2024 Northern Traverse – 72h, 18th

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In my dreams I'm still out on those trails. Sometimes moving well, sometimes lost, sometimes elated, sometimes cold. Always moving on. A week since starting the 2024 Northern Traverse (or Wainwright's Coast to Coast in old money) I think it's time to pull these memories together and let them out. To clarify what happened and recall just how fantastic those 188 miles were. Or at least how fantastic most of them were and how I survived the rest and lived to tell the tale.

The start at St Bees lay empty with runners sheltering in toilets and cars until they calculated they must move if they were going to have enough time in order to nip to the Sea to wet their foot and get a pebble to take to Robin Hood's Bay. Storm Kathleen was bending the branded flags and it was unclear if she would push us across the country or into the sea. There was anxiety around the weather but not the normal competitive frenzy as for most people this was a personal challenge to be savoured and not to be judged on times and places. One or two elite runners powered up the first hill poles digging in to the claggy cliffs but the rest eased into the day with focussed positive energy.

The race breaks down into approximately 60 miles across the Lakes to Shap, followed by a linking section to Kirkby Stephen, then 30 miles across the Dales to Richmond, followed by another linking section to Ingleby Arncliffe, then finally about 50 miles across the Moors to Robin Hood's Bay. Each section has very different characteristics and challenges and to see all of them in one long adventure felt like a real privilege. At so many points along the route I just kept reminding myself how lucky I was to be able to take this journey and that this was probably a once in a lifetime opportunity. After all who knew when I'd be here again?

Well actually for the first third of the race the answer was pretty soon. The Lakes is my home turf and I had recced all of this section. The weather was dry if very windy and I had supporters along the route. Gemma popped out on a farm track near Cleator, Pete and Gill near Ennerdale, Laura working in the Support tent at Stonethwaite and then Pete and Gill near Grasmere too. They gave me such a lift and I cruised almost on autopilot. The wind blew water off the Lakes into our faces along Ennerdale and at the same time took moisture off our lips gradually cracking the skin. Climbing over to Patterdale from Grasmere the same wind shoved us around randomly threatening to push us over as the dark fell. At times the wind gave and at times it took away but as head torches went on we had made it over 3 of the 5 biggest climbs of the race and could look forward with confidence to leaving the Lakes.

The route was diverted via Ullswater instead of over Kidsty Pike due severe wind, adding extra miles on but reducing the risk for most runners. Apparently not for me as I sliced my knee on the world's smallest sharp rock hidden in the mud when I'd fallen and started to bleed heavily. It did not feel like anything significant but glances down in the night created a different impression; it was if someone had painted my entire right leg in red paint before cleaning the brush on my sock. I ran on adrenaline for miles before cleaning most of it off in a river. It still bled but as midnight rains came it washed away for good and psychologically at least I felt much better.

Having once driven a Smart Car on the Motorway near Shap during a storm and felt like it was close to taking off in the wind, the intense chill in the rain was no surprise. Stumbling into the support point everyone was sat looking cold or vomiting or both. There was some Blitz spirit here with people helping each other and using gallows humour to get the right mentality for the night. I stayed for over half an hour and put on every item of clothing on I possessed and was still one of the first to leave. With the Lakes done and only around 19 miles to Kirkby Stephen to do over night things were surely looking up?

I just remembered thinking how will I get warm again? I had on shorts, over trousers, waterproof trousers and at least 4 upper layers plus 3 hoods and new gloves. These were all getting wet and even with support bag my core kit could be wet for the next couple of days. I should also point out I almost never feel the cold. I have almost been disqualified from races for arguing when told to put trousers on. This was an issue I'd not

contemplated before. Snaking close to the M6 with people whizzing by in their warm metallic boxes made comfort feel frustratingly close. Navigation here required constant concentration and only when the light came did the demons abate. I walked for most of this leg and joined with Edwina and Daniel for a time but otherwise no-one overtook us. It was clear that any progress was good news in these conditions.

The warmth of the welcome in Kirkby Stephen School combined with actual warmth in the building changed things for the better. Chips tipped it into being close to heavenly. So much so that I rejected the planned sleep and stepped out towards Nine Standards Rigg within an hour. I wished Ian Oldham well on the way out with him about to start his own race across the Dales. I spoke to Rich and Dad and they told me things were going well so I decided to believe them. On the way up the next climb I was moving in shorts and t-shirt and listening to my race playlist with the sun suddenly making things much more appealing. I even took a picture on top thinking I'd broken to the back of the climbing for the race and was well on the way to completing it. Only when my watch showed 99 miles to go were my hopes dashed a little.

Mud sucked my shoes and plucked my poles. It slowed my steps and skewed my direction. It was endless and relentless and stopped me running and frustrated my walking. Brown rivers of varying depths clawed at paths insistently and forced wading or paddling or a diversion. A leg that might have taken 8 hours now took 13 and a half. Which meant more time looking at vivid green valleys and Mordor-esque Mines. More time thinking and talking. More time just being. Once you accept this is the way it is, you enjoy it and move on. Occasionally the cold would bite again but equally a smell or a sound or a sight would raise the spirits and make you realise how lucky you were to be in this place at this time.

Midnight in Richmond brought a cold tent and a fitful sleep. 2 hours of twitching in a sleeping bag was still ecstasy after 39 ½ hours of running and being given a till receipt printed with good luck messages from the people at home following the race helped calm the mind and renew my purpose. The Lakes and the Dales were in the bag and as Laura again came and wished me well I set off confidently into a more settled night.

