

Going The Distance

The Bob Graham Experience.

I first heard of the Bob Graham Round about 8 years ago, when I was a confirmed pavement runner. I remember thinking what amazing courage, skill and endurance someone must have to be able to even contemplate doing it, never mind actually doing it. As the years passed, I became less of a pavement runner and gradually found fell running to be the most exciting and challenging kind of running. Until the summer of 2002, the idea of me attempting a Bob Graham Round was still an alien idea. During that summer I spent time in the Lakes and Howgills and gained confidence. I can't quite remember when or where the suggestion was put forward for me to 'have a go'. It was probably in a cosy pub after a few calming beers. Once there though, the suggestion gained momentum. It had a year to develop.

By the time Dark Peak were into the BG season, and the date of 20/21 June 2003 set, there was no turning back. The organisation of the club attempt appeared as a giant machine. My part in it was to get myself ready, both mentally and physically. I even became teetotal for months beforehand!

Friday the 20 June duly arrived. I believed that I was prepared as I could be as we started off at 1900, from the Moot Hall. I was in a line up with 4 other contenders, Al Ward, Tim Hawley, Chris Edwards and a Pennine runner. Jo Smith as a maybe (who went onto complete the Round in style). The weather and company was perfect.

I felt like I was going well, until I injured a knee coming down off Seat Sandal, about 8½ hours into the run. I continued until the base of Rosset Pike, a few hours later, where I had to admit that it would be unwise for me to carry on. It was a very sad decision to have to make. I limped my way onto Wasdale.

After a period of a few days treatment, it was decided that the knee problem wasn't as serious as I first thought and a new date was arranged for another attempt at the beginning of August. It was preferable that it was far enough away to allow maximum time for healing, but that it wasn't too late in the year because of the longer nights. There seemed to be no shortage of offers of help to assist with the Round, either on the hills or at the roadside. This time the wheels were put in motion just for me. There wasn't time for much extra training, I just did enough to maintain the fitness I had. The teetotal bit was spasmodic this time!

It was decided that a 0130 start would be the best option, as the 1st and 5th section of the 5 sections Round could be more easily navigated in the dark. I also (misguidedly) thought that I would be able to have a sleep before the start at Threlkeld campsite.

After a sleepless rest, Dave Moseley and I were driven by Bob Marsden to the Moot Hall in Keswick High Street. It was a strange feeling being back so soon after the last attempt, but without the numbers that there were before. Whilst waiting for 0130 to arrive I commented on the strange people that were wandering around, it was pointed

out to me that we probably looked pretty strange, dressed as we were, at that time on a Saturday morning.

Dave and I said our goodbyes to Bob and made our way to the lane that would lead us up to Skiddaw. As soon as we were away from street lighting, the darkness was inky black and it was very quickly realised that there was going to be no help from moonlight or any brightness in the sky. Even in open areas peaks didn't stand out on the skyline, which made navigation difficult and we were confined to the world of our headtorches. In contrast, the lack of light was a small price to pay, for the cloud was mostly high, the temperature was comfortable with only a slight westerly wind. The first two summits were reached to the minute on the schedule. Between Great Calva and Blencathra 9 minutes were lost due to a navigation error when we went onto cloud. A difficult moment was crossing the river between the two hills. It was impossible to see the river from the bank and so we had to launch ourselves into the abyss. I lost another couple minutes coming down off Halls Fell, which as anyone who knows me, knows it is not my favourite decent. Dave did a fantastic job carrying my 'luggage' and getting me round this 1 section. My Dad (Roy Clarke) and party were a welcome sight at the Threlkeld road crossing, as this meant food and relative comfort for 5 minutes. I had a bowl of porridge and a sandwich given to me to nibble on going up Clough Head.

