

Paul Neild – Bob Graham Attempt 6th July 2013

Its one hour before I'm due to set off from Moot Hall for my Bob Graham attempt and I've fallen asleep on the sofa. I'm clearly more relaxed than I thought, most likely due to the weather forecast and the exceptional team of navigators, pacers and road support helping me over what I think is an ambitious 21 hour 15 minute schedule.

I slowly wake up and my partner Nia says we should set off to make the short journey from Cockermouth to Keswick. Awaiting us in the car park at Keswick is the reassuring sight of Mike Johnson and Richard Mellon. Mike is the support AND navigator for leg 1, whilst Richard is off to Threlkeld for a sleep in Mike's car before he helps out on leg 2.

We are also joined by Mike Salkeld and Clare Marston, friends of mine from Penrith who are coming along for the ride. Both have experience on the fells but are unsure whether they will be able to keep up. I hope they can as they will certainly enjoy the experience. A quick warm up, a few photos and then at 1am its time to say goodbye to Nia and Richard.

Leg 1

We set off from Moot Hall, through Fitz Park and onto the bridleway to head on up the side of Latrigg. Immediately Mike hits the brakes and tells us to walk on what seems to me a nice bit of runnable incline. Having never run this sort of distance I have no idea how to pace myself and I decide whatever Mike says, goes! We keep a nice steady walking pace up Skiddaw and when we reach the summit I'm happy that Mike S and Clare are still with us and that my climbing legs are feeling good. On descending Skiddaw in the dark, Mike puts the brakes on again. Clare, a runner who I've given a lot of advice to over the last few years is amused by the fact I'm the one needing advice!

Great Calva comes and goes quickly and we cross the river Caldew to head onto the ascent of Blencathra. I notice Clare takes a tumble into the river. She gashes her leg but makes no issue of it at the time. Mike and I climb Mungrisedale Common. We've got a nice steady climbing pace and Mike ensures that I'm never without something to eat or drink for too long. We reach the top of Blencathra, pose for a photo and then it's downwards to Threlkeld. We go down the 'parachute' route with Mike S and Clare just about managing to follow our trail. It's a faultless descent, with Mike picking the line 10 metres ahead of me. Half way down, it is now light enough to turn off our head torches and I decide it would be nice not to need it again for the final leg.

We land in Threlkeld and my sister Denise and her friends Laura Couper and Claire Flannigan work like a formula 1 team in the pit lane. I'm refuelled and have my shoes and socks changed. Thankfully there is no need for any running repairs. Denise tentatively asks how I'm feeling – it's the first time I've thought about it since Skiddaw – I'm feeling good I reply. Mike has paced it immaculately – I barely feel like I've been out for three and a half hours and I'm also 19 minutes up. A few last words of advice from Mike and I set off again. Mike S and Clare haven't made it off the fell yet but I'm sure they'll be ok.

Leg 2

I'm privileged to be joined by Bowland's BG record holder, Richard Mellon. I helped out on his BG several years ago when he put in an awesome performance. I remember two other things from that day – the weather was perfect and I only just about hung onto his pace despite only helping out on the one leg. Also here is Neil Shepherd who is returning the favour from when I helped him on the same leg for his BG. Much of my schedule is loosely based on his as he was in good shape back then. Over the last year Neil has collected a long list of excuses and his fitness isn't great - as a result he has brought along back up from home in the form of Neil Ashcroft, Ian Hayburn and Ray Vose.

I tell Richard that Fairfield is a bit of a monkey on my back. Maybe it's the loose scree and the worry that if you notice tiredness in the legs going up and down Fairfield, there's still a long way to go. Richard brushes it off and tells me I'll barely notice it.

We keep a good pace up over Clough Head and the Dodds and quickly we've doubled the number of fells summated from the first leg. Neil A is doing most of the talking as the sun rises from the East. It looks like it might be a scorcher but there is a nice breeze on the tops which stays with us most of the day. Neil S is uncharacteristically quiet but he's not complaining about any aches and pains and I tell him he's not allowed to miss out Fairfield today.

Along the way I can't help run a few of the inclines near each summit – I hear Mike Johnson's voice in my head telling me to walk! We're soon on Helvellyn and in what seems no time we are descending to go anticlockwise around Grisedale Tarn. On the climb up Fairfield I employ a tactic that I continue to use for the other long climbs later in the day – focus on the shoes of the guy in front – its slightly hypnotic and it stops you continually looking up at how much more climb there is.

