

An Impromptu Bob Graham Round

I have failed at enjoying running for most of my life. Initially, it was when my parents took me out on the local five-kilometer loop around Mobberley; the flat roads seemed endless, a stitch would develop within ten minutes, and within fifteen my legs would feel like lead and I would wonder why I decided to go out in the first place. But after a few weeks, a romantic ideal of running would form in my mind and I would feel an urge to try again – only to get the same results.

It was when I moved to Macclesfield when things changed. Initially through road cycling and experiencing areas like the Goyt Valley, I soon got to wondering what traversing the same terrain on foot would be like... but I let these ideas rest as mere thoughts until two years ago, when after watching a documentary called *'Unbreakable: The Western States 100'*, I decided to put a bottle of water inside my stepdad's hiking bag, drive to the rangers carpark in Macclesfield Forest, and head up to Shutlingsloe. I very quickly found it difficult, mainly in the form of nausea and aching legs, but I made it to the top and counter-intuitively, made up my mind to head for what I now know to be called Clough Brook – I was enjoying myself.

A year later, once running in the Peak District had become something like a daily meditation, I naively entered the one-hundred-kilometer version of the 2021 Ultra Trail Snowdonia. Despite my lack of experience in the mountains, I finished the route after pushing through an extreme low point going up Moel Hebog and heading towards the Nantlle Ridge. I remember looking across in awe at two of the one-hundred-mile runners at the finish line. After a long recovery, I started to wonder how much further I could push.

At the start of this year I joined the Macclesfield Harriers, it was during these Wednesday night winter runs that I first met people who shared my enthusiasm for running in the hills, when I first felt the joy of a group run, and when I first started to hear about the three rounds... It was also during this time when I threw caution to the wind and entered the one-hundred-mile version of the UTS. My training ramped up accordingly and I started to spend much more time in Snowdonia and the Lake District; all my focus was on preparing for the UTS. However, on the day of the race, I was harshly reminded of those things that are beyond us; this time being one-hundred miles per hour gusts and torrential rain whilst I was heading over the Pen yr Helgi Du ridge and up towards Carnedd Llewelyn – the race was cancelled... Despite my obvious disappointment, I gained beneficial mountain experience in bad conditions and was reminded of the value of finding joy in the training and not the target.

It was two weeks after the UTS when I was scheduled to support Jake Dickinson's Bob Graham Round. I was initially put down for supporting one leg – I would not have wanted to do more if I had completed the UTS – but after the cancellation, I was assigned leg one and two with the option of doing more if I wanted; I was hungry for a long day out in the hills, and was already anticipating doing more than two legs. It was during my holiday in Greece on the week leading up to the attempt that my stepdad nonchalantly suggested that I could have a go at supporting the whole thing. This idea gained more substance when on the drive over to the Castlerigg Farm Campsite, I let slip my possible intention to Allen Bunyan – something I quickly wished I had not done. I intended to get some rest before the early start in the morning, but I was too excited to be out running in the moonlight with Jake and Simon; there was also someone snoring about five meters across the field.

Leg One – Accompanied by Jake Dickinson and Simon Harding

I got to Moot Hall early after walking the two kilometers down from the campsite with all my water and food for the day – my body was aching already! Jake arrived when a group of lads were climbing up the wall of the Kings Arms Hotel to get in through the open window; this certainly broke any tension before his start! Shortly after Simon appeared, and after a long couple of minutes, we were off!

I have been fortunate enough to be rewarded with many special views, but this first leg was magical... as I looked back down towards Keswick, clouds quilted the valleys, stopping any artificial lights from being visible; up above, the full moon bore down on us; on the western horizon the sky was a shade lighter; over towards Blencathra, thin wisps of clouds brushed the summit. Simon showed me up with his stellar support for Jake, always beating me to open the next gate for him; I think I got a couple.



On our way up Atkinson Pike, twilight was in full effect; we had already spotted some wild campers who were going to be treated to a special sunrise! We were soon descending Halls Fell Ridge, where I inevitably had a fall – I never have a long day out without one! After what seemed like an incredibly short amount of time, we were at Threlkeld.

Leg Two – Accompanied by Jake Dickinson, Simon Harding and The Two Kevin's

The climb up Clough Head was an early low point for me; Jake, who was feeling great at the end of the first leg, cruised through the first support area and headed up the climb. The rest of us packed the kit he needed – though we forgot the hat – and chased to catch him up; trying to keep alongside Simon was a bad idea! Although my legs were aching more than



they should have at this point, the spectacular sunrise kept me distracted enough to keep plodding on to the summit. I soon got chatting to Kevin Hoult and found out he was a UTS 165 finisher; what are the odds! It is at this point when I realised how beneficial light-hearted talk can be to recovery – I was soon feeling better. The rest of the leg

seemed to pass by uneventfully until Fairfield, when thoughts of stopping at Dunmail started to sound tempting... I got to Seat Sandal with my mind made up: I was going to call it a day; I even pushed on ahead on the descent through the ferns, thinking it would be my last one. I got to Dunmail Raise and let everyone know that that was enough adventuring for me for the day; they looked disappointed – especially Allen. I watched Jake and Simon arrive, talked to the supporters for the next leg and watched them get ready to set off. Something was not sitting right. Just as they were about to head up Steel Fell I changed my mind; how easily my day could have finished here – what I would have missed!



