

Mourne Peaks, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2008.

British Championship long race, 12.5 miles, 6200 foot climb

‘What about running the Mourne Mountains British Championship race Shack?’

Having decided to have a go I booked my flight to Belfast City airport and bought an ordnance survey map of the area. It was clear that I would have to brush up on my navigation and route choice skills as the rest of the Clayton team flew to Belfast International.

Arriving in Newcastle, County Down early on the Friday evening I was unsure what all the fuss was about as we couldn’t see any mountains. The mist cleared sufficiently later in the evening for us to get a feeling of what we were in for as Slieve Donard and its neighbours look massive, especially as they rise straight up from sea level. Newcastle itself is a strange town. It seems like it hasn’t realised that it’s by the sea, with hardly anything to suggest a seaside based tourist trade. Perhaps this is because from anywhere in the town one can’t help but look upwards towards the mountain peaks which dominate the skyline.

The highlight of our pre race breakfast and a good illustration of the Northern Irish laid back approach was when the waitress forgot to bring an egg for one of the lads breakfast, I had two eggs and rather than go back to the kitchen for one she asked ‘can he have one of yours’? No problem.

Travelling over to the race from the hotel I was a bit concerned that my bumbag seemed to be very heavy, laden with isotonic gels, jelly babies, dried apricots and my much studied map as well as the usual kit. The route, which was designed specifically for the British championship event, was described as having ‘parts of good underfoot conditions suitable for fast running’. In reality the only really good underfoot conditions were on the half mile track between the registration area and the start/finish. Before the race we debated and reccied the best route down from the last checkpoint (Lukes Mountain) to the finish. We all agreed that instead of running a straight line to the finish we would dog leg down and along the Mourne Wall to miss out the boggy ground, rocks, heather and gorse which were feature of the course. I kept quiet about the fact that I was more concerned about not being rescued off the course than by the intricacies of route choice for the final half mile.

Old habits die hard and a few seconds before the start I’m leaning forward like the start of a road race ‘don’t go for it Shack, remember its three hours’. I have asked Garry Wilkinson, our vets fell captain, a number of fell running related questions recently which some of you might find amusing e.g. what does AL, AS, AM, etc refer to? ‘What’s full body cover’? and ‘The contours on the map are close together, does this mean it’s steep?’ (The last one was tongue in cheek, honest!) It’s just another great thing about Clayton Le Moors Harriers, the level of support and encouragement from our fellow members and the team spirit within the club is fantastic.

Up the first climb (Meelmore) the runners seemed to split all over the place looking for the best route through the rocks and tussocks. Heading off the top I was looking forward to running alongside the Mourne Wall through the next few checkpoints, even if it was misty I couldn’t get lost on this section. Thankfully the weather was clear so this wasn’t an issue. A few people remarked later that they were surprised at the severity of the next two climbs and at the roughness (heather, gorse and bogs) of the section between Carn and Doan (CP 4/5). Coming off the rocky summit of Doan I thought I had gone wrong as I ended up having to slide down a very steep section of rock. I was following the flags from the summit (the only ones I saw on the course) so maybe the checkpoint marshal was having a laugh. I found out from the locals later that there was a little trod down from the summit but hardly anyone found it.

We got to the Ben Crom dam wall (approx halfway) and I was on familiar territory, 150 metres of road! It didn't last long and straight after was the hardest part of the race for me, Slieve Lamagan. I kept trying to run small sections but mostly I had to walk, hands on knees, scramble over rocks and tussocks of heather and try to avoid the gorse. And I was knackered. I got down a gel, a few jelly babies and some dried apricots. If I had been offered one of the dodgy looking breakfast sausages at that moment I would have scoffed that as well. The next section was a bit tricky as there was supposed to be a path, worryingly called 'The Devils Coach Road'. Most runners steered clear of that one and picked their way straight across the heather, heading for Commedagh which from that point looked like a vertical climb. I was down to my last dried apricot.

Climbing the stile at the Commedagh Tower checkpoint a lad watching the race was handing out bottles of water. What can one say about that kind of gesture, this guy had carried water up a seriously tough climb just to hand out to the runners. Grunting 'thanks mate' didn't seem anywhere near enough. It was mostly downhill from here even though it was boggy underfoot in parts. It was quite funny watching the runners in front throwing their arms in the air for balance and occasionally disappearing on the tricky ground. After all the rough ground we had covered I was feeling quite pleased that I had fallen only once. 200 metres from the finish I tried to leap across a stream and on tired legs, failed pathetically, landed in the water and needed a hand out as I couldn't get a grip on the slippery, wet rocks. I think everyone was pleased to see the finish line.

At the sharp end, with 200 metres to go Scottish champion Jethro Lennox was just ahead of British Champion Rob Hope and as it was Grand National day after all, did a 'Devon Lock' and fell just before the finish, allowing Hope to nip past to win. First woman home was Angela Mudge in 21<sup>st</sup> position.

A good performance from the Clayton lads to finish 4<sup>th</sup> vets team (Garry Wilkinson 37<sup>th</sup>, Tim Edwards 52<sup>nd</sup>, Paul Shackleton 85<sup>th</sup>, Colin Shuttleworth 93<sup>rd</sup> and Pete Booth 95<sup>th</sup>/9thV50) behind Borrowdale, Dark Peak (who had 17 runners in the race) and local club Mourne Runners. Wendy Dodds was 1<sup>st</sup> V50. Respect must go to our neighbours Calder Valley who had 21 runners in the race.

The banter at the presentation evening at O'Hares restaurant/bar in the town was great with the runners who had made the trip across the water being made to feel very welcome by the Northern Irish hospitality. Our responsibilities to work and our families sometimes make it difficult to get to these events but the efforts made by our hosts in planning a great race and social event made the trip worthwhile. I'm in no position to suggest that our members should do more of these championship events, I'm new to this and some of you have been doing them for years. However, I can guarantee two things about these far flung championship races, one is that you'll have a great trip with loads of craic in great company and the other is that you'll encounter some very tough competition in the race.

Paul Shackleton