I was still walking at this point and was impressed by others starting to run again. I swore I would teach myself how to do this. After endless road sections, farmer's fields and boggy paths I stopped for a Costa Coffee and a bag of pickled onion crisps in a Shell Garage on the A19 (the crossing of which is by far the most dangerous part of the whole route). A couple sat next to me on high stools doing the normal Monday morning thing and I sat there mud splatted, chaffed, wind dried and smelling of every type of soil the country has to offer. I have no idea what they were thinking but I felt like a rebel and loved it! It was time to enter the Moors and start running. I left a different man and believe Costa Coffee is secretly a powerful drug beyond comparison.

Over the next few sections up to Lordstones and then over the Glaisdale I felt great. My body ached occasionally but the sun was out and the terrain was interesting at first and then fast. I ran at one point on the old railway line (now the Cleveland Way) for 6 miles without stopping, which given I was 150 miles into a race, I would have thought was impossible. In fact for three sections I got faster. I arrived at 10.20pm (Monday) into an exceptionally friendly Glaisdale knowing I was one leg away from finishing. I spoke to Gemma and tried to down play things: 'still along way to go' (19 miles), 'might slow down a bit' (maybe 5-6 hours?) but at the same time 'there does look to be quite a bit of road which could be quick' and 'I feel strong the legs are back!'. I set off full of beans into what would be the most challenging (and nearly final) hours of my running life.

So what went wrong?

1) Mud. I just didn't expect the levels of thick mud along the rivers and near the coast. My running style is like a tank which means I can take it but it does make me slow.

2) Hills. The road hill from Grosmont was incredible on tired legs. Over 2 miles up to a height of over 300 metres starting with an incline of 33% with a sharp decrease in temperature and a significant increase in rainfall. I missed a cut-off path near the top and had to run to keep warm. A few other hills seemed unusual large.

3) The Ford. I arrived at the Ford in Littlebeck at around 1am (run time around 64 hours with 2 hours of sleep) and carefully checked the depth post. It looked about 5 inches. I confidently stepped forward to cross realising immediately the ford road actually went diagonally left. I therefore was in the river. The torrent was trying to pull me under the road and I could not get out. I tried to get my belly back on the bank but couldn't. I was losing the battle and just thought what I stupid way to die. I was really frustrated that this my way out. I scrambled under the water for something to stand on. I felt a brick under my right foot and stood on it but again felt myself coming away from the bank. At the last moment the brick was pulled away by the current giving the smallest moment of respite from the suck for me to flop out of the river. I stood up angry more than relieved and told myself off. I also shook out a significant amount of water. I power walked in frustration for the next mile, all my kit drenched including my phone and ate as much food as I could. I was alive but had I just ended my race?

4) Navigation. Unbelievably a mile down the road Danny (a Geordie I think but I was not sure about anything at this point...) had built a fire outside the Hermitage and put a vat of soup on. I know this was real as he has messaged me later but shortly afterwards I questioned whether this had really been an hallucination. He said was out to support people on the race and I will always be grateful for what he did. I managed to get some warmish clothes on from my dry bag, had some handfuls of chunky soup from a cup and cooked myself by the fire. I practically kissed him then headed out in the direction he pointed. I'm not sure if he was wrong or I wasn't concentrating properly but either way I immediately got lost in the woods. At this point the navigation on my watch packed in and I was using maps and phone maps. Race control spotted my meandering tracker and tried valiantly to help but GPS in a valley isn't great especially at a point where multiple paths and bridges come together so we both had different information and things took a while to untangle. Half an hour later having clocked a bonus mile I was off in the right direction and thankfully race control texted to say I was powering on correctly.

5) Headtorch. I was on the way to Hawsker! To be alive, warmish and heading in the right direction wherever Hawsker was, was just brilliant. By my estimates a quick 5 miles to the coast then 3 miles to Robin Hood's Bay and I'd be done. I'd had challenges but still no-one had passed me on this leg so I guessed everyone else was having their own issues. Then at 5am the head torch that had been asked far more of it than expected started to go (my 3 back ups had already been used). This was on arguably the most difficult part of the entire route; a muddy field leading up to an almost entirely submerged path near Low Moor which then travelled to the North East for more than a mile over unpredictable, sodden, grouse butts. I stumbled and swore by the light of my phone torch and begged the morning to dawn. I created new swear words and then made them ruder. I was travelling at less than a mile an hour and yet didn't have enough light to confidently go knee deep through each puddle and swamp. I tried to laugh I really did but it was hard. It was beyond ridiculous but right then that was the adventure I am always craving. This field would end. Eventually.

The field did end. As did the next path and the next road. The sun came up as I hit the coast and it was glorious. This was the first time I knew I would make it. I called home but could not get a signal. In my dreams I would skip along the hard baked ground towards the end supercharged on sea air and emotion. In reality I trudged, legs completely shot and toes completely blistered through more mud. Other runners passed me moving as I had planned to but I was just pleased to be there and I had nothing left to catch them with. I enjoyed those last miles tremendously and eventually fell into Robin Hoods Bay nearly 10 hours after leaving Glaisdale a changed man. I'd hoped for a faster time but looking later at the results realised most people had been much slower than the year before. This had been the full Coast to Coast experience and times after all quickly fade in the memory. I was glad to put my muddied shoe into the North Sea for a clean and then start the long climb back up and out of Robin Hood's Bay to the Support Point. I was full of something magical and chatted to everyone who would listen for around 2 hours before falling asleep soundly in a corner content and peaceful.