

Paddy Buckley Report – Mark Burley

14th-15th May 2022, 3:30am start

Clockwise from Llanberis

Road Support – Emma Mason, Emma Beveridge

Moral Support – Wendy Lynas, Robbie Peel

The Paddy Buckley (PB) Round first came to my attention in August 2020 during my Bob Graham (BG) Round attempt – one of my supporters asked if I could help them out on the Nantmor to Rhyd-Ddu leg at the end of the month. I guess I must have been vaguely aware that other rounds existed, but all my attention had been on the BG and I'd given no thought to other challenges. But a week later, I found myself struggling though the tough vegetation and bogs up to Bryn Banog thinking, "this is grim; I'm not going to bother with this one".

A couple of months later, the aforementioned attempt never having materialised (I don't recall why), I'd decided to have a look at all the PB legs. Still no inclination toward an attempt, just wanted to get a feel for the whole round, and I hadn't spent much time in Snowdonia other than the V3K Ultra a few years before. So I went round the Snowdon leg (noting that the first ascent is relatively miserable but it's nice after that); then another six months further on (post-winter), the Glyders and Carnedd's legs. It was at that point, April 2021, when I resigned myself (odd choice of words I know) to the probability that I was going to have to have a go sometime. I also decided I'd have to start in Llanberis rather than Capel Curig (the other popular choice), to get the technical rocky stuff out of the way whilst I was still fresh.

I finally got out to recce the longest leg at the end of May 2021 – despite descriptions of the hellish bogs, it was pretty dry and I really enjoyed the leg. That experience set my target time of year; it was going to be May to be post-bog conditions, but early enough to avoid the majority of the fell racing season. I did put together vague plans for an attempt in August, but due to issues with support and road support availability, I sensibly postponed to 2022.

Fast-forward to March and April, and there was just time to squeeze in another recce of the Carnedd's (plus Tryfan) and Nantmor legs, and finalise my schedule and some lines. I knew I was in relatively good shape; the issue was always going to be FOMO on everything else (the six weeks prior to my attempt included a road marathon, the Teenager with Altitude race, the Fellsman, the inter-county fell running championships and supporting a 12-hour Joss Naylor attempt) but I did manage three days taper of no more than 5k per day immediately prior to the attempt.

Some very minor tweaking of the intended lines after geeking at Finlay Wild's Strava trace of his recent record-breaking attempt (a combination of "yep, that makes sense, I'll do that" and "nope, not going that way, he's mental/suicidal") and I was ready. A short stroll up from Llanberis on a cloudy and windy evening with Emma, hoping the forecasted weather the following day (perfect if a bit too sunny; maybe some morning clag) would be proved correct, to have a look at the gate off the fell where she was to meet me for the last kilometre. Then in bed by 9:30pm for a 2:15am alarm...

Leg 1 – Target 4:20, Actual 3:40

Support – Nathanael Booker, Andy Sutton

Emma chauffeured me right to the start line for 3:25am in time to give kit to Andy and Nathanael – everything was super-organised and we even set off a few seconds before the target. There didn't look to be much of the forecast fog but it was a little cool and windy. It's a very atmospheric start through the row of old cottages and up through the slate mines, especially at night. Since this was a leg I'd only recce'd once, and a while ago, Andy's memory of having done it the week before was very useful on the first couple of summits. Civil twilight began exactly as scheduled (perhaps unsurprisingly) on the ascent of Elidir Fawr, and we were treated to an excellent sunrise.



There was a little bit of faffing on Foel-Goch (gloves on, torch off) but we were five minutes ahead of schedule by the summit, mostly gained on the initial climb out from Llanberis. Progressed smoothly from there, and after a bit of debate over exactly where the Glyder Fawr peak was we were presented with an impressive cloud inversion in the adjacent valley.



Andy's recce paid off again as he knew some good lines to the second Glyder, and this is where we began to make massive inroads to the schedule. The descent down to the Tryfan col felt good, and I left the support at the base to catch up after some water-bottle swapping. Nathanael caught up and presented me with an empty softflask, only then realising one had been misplaced whilst trying to get my gloves out from his bag earlier in the leg. Easily done! Although it did thwart my nine-bottle 'A'-'I' labelling system somewhat. Despite this I still felt great on the climb and was skipping between the rocks without much thought to the rest of the attempt.

I decided I could live without the 'Freedom of Tryfan' and consented to just touch Adam (or Eve) without attempting to jump between them. I was sure that both Emma and my parents would support that decision.

