

## **Bob Graham Round – 18th/19th August 2000 – by Bill Johnson**

When I first heard about the Round, in 1996, I thought it was madness. Who would ever want to put their body through such punishment? The madness was contagious, though, and within a year I knew I was hooked: I had to see whether I was capable of completing a Bob Graham round.

Anne Stentiford had been my inspiration. She introduced me to fell running and made me believe that I could actually get over 42 peaks in 24 hours.

So that's why, on the evening of 18th August I was stood outside the Moot Hall, nervously waiting for my watch to display 10pm and signal that I could start my attempt. With me were Andrew Addis and Martin Stone who would accompany me on the first leg.

### **Section 1: Keswick to Threlkeld**

Finally it was 10pm and we were off. Like all attempts, it was such a relief to actually start and be freed from the worries of preparation: now it was just down to whether I was capable of getting round the 63 miles and 28,000' of ascent. In the previous few days I had felt as though I had a hundred injuries, and could hardly walk up the stairs. All psychosomatic, so I hoped.

It was a fine evening, and as we walked steadily up Skiddaw there were fine views of Keswick and the mountains beyond that were to come later. However by the time we'd got to the top the cloud was coming in and the descent was in total darkness. We came down Skiddaw a little too far right, but as a result found a good, runnable trod.

I had deliberately set the schedule to be slow for this first section, so that I eased into the event gently – there would be plenty of time to stretch my legs. So when we dropped 2 minutes on Skiddaw and another 2 minutes on Great Calva, I wasn't at all worried.

Andy and Martin seemed to be yo-yoing beside me: Andy preferred the descents and was alongside me during them with Martin protecting his knees and coming down gingerly; then on the ascent of Blencathra Martin pulled me along at a strong pace while Andy slipped behind. Finally on the descent down Hall's Fell Ridge I left both of them and ran on ahead.

It had started to drizzle by now. I had hardly noticed before, but it became obvious even to my adrenaline-soaked mind when I saw the slippery rocks of the ridge. I wished I knew the grassy route that bypasses this, as I slipped and skidded down the stone. It didn't slow me down, though, and I came down 6 minutes faster than my scheduled time. Together with the 6 minutes I had gained as Martin forced the pace up Blencathra it meant that I was significantly up on schedule.

When I arrived at the meeting place in Threlkeld, my road support seemed a bit surprised: I think they expected me to be one of the pacers. John Axson had things well organised though, and I sat down to eat some rice pudding and pears. My parents and brother were there too, as they were at all the road crossings to lend encouragement and help.

I also received the good news that one of my prospective pacers on the next section, Rob Shaw, had helpfully agreed to run the section out of Wasdale instead. One of my two original pacers on that fourth section had pulled out a couple of hours before I started the round.

### **Section 2: Threlkeld to Dunmail Raise**

With Chris Rhodes navigating and Stefan Badeen and Mike Beecher pacing, I set off towards Clough Head. Surprisingly, I still felt nervous and unsure about what I was doing: I had expected that by this stage I would be more focused and concentrating on the running, but I wasn't at all relaxed. The lads provided good company, though, and I eventually settled down into enjoying the run.

My stomach started getting queasy. Though I was never actually sick, I felt close to it and the feeling was uncomfortable, especially when running downhill, which slowed my descents. I wondered whether it was because of the Hi5 powder I was drinking, since I don't usually use it. So I started drinking less of that and more water.

Slowing my descents on this section might perversely have been doing me a favour, because my knees were protected from early problems: I was quite worried that they would pack in later in the day.

I felt that I was going slowly and losing time on my schedule, so I had to ask my pacers to repeat themselves several times when they told me that I was 14 minutes up on Whiteside.

It had been raining for most of the night, but the clouds were very high. Although they obscured the moon, we could still see the outline of the hills ahead. As we dropped down off Dollywagon Pike, Grizedale Tarn looked black in the pre-dawn light. This was why I had set off at 10pm, so that we could get some light for this descent, and greet dawn on Fairfield; as well as cutting out some of the darkness on this Round late in the season.

