Sunny Spine by Simon Franklin



N.B. I took an old Nokia as my mandatory phone and therefore took no photos. All pictures have been generated by artificial intelligence. Words have been generated by very basic intelligence.

Misty Kinder – Sunday 9:30am – 5 miles

An hour and a half ago I was surrounded by 100 excited runners and the unmistakable tense atmosphere of a big race start. At least a year of build-up of training (on flatter terrain than I like), kit check panic and visualisation was all finally about to be tested, and yet the time leading up to it had crept forwards so slowly

But now I'm alone. The clag and rain deadens sound and I can't see more than 50m ahead or behind me as I jog along through puddles and over limestone. My 7kg pack feels light and all my worries are gone. It's too late to wonder whether I have the right compass, enough water, or the right combination of base layers. It's liberating. I sing to myself as I skip past the Kinder trig point and towards the Downfall. I feel euphoric, A big adventure lies ahead, and I can't wait.

Sick at Pondon – Monday 3am – 56 miles

If I'm awake for it, three o'clock in the morning is always a low point for me and this one is no different. I've treated the first day of the race like an ordinary ultra, running the flats and downhills and hiking the ups, eating and drinking a little less than I should and hardly resting. It felt OK and I had reached the first checkpoint in high spirits. After a short stop to eat, clean my feet and change clothes I had bowed to inevitable and teamed up with Alex to set off into the night. Alex and I did the last 120 miles of the Northern Traverse together in 2022 and had agreed to see where we were after the first day before deciding whether to do the same again. We'd worked together well then and it made sense to do the same again.



It had been drizzly and windy but warm as we had negotiated the bogs of Wuthering Heights country and I was starting to feel low. Descending down to Ponden Reservoir my stomach was now finally rebelling, as it always likes to do. Retching by the side of the path, I tell Alex to leave me, in a Captain Oates display of self-sacrifice, but he waits at a respectful distance until I've finished and we continue on in silence.

I'm not even 24 hours in and feeling terrible. I keep moving, knowing the sun will be up soon and hoping for a boost from that and from the pop-up checkpoint outside Cowling, but I know I'm silent, and in my head I'm thinking how bad I will feel if I stop so early.

At the CP, we're given a runner in a bad way to look after on the next section. Everything is a matter of perspective, and seeing someone looking so bad (he retires at the next road crossing) makes me feel better. As does the bacon sandwich, and by the time we reach Gargrave I'm feeling great.

Bob – Monday 6pm – 86 miles

Bob seemingly appears from nowhere as we pass a farm at the bottom of the climb up Fountains Fell. Bob is a black and white Jack Russell who skips along a constant 50 yards ahead of us, always finding the best lines up the hillside. If we stop, he stops and waits for us to continue. We question each other to make sure we are both seeing him. I have 2 Jack Russells and he looks like a cross between the two of them, making me wonder if I have willed him into existence.

We get to the top of Fountains Fell but Bob doesn't stop; he hops over the stile ahead of us and leads us on the muddy descent towards the road separating us from Pen Y Ghent. At one point we have a proper stop as the

descent has been hard and Bob comes back to us to be petted. Alex takes a photo and we both wonder if it will actually show me petting fresh air.

We lose sight of Bob when we reach the road and assume he has gone back to the farm, but near the top of a sunny Pen Y Ghent he appears again. A dog owner near the summit holds him and says his tag shows he lives about 10 miles away. She takes him off to return him home, so we never find out if he knows the whole of the Pennine Way. We reluctantly go back to navigation by map and GPX.

Hardraw Mudslide – Tuesday 3am – 105 miles



We've now been awake for over 40 hours and are pushing on to get to the checkpoint at Hardraw and the promise of a tent to lay down our sleeping bags and battered bodies for a sleep. Turning finally off the Cam Road we're expecting a gentle descent down to Hawes and a gentle jog across fields to our dreamtime, but what we have now found is hillside bogs and mudslides. I did the Baby Spine in Winter 2019 but have no memory of this horrendous section of skidding and squelching. I fall over for the 50th time and swear loudly into the night. We're both angry as only tired people can be.

There is no sign of the lights of Hawes for what seems like hours, but finally we reach a weirdly textured, ankle torturing farm track and silently fume our way to the Hardraw sleep palace in the sunrise. As we take off our shoes and socks and rucksacks, we're suddenly euphoric and everything is wonderful again.

Dufton Scone – Wednesday 4:30pm – 160 miles

During Tuesday, we had settled into a gentle rhythm of fast hiking through the northern Dales to another sleep at Middleton and then on through the beautiful Northern Pennines. Reaching High Cup Nick in afternoon sunshine, this whole experience had moved on from race to relaxed walking tour of all the sights I've imagined when tracking runners on the Winter Spine.