Andy was still catching up at this point, resulting in us taking a sub-optimal line down from the summit and losing a few minutes having to contour around to the right line once he'd pointed it out. Nonetheless I flew down this section, and we finished the leg a massive 40 minutes ahead of schedule. The main thing this taught me was having the recce and the attempt so far apart mean that the timings can't be relied upon as much! But psychologically it was a great place to be even though I knew I was likely to lose much of the time later on.

Leg 2 – Target 3:24, Actual 3:03

Support – Allen Bunyan, Andy Sutton

After a quick change out of my long-sleeve and into a vest, and putting on a sun visor, Allen and I set off East along the road. I'd decided on the Eastern Pen yr Ole Wen ascent because although a slightly longer route, it's much more pleasant than the Western option.

Still feeling good, we powered up the climb, and despite seeming to choose the boggiest option at every decision point we still gained another couple of minutes. Andy caught us up just before the summit and so I had two people to keep the chat flowing.



This leg flew by – given my very recent recce I was confident with all the lines and even stopped for *four seconds* (Allen told me off, “you can’t stop on *my* leg”) to admire my favourite view on the round, the Bwlch Eryl Farchog ridge.

Everything continued to go exactly to plan; Allen put in a 5-minute mile down the road section at the end to let Emma know I wanted 30p for the toilet block; this was waiting in her hand when I arrived such that I didn’t even have to stop running to seamlessly take it from her. All like clockwork, and another 21 minutes gained thus meaning I was just over an hour ahead of schedule after about a third of the way. At this point a 21-hour round was looking achievable and I was over the moon.

Leg 3 – Target 6:52, Actual 7:04

Support – Jake Dickinson, Joe Pickard

New support for the long leg, both full of energy and enthusiasm which was great. I thought the climb went pretty well so I was a bit surprised to have lost maybe 10 minutes here (allowing for the loo stop at the changeover). I really wasn’t bothered though; I knew I was still well ahead and still feeling pretty good.



Coming off Moel Siabod there was one dicey moment – I successfully implemented the feedback from my recce; that it was better to leave the summit to the NW and leave the fenceline for a bit and rejoin later to avoid a rocky section – when I slipped on a disguised damp moss-covered rock and landed hard on the backside, *just* in-between two relatively spiky rocks either side. A couple of inches either way would very probably have ended my attempt for good and could have been pretty serious – I resolved to try and be more careful. The trail shoes I'd chosen for the attempt had been targeted at the rocky sections and were pretty poor on every other terrain type!

I soon forgot about this since the next descent, following the fence along a long broad ridge, is so pleasant.



It was soon into the more awkward terrain though – awkward because although on paper following the fence should be straightforward, in practice the fence often goes through knee-deep (at least!) water, or up unnecessary climbs, or off small cliffs, or just through thick vegetation. I'm certain we didn't have the best lines though a lot of this stuff – a single recce is insufficient for that, and I think you could easily spend multiple days just on this section working out the best choices. And then it might all be different the following year with changing conditions!

Whatever the reasons, the conditions were significantly boggier than a similar time of year last year when I'd done the recce. Occasionally it was possible to avoid the bogs through judicious route choices, but often not. I almost lost both poles due to a particularly deep one, and needed Jake to physically haul me out of the thick mud under the water. Luckily my shoes were on tight.

We were more-or-less bang on schedule, and so still about 45 mins up overall, until we nearly missed a summit! We were on a lovely trod contouring around a lump on our right when Joe or Jake asked me where the next summit was – turned out it was that! Nearly caught out by Mynydd Llynau yr Cwn; but as it was it was just lost four minutes and an extra bit of a climb to the summit. Phew!





It was a pleasure to leave the bogs behind for a bit once we reached Allt-Fawr. Stayed pretty much on schedule and on track all the way to Moelwyn Mawr, on whose ascent we chatted to some walkers who when we mentioned the PB told us they were related to Huw Brassington (of Amazon Prime fame due to the '47 Copa' [summits] documentary about the round). I always like meeting people who understand the total ridiculousness of what I'm attempting!

We took a better line down toward Llyn Croesor than on my recce, deliberately staying on the Cambrian Way fenceline for longer to avoid a rocky section, and made good time to the dam wall crossing. Jake had been getting a bit dehydrated – both him and Joe were running low on water since I'd asked them to carry so much for me – but felt much better after filling a bottle from the outflow. We took a more diagonal line to the summit of Cnicht than my recce and didn't emerge so far along the ridge to the NE of the summit, thus saving a bit of time.



The descent felt like an awfully long way, and the mile of road at the bottom felt much longer than that, but actually that section was bang on schedule and we only finished 11 minutes down on the leg, and still nearly 50 minutes up overall after two-thirds of the round. I was starting to feel the effects of the previous [nearly] 14 hours running but I was still pretty confident at this stage.