The cloudy skies meant that we weren't going to be granted a beautiful dawn, but it was great to race down Seat Sandal in the early morning light, to the waiting cars below. The rain had stopped a while back, and the new day beckoned.

### **Section 3: Dunmail Raise to Wasdale**

Mark Hartell, Mike Wardle and Rod Sutcliffe were my experienced support for the middle section. As on all the sections, I was helped on by the companionship of my pacers. That's what the event is really all about: great hills and fine company.

The early morning weather was less friendly, though. At about 7am, half an hour after we set off, the rain returned. The temperature also dropped, so that this morning felt considerably colder than at any point in the night. I wore my gloves and hat for the first time.

We ticked off the peaks on this section steadily. Mark fed me sweets at the top of each peak, as he has a habit of doing when he is supporting someone. I felt fine at this stage, going at a pace that was comfortable.

Mark led us on a more direct route to Rosset Pike than the ones I had previously tried. I recalled Anne saying that on her runs she always hit a bad patch before the ascent of Bowfell. I looked at the ordeal ahead and sure enough my legs started to wobble. I forced them to take me up to the plateau, but once there I had to sit down for 2 minutes, and eat the doughnut that I had been trying to get down without success for the last 20 minutes. I watched a bird swoop below us as Mark in turn watched me like a hawk, making sure I didn't get too comfortable sat down.

The sit-down and the doughnut did wonders for me, though. Immediately I felt better and for the rest of the section I gained time against my schedule. Even the rain stopped: that was some doughnut!

I actually ate and drank very well for the whole run. I never had a problem consuming food, and I kept well hydrated, judging by the number of times that I had to stop for a pee.

The peaks up to Scafell Pike appeared and passed in a bit of a haze, my running had become quite automatic by now. I was enjoying it once more. I had expected to have met lots of people of the hills by now, it was 11am, but the morning rain must have deterred most walkers because it wasn't until Scafell Pike that we met anyone, and even then we only shared England's highest peak with three other people.

Originally I had planned to go up Broad Stand to Scafell, but the rain had scuppered that plan. The sun was out now, though, and the rocks under foot had dried quickly, so we decided to give it a go. Mike is a good climber and was confident.

We squeezed through the gap leading to the high step. At this point I became a lot less confident. It was my first view of the route, and though I am happy with the technical aspects of climbing I am not good with heights so I studiously avoided looking around or down. My legs started to feel considerably more shaky.

Mike led the way and started to help Mark up the step. Although the other rocks had dried out, this area was still very wet: there was running water on the exposed climb. Mark decided that discretion was the better part of valour and the rock was just too slippery to risk. I was happy to agree that we should abandon Broad Crag and return to Mickledore to gain Scafell Pike via the West Wall Traverse instead. As a sign that we were right to do so, a rockfall crashed down close to us as we edged away from the high step.

Spurred on by the thought of wasted time, I climbed strongly up the West Wall Traverse to Scafell. On the descent my knees started to complain and I was glad to find the scree slope that eases the way down to Wasdale.

There I was greeted by a large contingent. It was great to see Anne and our 18-month-old son, Adam. Anne and Jane Sullivan helped me put on new socks and a new vest, re-vaseline my feet and empty the stones out of my shoes. I even wore shorts rather than leggings for the first time on the run: the weather's looking up. A bit like me really, looking up at Yewbarrow looming ahead.

#### **Section 4: Wasdale to Honister**

I was dreading the climb of Yewbarrow, but Annette Morris led me at a strong pace up it, and the feet of ascent just fell away easily (well, relatively easily anyway.) Annette had been up and down Yewbarrow a few times in the last week, to find the route with the shortest bracken. Again the term 'shortest' is relative. It was still chest-high in places.

With me as well were Rob Shaw and Mark Hartell, who had decided to carry on to Honister.

I paid for the physical and psychological effort expended in getting up Yewbarrow, because I felt drained on the shallow but long climb up Red Pike. I trudged on at a slow pace and lost a lot of time on my schedule.

