

The Montane Summer Spine Race 18.06.23

Angela Drakeford and Rob Gittins – A Honeymoon Adventure

The Montane Summer Spine Race is a 268 mile, largely unsupported, race along the Pennine Way from Edale to Kirk Yetholm in the Scottish Borders. The route has over 35,000 feet of elevation and a time limit of 156 hours with strict cut-offs along the way.

Ange had entered 12 months ago, prior to setting a date for our wedding, and after a few pints in Dufton, following a recce over High Cup Nick, I foolishly offered to run it with her – it would be less stressful than sitting at home dot-watching and a suitably adventurous honeymoon. Ange had been training diligently, months of 50-mile weeks carrying bags of King Edwards and large bottles of Irn-Bru in her rucksack to get used to the weight of the pack she'd be carrying.

The ideal pre-race prep would have been a relaxing week banking plenty of sleep. Our wedding, the Trout Run, a week at work and club Bob Graham support early Saturday morning put pay to this and I was already in sleep deficit managing 4 hours in the two-days prior to the 6am registration in Edale on Sunday 18th.

The village hall carpark in Edale filled with competitors for the 8am start. It was the scene of much pre-race faffing, varying degrees of anticipation on runners' faces and pre-race interviews with the media team – everybody loves a good backstory. Before we knew it, we were off.

Day 1 – Edale to Hedben Hey CP1 (46 miles), cut-off 24 hours, 8am Monday

Kinder, Bleaklow, Black Hill, Standedge – a biblical storm over the moors and food and shelter in the containerized oasis of Nicky's food bar before crossing the M62 to Blackstone Edge. Darkness just before Stoodley Pike, then the descent to Hebden Bridge along the ancient walled and cobbled tracks to the cruelly situated CP1.

A generous 8am cut-off time allowed time to charge phone batteries, drink tea and sleep for a couple of hours before a breakfast of lentil soup and a 5am start back up the hill from the checkpoint.

Day 2 – Hebden to Malham Tarn CP1.5, cut-off 48hrs, 8am Tuesday

Wadsworth Moor, tuneless renditions of Kate Bush classics at Top Withens above Haworth, Ickornshaw Moor, a welcome visit from Sally Parkin on the descent to Cowling and a 15-minute nap in a bus-shelter.

A short hop to Lothersdale and a very (too?) relaxed haddock and chips in the welcoming Hare and Hounds, a raid on the Co-Op in Gargrave and a beautiful evening stroll along the River Aire to Malham.

We emerged from the pub (two pints of lime and soda and a packet of crisps please) to a noticeable drop in temperature. Jackets on and onwards up Malham Cove and across the limestone pavement as the sun set and the crags of Ingscar turned black.

We emerged into a sea of fog on the tarn plateau, a meter thick and clinging to the water and the shore around. It gave the impression that the path was leading directly into the water. The fog thinned as we entered it and we made our way around to checkpoint 1.5 (a monitoring point with a 30-minute maximum stop).

Tonight's refuge was a bird hide on the shores of the Tarn. The perfect honeymoon suite – two hours on a wooden floor in a Hunca bivvy bag (Initially we had the room to ourselves but woke up with three other Spinners for company).



Day 3 – Morning, Malham Tarn to Hadraw CP2 (110 miles), cut-off, 60 hours 8pm Tuesday

An early start, over Fountains Fell as the sun rose and then strongly up an unsurprisingly deserted Pen-y-Ghent. T-shirt weather for the descent to Horton, bottles re-filled in the car park (where there were several racers asleep on the grass) and on to the Cam Road, notorious for its monotony, in cooler, wetter weather. A grassy runnable descent into Hawes to purchase the pies we'd been fantasizing about for the last couple of hours – they didn't disappoint.

Through the fields to CP2, Hadraw – a tented camp where tea was served by Nicky Spinks and we grabbed an hour of sleep in a comfy two-person tent.

Day 3 – Evening, Hadraw to Thwaite

We left an hour before cut-off for a glorious ascent up Gt. Shunner Fell. Calm, warm, a setting sun and disturbed curlews circling and calling overhead.



Down into Thwaite for dusk and a midge infested bivvy on the side of the track – another quality honeymoon experience.