Leg 4 – Target 3:20, Actual 4:01

Support – Matt Lynas

After another quick loo stop / excuse for a sit down, and the application of some anti-chafing gel under my arms, I was straight on my way again with new support and new nutrition. Usually I go with Clif bars the whole way around, but I decided to vary it a bit with some savoury stuff and had a buttered wrap and a hot cross bun as we jogged down the road out of the car park. This gave Matt something to grumble about, “hot cross buns don’t fit very well in the pockets of my bag; the wraps are much better”, and actually I don’t think I needed or valued the variety much. I had the option of salted peanuts too but decided against them as chewing nuts seemed a bit too much effort at this stage.

Everything was going well up through the forest until we emerged by the stream – then suddenly I did a double-take. What five weeks before had been bereft of vegetation, and we'd been able to pick and choose a perfect (and relatively dry) line through the bogs, was covered in a combination of young bracken and what I think were bilberry bushes. This was a big blow – I'd adapted the schedule based on my recce times and the conditions were totally different; not only with route-finding but also impact on my legs. I probably went on about this quite a lot (sorry Matt).



Despite getting the line right off Bryn Banog (third time lucky after missing it on both recces), the vegetation problems continued up Moel Hebog. I guess the issue affects East-facing slopes (?) at lower altitudes, which are notable by their absence (retrospectively!) in the round up until this point. Whatever the reason, we'd lost a good 20 minutes by Moel Hebog summit and I was wavering a bit mentally – but I knew we were still up on schedule overall and Matt was doing a great job to keep me moving. Managed a smile / grimace for the camera at the distinctive gap just prior to Moel yr Ogof and then it was back on it.



No navigation or other issues really for the remainder of the leg. The vegetation was again tough going following the Y Gyrn wall, but at least I'm confident with the route there, and down from the summit, after the recent recce. Lost a bit of time on the steep ascent of Trum y Ddysgl but again, Matt kept me going.



Lost a bit more time on the final steep descent and through the forest to the changeover. It was great to see in the distance at the final summit of the leg, and then pass on the way down, another PB attempt. That definitely minimised the time loss since I pushed harder – although back to the hard ground again on the tracks through the forest, my feet were beginning to get pretty painful on the soles. This felt like blisters had formed across the whole bottom of each of my feet and that's what I assumed it was – it was only at the end of the attempt when I looked at them, I realised it was trenchfoot caused by having wet feet for so long. I'd considered changing shoes and socks at the end of the boggy leg, but had decided against it because I'd anticipated the start of leg 4 being boggy too (which it was). I considered it again at this point – but again rejected it because I expected the start of leg 5 to be boggy! Ideally, someone stationed at the top of the initial climb of each of these legs with a spare pair of shoes and socks would be perfect, but as Emma commented to me afterwards, "that's probably a bit much to expect for a non-sponsored athlete". Thanks Em, I'll work on that.

I'd lost a massive 40 minutes on this leg overall, mostly right at the start, but still being nine minutes up on the 22:00 schedule buoyed me. I was pretty confident that whatever happened now I wasn't going to lose over two hours on the final leg and so I would get in under 24, which was the main aim.



Leg 5 – Target 4:02, Actual 5:08

Support – Tom Fellbaum, Allen Bunyan

Just a change from vest to t-shirt as well as some more anti-chafing cream, and then I was off on the final leg. New support again with Tom, and great that leg 2's Allen just couldn't get enough of the round and fancied another leg (and a late night).

Leaving the changeover is the section where my intended route has changed most often, with some comments in the PB Facebook group suggesting that the farmer was okay with attempts to use his (private) track, and others suggesting that he frowned upon it. Since all information was third-hand I decided to err on the side of caution and go up the boggy pasture. This wasn't too bad (just par for the course now I think) and we crossed the required walls without issue. Some minor panic as I realised the coat and gloves which had been used on leg 1 hadn't made it back into the "leg 1/3/5" kit bag, but luckily Allen had both of these to lend me as it had got cold very quickly after sunset.

Took the diagonal line to the Craig Wen highest point which probably shaved off a few minutes but still lost a bit of time on this section. Then once we were back to rocky paths, starting from the ascent to Yr Aran my trenchfoot was getting really painful and fatigue was setting in too. I was losing quite a lot of time due to these issues on the ascents, but also a compounding factor was the descents in the dark were significantly slower than anticipated since none of us knew them very well. I'm used to running in the dark in the fells, but only on terrain I'm familiar with – the (depressingly enormous) descent to the col prior to Snowdon even on the path, and then the steep

grassy off-path descent through massive boulders before Moel Cynghorian, both caused massive losses against the schedule.