Richard was right – Fairfield comes and goes quickly and we are soon descending from Seat Sandal into Dunmail. Leg 2 has flown by, I'm feeling good and I'm 45 minutes ahead of schedule however, I know the business end of the BG is about to start.

I have a quick chat with various people including Mike Meadowcroft who is making a rare appearance. Mike J gives me some final words of advice before he departs for Lancaster with Richard. I'm going to miss him but know I've got the equally experienced Chris Reade next who will ensure I don't do anything daft.

Leg 3

We depart Dunmail up Steel Fell and I again focus on the shoes of the pacer in front. I'm joined on this leg by Chris Reade, Alan Lucker and Mark Chippendale.

Chris asks me why on earth I've selected Sergeant Man first over High Raise. It's the route I know but I tell him I'll go with what he wants to do. Alan agrees it should be High Raise first – one day I'll come back and double check if they are both right.

Having Alan and Chris on Leg 3 is like having two spaniels in front of me sniffing out the best lines. I've helped out on leg 3 the most on other Bowland attempts (often with Chris) and I know the second half of it is usually when the cracks begin to show. It's reassuring to know however, with Chris and Alan around, I'm not going to waste a centimetre on this leg. Mark on the other hand knows not to get involved in the navigation side of things with these two around. He sticks to me like glue ensuring a good supply of food and water throughout the leg.

We tick off High Raise and Sergeant Man (in that order!), Thunacar Knott, Harrison and Pike of Stickle and on towards Rossett Crag. On the top of Rossett Crag we encounter a Chorley Harriers BG attempt – they are sat down eating and I'm handed a piece of melon by one of them as I pass - it goes down well. As we climb Bowfell we look round and the Chorley group are on the move again at a decent pace, so thankfully their guy seems ok.

Before we hit the summit of Bowfell we encounter clag which stays with us until Scafell and keeps us nice and cool. Between Scafell Pike and Mickledore I obsessively watch my footing as I'm not keen on doing an 'Ian Cookson'. I was with Ian here when he fell during his BG attempt in atrocious conditions breaking several ribs. The weather alone on that day would have seen off most people and I'm still amazed on his mental and physical toughness to go on to successfully finish. A tough guy!

We climb up Scafell via Lord's Rake and the climbers traverse. I'm not a purist but prefer this route rather than Broad Stand as you don't need an additional support crew in place. We summit Scafell and I'm completely shocked when Alan informs me that it's only 28 minutes since Scafell Pike. I don't know many of my other splits but know I had scheduled 35 minutes for this leg.

We descend into Wasdale and I notice my descending legs are beginning to show the first signs of tiredness and unsurprisingly I'm starting to feel a little battered. I worry little, I'm actually looking forward to Leg 4 – it's where I've run the most in the last couple of months and in terms of orientation, Pillar and Great Gable, in my head at least, seem like major turning points into the direction of 'home'. Denise has read my mind – there's a bowl of pasta waiting for me in Wasdale. I've made this sauce myself so I know it's going to be perfectly seasoned with additional parmesan!

I change into road shoes and raise a few eyebrows. I much prefer running on the fells in road shoes when it's dry, mainly because of comfort. Yes you slip a bit on the odd steep descent but I'm not racing and I feel the need to offer a little luxury to my feet.

Leg 4

I'm joined here by yet another highly experienced member of Bowland – Leigh Warburton. I feel safe in his hands. Also joining us is Graham Lund and Andy Crook. I supported Andy briefly on his successful attempt in 2011. It was a pleasure – a nice day and a solid performance from Andy allowing him to enjoy his day. Although Graham hasn't attempted the BG, his long distance performances over the last 12 months clearly shows he has the potential for a strong attempt sometime in the future.

We climb Yewbarrow in 36 minutes – knocking another 7 minutes of the schedule. Andy begins to fall behind – he's run over to Wasdale from Honister and is carrying a heavy rucksack. Unfortunately his legs are feeling like lead today.