Day 4 – Morning, Thwaite to Middleton-in-Teesdale CP3 (174 miles), cut-off 60 hours 8pm Wednesday

Steeplly out of the valley and through the mine workings and limestone pavement around Kidson, up and over the moor to Tan Hill. A cup of tea and 10 minutes on a comfortable leather chesterfield then across an unusually dry Sleightholme Moor.

Ange spotted the media team perched on a ruined lime kiln before God's Bridge and the sound of their drone prompted a suitably photogenic jog before a genuinely cheerful interview.

Numerous wild flower meadows before Harter Fell and the glorious weather made me wonder which country I was actually running in – perhaps the first tell-tale signs of sleep deprivation. Then down into Middleton and along the Tees to CP3 with a cooling riverside photo shoot (we were beginning to enjoy our 'celebrity' status) providing a welcome ten-minute diversion.



Day 4 Evening, Middleton-in-Teesdale to Dufton

Food, admin and an hour's sleep permitted before leaving CP3 at the 8pm cut-off. Up the beautiful Tess valley with Kingsley and Lisa. Low Force, High Force, lapwings and curlews, the moon hugging the crest of the valley walls, the tricky blocks of Falcon Clints at dusk and a dark scramble up the gorge beside Cauldron Snout. A long ascent to High Cup Nick and a slow, now blistered, descent into Dufton as dawn broke.



We met the safety team ascending as we came down. They needed to extract someone from the hill and had closed the monitoring point in the village but recommended several quality sleeping options: The bus shelter; the public toilets or the children's park. We opted for a couple of hours in the bus shelter – Ange had the luxury of the bench.



Day 5 Morning, Dufton to Alston CP4(181 miles) cut-off 110 hours 10pm Thursday

Tired legs, sore feet after days of hard ground and lack of sleep didn't inspire us with any urgency to leave our 'accommodation'. A roving marshal appeared to check on us and provided the most amazing cheese and ham sandwiches, ice pops and encouragement.

Temporarily invigorated we limped out of the village but soon found our rhythm and raced up Knott Fell, across the Duns and over Cross Fell. We slowed in the heat on the long descent to Garrigill and the innumerable awkward stiles along the South Tyne seemed to slow progress even further. Despite a close encounter with a pack of dogs we made it to Alston, CP4 in good time.

Day 5 Evening, Alston to Greenhead

A wedding congratulations card from the checkpoint volunteers, legendary lasagna, professional footcare from the lovely medics, encouraging chat (before you get to the next checkpoint there are some really nice toilets – they are nice, I slept in them once – and a tea shop, top class motivation) and an hour's sleep lifted our spirits. We left the checkpoint at 9pm, an hour before cut-off.

GPS enabled nav through countless fields and a difficulty to decide what time of day it actually was. Was it morning or evening? It soon went dark; it had been evening.

Up on to the moors and a beautiful 15-minute bivvy with a bilberry bush pillow, waking to the sunrise and a carpet of mist on the plains below. Down, a hug for a desolated runner whose race was over, then back onto the moors before Greenhead (this time without getting lost) and the start of the Hadrian's Wall section.



Day 6 Morning, Greenhead to Bellingham CP5 (221 miles) cut-off 130 hours 6pm Friday

A leg we'd both been looking forward to – running a long so much obvious history in a stunning location. We allowed ourselves 15 minutes at the side of the path. Time was no longer on our side – we'd been close to previous cut-off points but had made them comfortably with only occasional 'hurrying' required. The summer spine race had a tighter time limit than the winter race and reduction of 12 hours has largely been taken off the last 2 sections. We knew we'd actually have to run a large proportion of the remaining route.

Two espressos and an amazing brownie from a lovely coffee wagon by Burnhead and we were temporarily revitalized. We were low on 'tec', Ange's watch and phone were dead, my phone was low and I wanted to save the GPS for the nighttime stretch to Byrness.

Spence messaged with best wishes; I messaged back 'how far to Bellingham'. Tom W messaged; I asked the same question. 15 miles – we had 6 hours to get in by 5pm giving us an hour before we'd be ejected from the checkpoint – Bob pace, 3 mph required but not an easy task along the unforgiving profile of the wall in temperatures hitting the high 20's. Strong walking uphill, running the flats and the descents. An obligatory photo at sycamore gap then off the wall and into the woods and the interminable fields arriving at Bellingham, as anticipated, at 5pm.