Some highlights of the leg were being *above* what we assumed was a Mountain Rescue helicopter on a training flight (at least if they were looking for someone, they had no clue as to where to look as it was flying around multiple different peaks) which kept looking like it was going to crash into the mountains looming out of the darkness; and then coming down off Garnedd Ugain there was the most amazing reflection of the moon in the reservoir South of the col, which due to the perfectly still water looked and felt like we were standing above the moon. I've never seen anything quite like it before.

It was also nice to be able to get to the trig at Snowdon without queuing!

By Moel Cynghorian, 22:00 was a distant dream and I'd pretty much accepted sub 23 wasn't achievable either. Tom and Allen were doing their best to keep my spirits up by alternately using my favourite approach of breaking all the climbs into 'White Nancys' (my local monument at the top of a hill), "it's only 170m; that's only one-and-a-bit White Nancys", and purposefully annoying me by using expressions they knew I don't like (what does 'strength-to-strength' even *mean*?). It was only afterwards I found out this last strategy was Emma's idea to infuriate me to distract me! Which I can't be too upset with her about, since it worked at least partially.

The last few summits were still a bit of a slog, though. All through the leg we'd been able to see the torches of the attempt I'd passed on leg 4 getting closer and closer, and at the final peak Moel Eilio they finally re-caught us. This re-emphasised just how much time I'd lost on the final leg! But Tom and Allen reminded me that since they'd started at Capel Curig they would naturally be in a better state than I was, which was fair enough. Also, we'd calculated that with 3.5km left to go there might be enough time to squeeze under 23 hours if I got a move on. I couldn't cope with Allen's minutes-per-mile to minutes-per-kilometre conversions at this point, but I latched onto the "there might be enough time" part and tried to ignore the pain. At least my feet didn't hurt quite so much on the grass and so it was just the fatigue to combat. But it worked – we dropped the other attempt again! I think they had been using our torches for motivation for the last four hours and once they'd caught up, they were spent. Our routes diverged anyway during the last part of the final descent before the road – we stayed left of the wall for longer. This was the one section of the route that I hadn't recce'd though, since on my recce we'd tried the other line and decided there was probably a better one. Retrospectively, it should have been obvious that trying something new for the first time, after nearly 23 hours running and in the dark, probably wasn't the best idea. We missed a crossing point of a wall to our right and went through a gate I don't think we should have, and then we had to climb over a wall with a fence on top of it (luckily not barbed wire!) in order to get back to the right line. This probably didn't lose more than a few minutes but I was hyper-aware of the 23-hour goal (very recent goal admittedly, but somehow round numbers are seductive).

It was a relief to meet the first road and recognise it from Google Maps geeking a couple of days before, and be able to visualise exactly where the path should be. Tom expertly navigated the last few fields until I began to recognise buildings – and then suddenly there was torchlight ahead and Emma and Emma B were waiting at the gate ahead of me.



At this point I didn't even look at my watch, I just knew that I was so glad to see Em (pretty dedicated to be waiting at a gate in the middle of nowhere at 2am) and that I was going to get down the last kilometre as fast as possible, whatever the result. It helped having walked it the night before as mentally I knew I could manage it, so I tried to ignore the throbbing pain from my feet for just a few more minutes...



Made it with four minutes to spare. Very glad I'd started from a bench as I don't think my legs would have supported me for much longer.

Overall – Target 22:00, Actual 22:56

It was great that Joe and Jake hung around for the end – thanks guys. The pizza (seven hours old now, but still; pizza) and the sit in Emma B's van were very welcome – thanks for those too. The support throughout was top-notch, couldn't have asked for more; Emma says I'm not allowed another go at the PB myself but I hope she'll consent to let me support some of you guys. Emma's organisational skills meant that I never had to worry about logistics – everyone was always where they were meant to be, on-time and with the correct stuff. Thanks Em.

By the next day my feet looked a bit more human and I managed the few hundred metres walk to a local café for breakfast. After finishing off my own eggs benedict I polished off the half of hers that Em had left and then ordered banana, walnut and maple syrup pancakes too. Very important to eat things with proper nutritional value after the 13 Clif bars and two packs of Bloks during the attempt.



This time is more-or-less exactly *three hours* slower than my BG time, despite being a similar distance and ascent, and me being in better shape now and more confident over rocky terrain than I was a couple of years ago. The seldom-visited terrain of this round, the bogs and the vegetation, and the contrasting remoteness of some sections against the industrial heritage of the rest, make it a significant challenge which I definitely underestimated. Perhaps I should have looked at the completion statistics *before* the attempt rather than the day afterwards!