

Joss Naylor Lakeland Challenge

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Report by Peter Nolan of his round on Friday 19th July 2009

This challenge has hung over me for years, not oppressively, not even as a dull ache. Just a gap, something missing from my life, something that I really ought to do. Its main problem is its pace requirements for the younger veteran fell runner. Both my BGs were comparatively slow. Steep fast descents over tricky ground have never been strength of mine. So in my fifties I did not feel confident enough to try Joss's challenge. But at 60 there appears a tantalising window of opportunity. Unfortunately this coincided with a difficult spell of caring for and then burying my parents and I forgot all about it. So had my opportunity gone? Was the relentless passing of time against me? Last year I began to think about the challenge again and, on New Years Eve, I made a resolution to go for it in 2009. Up went the weekly mileage, off came a stone of weight, and a six month training programme was rigorously pursued. Holidays precluded a June attempt but this turned out to be a Godsend. I found the hot weather very difficult to train in and I considered postponing my attempt if global warming was going to hit the Lakeland Fells. Suddenly July brought in cooler weather without the usual summer storms. It all looked good. Just a matter of finding a spot of settled weather and gathering a group of friends. Then in the second week in July the weather window arrived and the long range forecast predicted a 48 hour slot of high pressure and light northerly winds. Fate was telling me something loud and clear.



So late on Thursday evening, 9th July, I left Macclesfield with a car full of friends and supporters. We drove straight up to Pooley Bridge and parked up at 2am. An almost full moon hung low in the summer sky. Not a breath of wind disturbed the night. With a few minutes to go, I moved onto the bridge and at 2.30am precisely I jogged off with Phil and my daughter Rachel on the first leg. In the dark we missed to correct line across the very first field and, whilst we tried to find the gate into the road, we even considered a

restart. This was rather unappealing. 48 miles was long enough without adding on an extra one before we began. Anyway we soon fell across the gate and were in the road and then traversing the caravan site. The final exit from the site is not obvious and it was a relief to finally be out on the fell side. The path to Arthur's Pike was easy to spot in the moonlight and we were back on schedule at the summit cairn. Phil then gently eased the group into a higher pace and spent the next two hours on easy ground chipping away at my 18hr schedule. A grassy alternative descent off Thornthwaite Beacon was a blessed relief from the rocky path. It seemed a long way up Stoney Cove Pike but the ground eased again on the descent before Phil's detailed knowledge of grassy alternatives avoided the stony descent to the Kirkstone Inn. John and Simon had taken the car up to the car park and were well prepared with food for my break and supplies for the next leg.

We left Phil to move the car round to Dunmail. Rachel, John and Simon took me up Red Screens and over the long tramp to Hart Crag and Fairfield. A tricky scree path took us down to Grisedale Tarn and a surprisingly steep climb led us up to Seat Sandal. Phil had recommended that we took a 280 degree bearing off the top and try for the path down



through the bracken. We ended up too far right and were dropping down desperately steep grass into the river before I decided to contour left in search to Phil's path. I came across this very quickly but by this time Rachel had flown down the grass and was below me on the main path. She reckons that she could have saved me three minutes if I had followed her down the steep grass but I really did not fancy that gradient of descent. I still got down three minutes in front of John and Simon and was happy at having held on

leg 2 the time gains that Phil had achieved on leg 1.

Walter was ready to go and I was relieved to see that Phil was rejoining me. My navigation input would no longer be required. We set off up the steepest climb on the entire route, 30 minutes of leg sapping steep grass. I was pleased with my climbing. I was going well on all the ascents and we gained the ridge a few minutes ahead of our schedule. This pace was unfortunately too much for Simon who took the wise decision of returning to Dunmail and down the road to Grasmere where he rang for a family pick up. This left Walter and Phil to take me over the rest of leg 3. I was amazed at Phil's route choice in the initial stages. Instead of following the meandering path, he shot across the open moor on a bee-line which avoided all the ups and downs. Then, not having to go out to the BG summit of Calf Crag, he followed the fence line through an area of boggy ground. 'Now I am a real fell runner', cried Walter as he disappeared up to his waist in green slime. Water bottles were topped up at a stream before the climb up to the High Raise ridge. Then it was down a lovely grassy track to the Stake Pass.

Here I ran into cramp problems, an issue that has bugged me for most of my running and long distance walking life. I could discuss this at great length but this report is not the best forum. Suffice it to say that Phil and Rachel are adamant that I do not drink enough (which is true) whilst I am convinced that there are additional factors, possibly due to the closing down of body organs (kidneys) during periods of intense activity. How else does one explain a 4/5lb weight gain during my round? Enough of this. My cramps got worse as I jogged along the easy grass paths. Then I tripped and ended in a hollow with both my legs completely seized. Walter returned and ministered water, electrolyte and a massage. This got me back moving but another few minutes had been lost. I moved very tentatively up to Rossett Pike, with Phil paying particular attention to water intake. I had to retreat into myself to regain that drive that was going to get me to Wasdale.

It was almost a relief to be back climbing again as we started up Bowfell. I felt a little better as we crested the ridge and shinned up to the summit cairn into a bit of cloud. We made a slight error on the descent and it took us a few minutes to find the right line off the summit plateau. It was cooler now in the clag and I was able to get back into a rhythm going up to Great End. Once again Phil got the route spot on, managing to avoid most of the rock field on both the ascent and descent. We were soon scooting round the base of the rocks above Esk Hause and down the grass to the Sty Head path. It was a wonderful moment to see the

reception committee, including Gillian who had walked up from Borrowdale to collect Walter.

I was fed and watered and passed into the hands of my last support team. Chris and Annette took over with an air of absolute confidence. I was amazed and grateful to see that John had come back to be with me on this last leg. The nature of the support changed completely. I felt I was suddenly with two guardian angels. I was gently talked over the most difficult of descents, the part of the route which I had dreaded. They found a perfect way down through the Gable scree and then ushered me gently down the Kirk Fell Gully. A drink was always there at hand, conversation blossomed and I was drawn out of myself. The sun came out and I even began to enjoy the magnificent scenery. Annette cautioned me once for stopping to look at the view. 'Not you' she said and pointed me on up Pillar. I was tired now and they did not



push me. I had held the advantage gained earlier and had time to spare crossing the last few peaks. John wisely opted to miss out Haycock but could not resist Middlefell on his way down. On the last summit, I was met by Joss Naylor and David Powell-Thompson and this of course meant that I was given the easiest and pleasantest route down to the finish. Sam and Melissa, Simon's kids, had come up the path to meet us and it was quite a party that arrived at Greendale Bridge. All my support team was there to greet me. I shook lots of hands

and kissed lots of cheeks before I finally turned to Rachel, my wonderful daughter, and I was close to tears as I held her in my arms.

Then it was champagne (courtesy of the Simon and Kath), photos, a change of clothes and a dash to the pub. A pint went down well but what I really need was the speciality of the Gosforth Hall, pie and chips. Joss joined us for a drink and our very old colleague Bob Smith was there with his wife. I was beginning to flag so I said my last thank you's and got into the back of the car for the drive home. Rachel had had some rest during the day and was able to get us well down the M6. Then John took over for the last hour. As we arrived home, it seemed incredible that only 25 hours had gone since we had left. So much had happened, so many memories. John asked me what I remembered most of the day. The people, the support, the amazing enthusiasm and kindness of my friends, that was my lasting memory.