Food, minimal charge time and the camp literally dismantled around us. (Felt harsh at the time but for our own good) we sulked off with a disgruntled band of tail-enders, repacked in the park and sought solace in the co-op.

Day 6 Evening, Bellingham to Byrness CP5.5 cut-off 144 hours 8am Saturday

Out of Bellingham and up on to the moors on infrequently trodden paths. An immense moorland bowl with a threatening, lightning filled sky and then darkness. Reassurance from the mid-way safety team and into the high forest. Its my third time on this section and it never disappoints. Every rock, plant and trackside tree were animated – mocking faces, extended pine fingers and ghoulish tableaux. Yellow flowers turned into gremlins nipping at Ange's heels. The sky formed a roof along the top of the headtorch beam. Seemingly so solid that at times I had to duck under it. Ange's face and voice changed, an angelic transformation (In times past such a vision would have merited the erection of a shrine) and I appeared unrecognizable to her (unfortunately my

metamorphosis was less flattering). The only confidence she had that it was me was my wedding ring. I drew a line across the track, convinced we were going around in circles.

Finally, off the top and onto the fire road – Compass and map out to convince ourselves we were going in the right direction. Dawn brought relief from the hallucinations but awoke a plague of midges.

Through the Byrness monitoring point, where I admitted to only having a tenuous grip on reality and a long 2km to Byrness Chapel, arriving after 4am.

Day 7 The Cheviots, Byrness to Kirk Yetholm (268 miles), cut-off 156 hours, 8pm Saturday

After a devilish night the chapel was an ideal place to seek sanctuary. 45 minutes under a pew revitalized both body and soul. We were woken by Alan, who'd asked to buddy up with us when he arrived.

An unhurried 6am start, 14 hours until the final cut-off and 22 miles seemed simple enough. Steeply up through the forest and into the cloud. The first few summits ticked off and all going well until Alan was battered by a collapsing boardwalk. He soldiered on behind us for a while but retired later in the morning.

We were met by the photographer for a quick phot-shoot at the roman camps and Darren, who'd left the Chapel after us caught us up. We slotted in behind him for a while. The clouds lifted, Hut 1 appeared and we followed the largely flagged path of the Pennine way along the border fence.



Six months previously the path had been covered in drifting snow and I had made slow progress forging a path. Now, in warm sun we were able to maintain a decent pace, alternating at the front with Darren and running all but the steeper ascents.

Lambs Hill, through gale force gusts on Windy Ghyll and up to King's Seat. Sharp left and down to Hut 2 – only The Schil and final descent to go. It was 4pm.

The safety team offered us tea and one of them pointed out their algorithm calculated our finish time at 8:08pm.

Ange angrily strode off towards the final ascent. Darren and I drank tea then set off in pursuit.

We powered up The Schil summing in just over 40 mins (the safety team had suggested the average was 90 mins, and 60 a good time). Confidence restored we jogged the descent for the final few miles and hit the tarmac of the valley road with an hour and 45 mins to spare. A relaxed but uncomfortable walk along the valley before the seemingly unending cruel finish hill and a forced jog across the village green to kiss the wall of the border hotel to an amazing reception from the spine team and recent finishers.



Done!

An hour to spare.

The final two days had required a lot of determination but we were both capable of upping the pace when necessary. Ange wondered how she'd been 'able to pull that one out of the bag' – a fair amount of training and a lot of focus.

I think it was probably more stressful for those at home watching our dots than for us.

The spine is a brutal race whether in winter or in summer. The heat of June is equally as debilitating as the freezing temperatures of January. Summer does have the benefit of nineteen hours of daylight which reveals the beauty of some of the places I've only previously passed in darkness.

We brought up the rear but proudly completed a tough race that saw over a third of the field retire. It was a fitting start to our marriage. We both helped and encouraged each other through some difficult periods but we succeeded and enjoyed a wonderful adventure.

Thank you to all the spine volunteers, the safety teams, the brilliant foot taping medics and all the encouragement they gave us along the way.

Thanks for watching our dots and willing us on from home.

And finally, thanks for Sarah Cassie for picking us up!