Leg Three – Accompanied by Jake Dickinson, Rob Gittins, Allen Bunyan and Nathanael Booker

By the time I had packed all my food and water for the leg, the rest were on their way up Steel Fell. It took more effort than was ideal to catch them, but I eventually got to the back of the group on the flat before Calf Crag. I used this as a point to open the sachet of my energy drink; the powder went all over my front and made my top, shorts, pack and hiking poles stick to my body... horrible! In the process half of the water out of my flask had leaked. Luckily there was a stream to re-fill at – I usually have some trepidation regarding doing this, but I was rather thirsty!



Bow Fell was another tough climb, but I utilised my chatting tactic and soon got talking to Rob. It was at this point when Jake started suffering from a groin injury, by Scafell Pike it had deteriorated rapidly. We then had some light scrambling in the form of Lords Rake; we were all surprised by how loose the rock was. At the top you could see the UV rays; I was aware I had not brought sun-cream to put on and was likely burnt... Jake was having his doubts about continuing at this point; we made a group decision at the top of Sca Fell that me and Allen would go ahead and inform the others at Wasdale of the situation. This descent was one of the best of the round, especially the scree section, which gave my knee's a welcome break! I had a quick dunk in the river crossing which was refreshing, and continued on to be met by Mark Burley and Tom Whittington. I informed them of Jake's unfortunate situation; they were immediately gutted... we all knew what Jake is capable of.

They asked me if I would want to carry on, I replied that I would, but would rather wait for Jake to arrive with confirmation that he was stopping. Tom then treated me to a cup of tea and an ice-cream; I cannot explain how nice it was to have something different than gels and flapjacks! I was also offered a pot of rice-pudding, of which words were synonymous with heaven to me at the time! I tactfully decided to leave it uneaten until the foot of Great Gable – which was always lurking in the background of my mind. After about fifteen minutes of rest and preparing my kit, Rob came into the car park confirming that Jake was unable to carry on... therefore we left from the car park one person short; despite my sadness, I knew that without the injuries in his build-up training, Jake could prepare for a much quicker round in the near future – I will certainly be there to support if needed.



Leg Four – Supported by Allen Bunyan, Mark Burley and Tom Whittington

Leg four is my favorite of the round. Ever since first coming to Wasdale with Jake earlier in the year, I had decided that not only Great Gable was my favorite mountain, but that the surrounding terrain offered some of the most beautiful views of anywhere I had been. All day I was silently fearing the climb up Yewbarrow, but whether it was the rest in Wasdale, not having to carry anything, or the rice pudding I knew awaited me, I felt good and before long, the top was within reach. I was surprisingly fresh on the flats and descents, so my tactic for the leg was to go up the climbs reservedly and use the rest of the terrain to claw back time - we were flying.



At Black Sail Pass, I had to say goodbye to the great support of Tom, who due to other commitments, had to descend back down to Wasdale. After the descent of Kirk Fell, which offered alien-like views of Great Gable rearing its head, it was rice-pudding time! Emma Mason met us at this point with much needed support and water. The climb up Great Gable was not as bad as expected, we were soon at the top. Mark's navigation off the summit was invaluable – for these two legs I was able to follow behind him and not think about the quickest lines! The views on Green Gable were spectacular; the characteristic valley, like two green tidal waves coming to meet head on, with a small stream weaving through it. The descent down to Honister was accompanied by live music; which accentuated the fact that I thought I had it in the bag by this point – I had heard more than once during my attempt that after Great Gable, the round was near enough secured. Still one leg to go... still the underestimated Dale Head.



Leg Five – Supported by Mark Burley and Allen Bunyan

Jake's excellent road support team kindly met us at Honister with my equipment and nutrition needed for the final leg. Only a few gels and energy drink were needed for this section. Going up Dale Head we caught up with Fiona Pascall, who was attempting (successfully) to break the women's twenty-four-hour record alongside her support team – which included her sister Beth Pascall; we had also seen them earlier in the day on leg three, when Damian Hall was supporting. Thinking of the scale of what Fiona was achieving was inspiring and gave me a boost up Dale Head. At this point I just wanted to be finished, but there were a couple of climbs left and the dreaded road section... My feet were sore and I wished I had brought some cushioned road shoes with me; this is the point when you need to take a step back and try and enjoy the special moment, the finish will come when it comes - easier said than done!

By the time me and Mark reached the playing fields leading into Keswick, I was properly tired... It was nice to come from the hills slowly back into civilization; it gave the adventure an ethereal quality, as if it occurred in a separate reality. Suddenly Moot Hall was in sight, and I started to think about setting off in the middle of the night, not believing it was the same day or the same adventure; I remembered the magical moon on leg one... I had just enough left in the tank for a final sprint; I could hear people clapping; I climbed up the stairs to an ovation from the public – I had finished. Only a few seconds later, a pint was brought out for me from The Round, I sat down on the bench, took my shoes and socks off – bliss! The first half of the pint was heavenly; the second half, I had to give to Allen to finish! After

a hard-to-stomach pizza, we were given a lift by Mark and Emma back to the campsite, welcomed to the familiar sound of the same snorer from last night... no rest for the wicked!



Timings

Leg 1: 3hrs 15mins

Leg 2: 3hrs 44mins

Leg 3: 6hrs 30mins

Leg 4 3hrs 55mins

Leg 5: 2hrs 27mins

Rest Time (mainly at Wasdale): 35mins

Total Time: 20hrs 26mins