Graham constantly hands me fluid – he clearly has the strategy in mind of little and often. It works – I accept every time he offers and I remain hydrated throughout Leg 4. After the success of Yewbarrow we drop a couple of minutes on Red Pike but I'm not informed of it at the time. It's the only major climb all day where I lose time – maybe I got my estimate wrong or maybe I was paying, albeit briefly, for overcooking it on Yewbarrow. On the climb to Pillar we are joined by Chris Reade again. Andy briefly joins us as well before his legs go heavy again.

Coming off Pillar and heading for Kirk Fell, I already feel like I'm on the homeward stretch. Leigh and Graham tell me they've strategically placed some water at the bottom of Great Gable a few hours before from their run over from Honister. Er, except when we get there, neither can now remember where they've stashed it. Graham stays behind trying to find the pile of rock among hundreds where the water is hidden as Leigh, Chris and I push on up Gable. Graham catches us up as we run off Great Gable towards Windy Gap having finally located the water.

Since Yewbarrow no one has mentioned how I'm doing in terms of time. I felt that this was because I might have been losing a bit of time as I'm beginning to feel tired. Chris asks me if I want to know – I agree and Graham tells me I'm nearly 1 hour 40 minutes up on schedule – I'm aghast. Then I think if I'm that far up, Mark Saunders and Todd Oates (my support for Leg 5) may struggle to make the changeover. I know they were doing a BOFRA race mid afternoon so would be pushed to make it in time. Graham tells me he's planning on continuing anyway so there's no need to worry.

We descend into Honister and sure enough there's no sign of Todd or Mark. My legs have begun to complain, the last descent was painful and I know I'm beginning to get tendinitis in my quadriceps. Chris and Mike warned me that it's the descending that gets you in the end and I now understand why Mike J was so keen all that time ago on Skiddaw to descend sensibly. Laura helps to take off my shoes – a simple touch of a hand on my feet is soothing. For the first time Denise doesn't look worried – she tells me she's been texting my progress to our parents who are in the Pyrenees and they are waiting anxiously by the phone to know how I've done.

Ian Roberts tells me he'll be on Robinson to show me the line off, oh and he has also recruited Rhys Findley-Robinson of Dark Peak, who happened to be at Honister on a training run, to help out on the final leg.

Leg 5

Graham, Rhys and I set off onto the climb up Dale Head. I tell Rhys I'm completely knackered and I'm going to be terrible on the descent. I'm a bit embarrassed by the fact he's helping as I think he probably has no comprehension just how slow runners like me go, especially after nearly 17 hours on the fells. Still he takes it in his stride and seems to be enjoying the views on offer as early evening approaches. Graham continues his good work with the constant supply of fluid. We hit Dale Head and I knock another 3 minutes of the schedule – I'm still scratching my head as to why I'm climbing so well. We descend Dale Head towards Hindsgarth and my quadriceps tendons now feel like there are knives being stuck into them. I'm already dreading the descent from Robinson.

We tick off Hindsgarth and then finally Robinson and that's it – fell number 42. I turn 90 degrees and there's Keswick – it looks miles away. Ian has joined us bang on time and leads us down the craggy drops off Robinson – I'm descending very slowly and the pain is getting quite intense – it's the first time I have suffered all day. I grin and bear it and just about hang on without the need to do a 'Steve Cox' and descend Robinson backwards. At the base of Robinson we encounter Mark and Todd – they are buzzing. They've had an adrenaline fuelled drive over trying to make it in time – so much so Mark has managed to pick up three points on his licence.

I swap into Hoka shoes loaned to me by Laura at the start of the road section. They've got 2.5 times the mid sole cushion of a normal road shoe and they offer perfect comfort for battered legs on this final run section. We get good support at Newlands and we are joined again by Mike S from the first leg – thankfully he made it safely down the parachute route. We jog the road section – with me moaning to anyone willing to listen about the pain in my knees. Of course no one does listen and unsurprisingly it's Todd doing most of the talking. Rhys runs ahead and covers up the road signs indicating the distance to Keswick. Finally we reach Keswick and the run towards Moot Hall to a round of applause. I hit the green door and stop the watch – 19 hours 25 minutes – far better than I was expecting.

I can't quite comprehend how perfect the day has been and I feel lucky and privileged to have had such a quality support team behind me. The fact that so many talented and experienced members of Bowland Fell Runners volunteered to help out with only a months notice is a testament to the club and the supportive nature of its members. I am forever grateful to everyone who sacrificed their time and effort on the day especially Denise, Laura and Claire and their fantastic road support and organisation.