For the next three peaks, Steeple, Pillar and Kirk Fell, I maintained a slow pace on both the ascents and descents, feeling the strain of the 16 hours that I had done so far. I felt sure by now that I could get round, but equally sure that I could not increase my pace. It was good to meet more friends on

the route: Lawrence Sullivan with rice pudding and tea at Black Sail Pass and Clare Kenny on the Kirk Fell plateau.

Then on the climb up to Great Gable something changed. I suddenly felt great. Mark and Annette ahead of me were amazed that I was snapping at their heels and forcing them to climb quicker. I don't know if it was the sponge bar I ate at the bottom of the climb, or the Ibuprofen I'd taken an hour earlier to ease the pain in the legs, or maybe the thought that once I got to the top of Gable there were no more hard climbs, but whatever it was it felt good.

I ran down the far side of Great Gable, with Annette complaining that BG contenders were supposed to have shattered knees by this stage and not be able to run at such a pace. At Windy Gap, before Green Gable, Rob stopped to chat with a couple of walkers for 2 minutes but regretted it, since he couldn't catch the rest of us up until Grey Knotts.

I forced Mark to lead a strong pace over Green Gable, Brandreth and Grey Knotts and down into Honister. I was really flying, and Mark asked if he treated his pacers as bad as this on his rounds, as he sped to get sufficiently ahead of me on the descent. It was nice to turn the tables for the times I've supported him and never had time to relax or eat anything myself!

### **Section 5: Honister to Keswick**

At Honister I felt better than I had at any point in the run. I still had the boost of energy that had borne me from Gable, and I did not have the nervous worry that I had at the start of the run. I just hoped those feelings would last.

My son Adam soon learned the requirements of road support and passed water bottles to me, as well as a grape he'd found on the floor.

Then it was off on the final section, with Mike Lawrence and Jane Sullivan. If they were hoping for an easy run, I was trying to disappoint them. We sped strongly up Dale Head and across to Hindscarth and Robinson. I was incredibly focussed and concentrating on maintaining my pace. Jane was racing around to get water bottles in and out of her pack to keep me hydrated. I was still eating by this stage, but only sponge bars and sweets.

Mike's wrist and leg were bandaged after his reconnaissance of the route yesterday. I'll try and avoid taking the route he did that on!

The weather had been getting steadily better all day, and by now, 6pm, it was a glorious evening. I was overjoyed to find that on the very last peak the weather had also reached its peak. The skies were clear and the views were superb. I spent a short while looking around from Robinson at the hills that had made this such a wonderful day for me.

Dropping from Robinson to the valley floor, it was Mike's turn to complain that my knees should not be letting me descend so quickly. He ran strongly to get ahead of me and open the gates on the path.

At the chapel before the Newlands road, my road support team, efficient and organised as they had been all day, met me for the final time, to change my Walshes for road running shoes. I had expected that to feel wonderful, with the extra cushioning, but it didn't really: my feet were past caring. I had a couple of Milk of Magnesia to calm my stomach.

The road section was the only part of the round I hadn't been on before and I found it tiring after the wonderful hill sections. Not knowing how far we had to go and where the ups and downs were switched me off and I lost my drive and energy. I just wanted it to be over.

Finally, of course, it was over: we entered Keswick. Oblivious to everything except the Moot Hall and the cheers of my friends and family there, I ran to the steps and collapsed onto them. Finished! In a time of 21 hours 25 minutes.

### **Afterwards**

Adam made me sit down. Anne thrust a glass of champagne into my hand and Mark offered me some chips. What a divine combination: champagne and chips, well earned! I basked in the satisfaction that I had completed my goal: I had achieved the Round. With friends and family congratulating me, I felt supremely content... though a little sore.

I had hoped to buy my supporters a drink in the pub, after I'd had a shower back at the B&B. However after my shower I felt very cold and was shaking uncontrollably. I guess that after the adrenaline had drained away, my body realised the demands that had been put on it. I had to put more clothes on and go to bed, to have the soundest night's sleep I have ever had.