I had Colin Henson and Roy Small to accompany me on the 2nd section. We made good progress up Clough Head taking an easterly line, because of loose scree on the more direct route. Once up on the ridge I was able to run and felt I was making progress picking the summits off in quick succession. Under foot was good because of the long dry spell. We took a steep route that Roy described as the 'gentleman's route' on to Fairfield, thus missing out the track that has to be retraced, if used. Coming down off Seat Sandal was anything but a 'gentleman's route', through bracken with boulders strategically placed (or so it seemed). Despite what appeared to be slow progress down, I arrived at Dunmail Raise just 6 minutes down on schedule. Waiting for me at this road crossing was my Dad's soup and sandwiches, next companions and roadside supporters.

As we set off up Steel Fell it felt like a Dark Peak run. With me were Richard and David Hakes, Tim Hawley, Rob Davidson and Bob Marsden. No extra time was lost until reaching the summit of Great End when I was 11 minutes behind, extending to 19 at Wasdale. I still felt strong and enjoyed the relatively easy going on the Langdales, in this section, I was even looking forward to the challenge of Broadstand. However, when the wall appeared towering in front of me, I changed my mind and thought that this may be the end. There was no alternative as Lords Rake had collapsed and there wasn't sufficient time to go down to Fox's Tarn. But in place was Dave Lockwood with an army of helpers who had no hesitation in getting me safely to the top.

At Wasdale I took a minimum break of 9 minutes where my socks were changed and I had spaghetti dished out to me. I continued to lose time on the next two summits, where I ended up a total of 25 minutes behind, it didn't worsen. The time fluctuated

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on the intervening summits, but I arrived at Honister 23 minutes down. During this section I had the company of Dick Pasley and Colin Lago, who kept me entertained. I was aware that Great Gable looked formidable and after seeing it as early as from the top of Yewbarrow,

wasn't particularly looking forward to it. When it did arrive, I was part way up it when the weather took a dramatic turn. Up till then it had been overcast with high cloud and a comfortable temperature, but suddenly we were in cloud, it became dark and very cold. In reality, this was an ideal distraction for me, just by putting extra clothing on and concentrating on keeping warm, kept my mind off the difficulty of Great Gable. Navigation and under foot became harder for the next summits, but in time, Dick and Colin led me down to the supporters lights below Grey Knotts. The weather was fine again.

It was a quick turn round at Honister with more soup and sandwiches, plus my longed for change of shoes. I changed from Inov-8 to Walshes. According to the 23½ hour schedule we were following, we set off from this road crossing with only 10 minutes to spare in the 24 hours. The schedule time for the section is 3 hours. The strong and experienced team of Bob Berzins, Roger Baumeister and Bob Marsden saw me to the top of Dale Head just 14 minutes behind. At this point I thought that it really was a reality that I would finish the Round in the time. As of the previous night, it was inky black with no help from a moon. I was quite happy to let others lead me and I didn't realise, at the time, that my three companions were having difficulty navigating and we had to retrace our steps at one time between Hindscarth and Robinson. I knew that we came down a much talked about step off Robinson, instead of going round it, in order to save time, but I was quite complacent that we were going well and must be well in time (I didn't wear a watch). Being a long standing road runner, I was delighted when we set off on the track leading to Newlands and subsequently, the road to Keswick. The delight was short lived though when Bob Berzins mentioned that there would be no time for me to change into my road shoes, as previously planned. When we arrived at the area where the road supporters were parked, we ran straight past with no time for pleasantries. The next 30 minutes were fraught. I ran as fast as I could, at the time. Although this wasn't fast enough to be sure of a finish inside 24 hours. To spur me on I was given a huge amount of encouragement from the people running with me and from car drivers shining their headlamps to light the road ahead. Some passengers even got out of the cars to run with us.

Eventually, we got to a residential area of Keswick where the cars left us when we crossed through the fields, to cut a corner. Keswick High Street was the most welcome sight ever. In the Autumn Dark Peak newsletter I was credited with completing the round with 3 minutes to spare, I cannot accept this credit as my judgement was not as accurate, I did in fact have 7 minutes in hand!

There were a lot of people who contributed towards my successful attempt of the Bob Graham (plus my previous attempt), whom I am incredibly grateful to. A special thanks is to Colin Henson who has co-ordinated DPFR Bob Graham Round attempts for many years. I was to be his 99th successful contender.

Alston Shepherd