And now I'm sitting in the sunshine, looking out on the village green at Dufton. I've finished my first latte and a cheeseburger, and now I'm spreading cream and jam on a scone. Other runners are lying on the grass chatting.

I look down at the number on my rucksack. Written across the top of it in a dramatic font it says, "Britain's Most Brutal". I take a sip from my second latte.

Gregg's Hut Mission – Wednesday 6:30pm – 169 miles

Alex is sitting outside the bothy in the sunshine, but I have a mission. I stand on a chair to reach a ventilation grille and there is what I'm looking for; an electrical cable tucked up inside it. I take a photo with my Nokia 1.5mp camera and head back out to Alex.

Two days earlier, when we had been sitting eating our rehydrated curries in checkpoint 1.5 at Malham Tarn, John Bamber, who runs this Gregg's Hut CP during Winter, had jokingly asked if I could check if the solar power cables he'd fitted in the hut were still OK. The bothy is not used in the summer race but is a crucial spot for people to warm up after the climb over Cross Fell. It's frequently snowbound and the chilli soup there has resurrected many runners. Everyone in the Malham CP had laughed but I had taken this task on board, thinking that it would give me extra motivation to make it to CP5.5 when I will next see John.

I climb down off the chair, determined to surprise John in a couple of days' time with a cable status update and a photo before the Cheviots.

Alston Dream Sequence – Thursday 1:30am – 180 miles

All the sleeps so far had been in tents outside, so reaching Alston YHA and the promise of an actual bed had been a beacon of comfort shining through Wednesday.

An hour after lying down though, it has not gone as planned. Having to try not to disturb the other sleeping runners has kept me awake long enough for my feet to start throbbing, and I can't sleep. There is a limit of 6 hours in any checkpoint and with admin to do either side this means a maximum of 3 hours to sleep. I need paracetamol, but my first aid kit is downstairs with my rucksack. Eventually I get up and stagger into the bright lights of the YHA dining room.

Over the last few days, we have seen the same faces when we've been at checkpoints as everyone is going at roughly the same speed. We see the people close to us and the people 3 hours ahead of us (who are getting out of bed when we arrive) and 3 hours behind (who are arriving as we get out of bed).



Now though, I've broken that pattern and I see only strangers around me. I'm very disorientated and wonder about all these weird unfamiliar faces who seem to be doing the same race as me.

After finding my tablets, I get lost trying to find the bedroom but get back into bed and the pain in my feet magically subsides after 15 mins. I fall asleep straight after. The whole race has these moments that feel like they could finish everything; missing the chance to sleep, leaving a blister too long before sorting it out, forgetting to drink for an hour. I've dodged another one and remain vigilant for the next one.

Shitlington Crags Mob – Thursday 9:30pm – 216 miles

It's late in the evening but the sun is still warm. Thursday has been a magical trip along Hadrian's Wall followed by a stop at the Horneystead oasis, one of the many farms that have an honesty system working. The farmer and her husband are out in the midgy evening bringing round coffees and ham sandwiches and we're in a group of 8 or so, knowing that we're probably only 24 hours away from finishing.

We're now heading up to Shitlington Crags, and we've grouped together. It's been great to be with Alex, but now there is new conversation and jokes and sleep-deprived high spirits. The last final miles heading to the checkpoints have dragged over the last three nights, but this time everyone is laughing and suddenly we're at Bellingham. This will be the last sleep before the finish. For the first time I feel that this finish will happen.

Kirk Yetholm Finish – Friday 9:02pm – 268 miles

My feet really hurt. I'm staring at the tarmac and grimly trying to keep running. We've hiked the 220 miles from Hebden on Sunday night until now. It's about 4 miles from the end and the previous 5 miles have been really difficult for me. A hot day over the rolling Cheviots took its toll and Alex was much stronger than me. The never-ending slabs heading to Hut 2 had been a real low point, btu seeing Alex striding ahead of me had kept dragging me along when if I'd been alone, I'd have slowed down to a crawl.

The safety team at Hut 2 included a friend called Kate which had lifted me from my slump. I had tried to be cheerful going into every checkpoint, probably annoyingly so, but it was easy to do as I'd enjoyed almost every minute of this adventure. Now though, it was so close to finishing that it was hard to keep ignoring the pain and fatigue. Alex was insistent we should run in to get it over. I knew he was right, but as we headed to the last hill on the road I had retreated inside my head. But suddenly we are the top of the last descent. Running starts to feel easier. We're talking about what we're looking forward to when we finish; beer, pizza, dogs, family.

Alex had given us a target of 9pm to finish. As we see the village below, we hear the church clock strike the hour and we smile. We float over the green, through the arch and kiss the wall of the Border Hotel. I scoop up my dog and carry her with me. There's a crowd of people, it's still sunny and we're all smiling.

This was exactly how I imagined finishing. The whole adventure is too big to see all at once in my head at the moment, but I know I'm happy.

