

Joss Naylor Lakeland Challenge July 31st – August 1st 2015 - Jim Kelly

Originally planned as a joint attempt with Colin Ardron but with Colin unfortunately sidelined with an ankle problem all the attention, and pressure, was now on me, or at least that was how it seemed at 6pm on the Friday night in Pooley Bridge. Led out by Phil Cheek, five of us set off on a clear but blowy evening for the long gradual pull up to the High Street range. Beyond the first summit the views soon opened up, the mountains set in profile against the setting sun and darkening clouds. I had always known that this would be the best of the four sections, and so it proved, although I needed to resist the temptation to use up too much energy on the long grassy runnable slopes. The forecast was for a worsening weather picture with rain and winds on the way but it was not until the descent to Kirkstone Pass that any rain disturbed our contentment. Despite strict marshalling by Phil we were almost half an hour up on schedule.

A quick changeover, and the donning of full waterproof cover was the prelude to the ascent of Red Screes. Guided by Julie Gardner and Johnny, a Jack Russell with more miles in his legs than any veteran runner, and supported by Hazel Winder, we made good progress up this first summit. The water pouring down the stepped path, however, was a clear indicator of what lay ahead and from this point on we were up against it. For the remainder of the section we were lashed by driving rain, strong gusts of wind seeking out weaknesses in our cover, enveloped by the pitch darkness, made worse by swirling mists. Our route to Hart Crag and Fairfield proved a regular struggle to stay on course, and it was difficult to stay warm. Hazel was reminded of some of the worst mountain rescue incidents she'd encountered though thankfully she didn't tell me this until the following day. Despite everything, Julie kept us going in the right direction but descending Seat Sandal brought the new problem of mud. The studs on my tried and trusted fell shoes became embedded with mud and I slipped numerous times. Our relief getting down to Dunmail Raise was shared by those waiting; we were behind schedule but more than ready for breakfast.

With two wildly contrasting legs behind me, and conscious of the long and rocky sections to come, I could reasonably have felt a little down-hearted at this stage, but even so I was fairly confident that we would not lose any further time. A brief glimpse of the fabled blue moon near the top of Steel Fell was a boost to tired spirits and one of the delights of the whole round was the magnificent sunrise brightening the dull, tiring trudge up to High Raise. The gradual dawning of the new day and an easing of the rain helped as we maintained our course. It was a matter of staying focused and continuing to eat and drink. John Kavanagh's stories of adventures in the wacky world of kayaking were also a helpful distraction from occasional moments of self-doubt. Pinpoint navigation from Julie and Dave Tucker got us safely to Styhead Tarn with some minutes clawed back, and wasting little time we looked Great Gable in the face and started off on this long final leg. Still climbing fairly well, I was more concerned about the rocky descents to come. Carefully guided down Gable and Kirk Fell by Chris Cripps, we made slow but steady progress, helped by the more settled weather serving to dry the rocks. The oft-repeated advice to 'just put one foot in front of another' was followed faithfully as each hill was slowly ticked off. By the time we reached Haycock, it was clear that short of major incident I would be successful in getting round. Perhaps that caused me to lose some focus as from that point on, I really felt tired and had to fight the desire to just lie down in the sunshine but, by now joined by a fair crowd of supporters, I would have been lucky to get away with it! Seatallan was a cruel climb, a seemingly endless ascent that saw me at my weakest. Never has a top been more joyfully greeted.



Happy scenes on the last top, Middle Fell as the cameras clicked incessantly but standing still seemed to invite sleep so it was better to keep moving. The steep descent into Greendale through the high ferns seemed to go on forever but we kept up a steady jog until finally, after 22 hours 55 minutes of Lakeland traverse, I was on the bridge where I was greeted by Joss Naylor and all my supporters, warm in their congratulations and happy at my success. Despite my tiredness, it seemed almost a disappointment that it was all over, a challenge that had taken up so much of my time and energy over many weeks had finally been achieved.

During my preparations, I had noted that this weekend would be exactly 27 years since my successful Bob Graham Round, probably an unusual anniversary for celebrations. The occasion is traditionally commemorated in marriage with gifts of sculpture, rather apt perhaps as I thought about the huge rocks I'd encountered during the second half of the Joss Naylor Round.

I later learned that my successful attempt had earned me the title of the oldest Macclesfield Harrier to have completed the Round. I was less than enthusiastic about this accolade as nobody welcomes reminders of their passing years, but a suggestion that I could be the first from any club to have got round during the time of a blue moon felt rather more agreeable. A record that should be safe for at least the next three years?

I could not have completed the Joss Naylor Challenge without the support of all those Macclesfield Harriers, past and present who gave so freely of their time and experience. The club is renowned for its fine record of achievement when it comes to long distance fell-running, and being able to call on that expertise was a key factor in my success. I am very grateful to you all.

