuse as osteoarthritis took over my right knee resulting in even less of an ability to run and then a high tibial osteotomy to realign my knee which left me with a metal plate and half a dozen screws in my leg. Thankfully as the months of rehab went by, I was back on the fell and plodding once again, with 55 years of age (and an additional 3 hours for the crossing) coming into view!

I hatched the plan that this is how I would spend my 55th birthday in April and started training. Coronavirus and its lockdown put a stop to that, albeit I was able to keep training and run from home onto the lower Wasdale fells during this time. My training concentrated on steady climbing - as the fell running legend himself said “get the climb in yer legs lad, and everything else will tek care of itself”.

With that sound advice come 15th August I had managed 350,000ft of ascent over about 1000 miles since January. I had looked at the route a fair bit and particularly Leg 4 I like to view as my “back yard”

Cumberland Fell Runners and friends had been really generous with offers of pacing and support - so much so that I had a reserve list to try and comply with Covid guidelines once the Challenge was reinstated. My thanks go to all.

I spent a pretty much sleepless night in a hotel outside Pooley Bridge and managed a 1.5 mile warm up from there walking in to the village with all my kit, supplies and overnight gear. First tactical error.....

The weather forecast was the stuff of dreams but likely to be hot later in the day. No worries, I thought.

At 5am it was cool and still as I set off in the hugely capable and experienced company of Tim Ripper and Jimmy Walsh. A clear dawn was breaking and all was well. I felt rested, fuelled and quite emotional. On the road section before the campsite I turned to them and said, “I can’t believe I’m actually doing this!” whilst grinning from ear to ear. Then it was up onto the Ullswater fells to be greeted by a stunning cloud inversion.



My schedule gave a little more time than the standard schedule on Leg 1 and aimed to make up this time on the later legs. The plan was for 14.5 hours.

As each top came and went it felt good to be shaving some time off. Worried about going too fast too soon, the advice I got was as long as I felt I was running within myself, try and get some time in the bank given the warming weather. How true.....

I had promised myself to try and run “in the moment” as

the experts say, and not look too far ahead. At this stage this proved amazingly simple given the conditions we were blessed with.

We arrived at Kirkstone 30 minutes up on schedule - so “in the moment” we had been that Leg 2 support had not been informed we were up on time which resulted in them scrambling for kit and supplies, which was quite a giggle. David Powell Thompson provided road support throughout and fellow CFR members Paul Jennings and Daryl Tacon saw me through Leg 2. The weather was starting to warm up as we climbed Red Screes and despite me saying I wanted to stay on schedule pace I naively pressed on and the wise heads with me tried to calm me down! The cloud inversion remained and we joked about those below who would probably be cursing the morning weather as another dreary Lakeland day!



A few minutes were shaved off again and as we descended through the bracken of Seat Sandal things were definitely starting to feel furnace like (I had a flash back to the Wasdale race in 2013 when many of the field retired early at Greendale due to the heat).

At Dunmail I took a seat and felt a bit queasy. David had bought a bag of ice to put in my replenished drinks. I declined, thinking it would mean I’d have less to drink and settled for putting ice under my cap - not thinking straight here!! Rice pudding and peaches helped and off on Leg 3 up the lovely Steel Fell with Mike Harrison and Sam Holding from CFR. It was mid-day and baking hot. Even the bogs of Brownrigg Moss felt warm. It was a relief to reach High Raise summit and I continued to try and stay “in the moment” but thoughts turned to Bowfell as I felt after here, I was heading home. I made the most of the spring at the bottom of the ascent path near Hanging

Knotts with a good head dunk! At its summit I got a burst of adrenaline - nothing to do with heading home but the idiots who were on top blasting music out.

The heat continued to turn itself up with Esk Pike simply radiating. Mike and Sam were keeping

me on schedule to the minute but cramp was starting. Salt tablets and more electrolyte kept it at bay for a while but Great End Band did its best to work against those positive effects.

Arriving at Sty Head I got the ultimate lift. Joss had made it up there and I sat down for a word only to let out screams and expletives as both my calves locked up with cramp! I was struggling to eat now but was told I must open the sandwiches from Tracy my wife. I duly did to see another encouraging note within from her. That, with Joss telling me to “just get my head down” spurred me up Gable, ably paced by Bill Williamson and force fed (literally) jelly babies by Peter Ferris. Off there and up Kirk Fell, where I had my first doubts about finishing as both legs locked totally with cramp. Peter deployed his massaging skills there and then and I’m not sure which hurt more! He got me moving again. It felt as though the salt tablets were not working as well now so it was a case of relaxing as much as possible and moving smoothly - how easy it is to type that now! , we started to make a few minutes up on the Leg schedule as we picked up further support en route in the form of Sue Naylor, Paul Hayes, Debs and Chris Cripps and Klem Zafred.

Bill took us a slightly gentler line off Haycock that helped which really only left the Lakeland fell which has no father - Seatallen! That done, David Powell Thompson and Mark Kendall made it onto Middle Fell

also. Almost job done. Photo time and possibly my slowest descent ever of my home fell, whilst almost causing a couple of pacer pile ups as I went into emergency braking mode with cramp.

Greendale Bridge was humbling, being met by Joss again and friends and family. I was soon followed in by Mike Robinson and his team which was great as we shared the beck. Mike showed his superior fitness by being able to get out of the water whereas I need two people to lift me out!

Total time taken 13 hours 21 minutes.