

Charlie Ramsay Round Report – Mark Burley

28th-29th May 2023, 2:30am start

Clockwise

Preamble

In August 2021 I was due to be competing in the Scottish 6 Days orienteering competition, which had been reduced to three days that year due to Covid restrictions. The event was based in Fort William, and about a week beforehand I was asked if I was planning on a Charlie Ramsay Round recce whilst I was in the area. The answer was that I hadn't even considered it – I'd spent very little time (a couple of mountain marathons a while ago) running in the Scottish mountains, and zero in the area surrounding Ben Nevis, which I'd only ever even walked up once.

But I bought the Harvey's map of the Round, found some gpx files of previous completers online, looked at some satellite pictures to identify obvious perils, and thought yep, why not? I'll have a go solo unsupported and see what happens – how hard can it be?

Turns out quite hard. I bailed at the end of leg one, as I'd been moving too slowly, at 26-hour pace. A solo attempt had been hard not only psychologically but also physically (as I had to carry everything!); an un-recce'd attempt had been hard because neither a map nor a gpx file is an 100% accurate reflection of the ground – and also I just didn't have enough confidence over the rocky terrain and was moving too cautiously.

I resolved to return, post-recces, and with a good support team!

Fast forward to May 2023. I'd now completed the Paddy Buckley Round in addition to the Bob Graham Round. In August the previous year, four of us had spent three days in vile weather recceing the vast majority of the Ramsay Round. I'd learned a lot about the terrain, trialed some different route choices and visited 21 of the 24 summits. I felt ready to give it go.

Leg 1 – Target 8:00, Actual 7:51

Support – Allen Bunyan, Andy Sutton

I'd chosen a 2:30 start time so that civil twilight (the time before actual sunrise, but when you can see without a headtorch) would be due round about the summit of Ben Nevis. That would mean tackling the technical CMD arête whilst being able to see it – a significant advantage.

Everything proceeded to plan at the start. One of the things we'd learnt from our recces was that even though the tourist zig-zag path is much further than the direct route up the scree, it's both faster and less energy sapping. This choice paid off and we were two minutes up on schedule at the summit – marvelling at the amount of snow still remaining and surprised by the unforecast cold breeze (I always forget that weather forecasters' target audience is not those starting activities at 2:30am). Since my gloves were in the middle of a kitbag somewhere, Allen kindly lent me his mittens and then Andy gave me his overmittens to put on too. I'd waited too long to ask them for these and so my icy hands were pretty painful, but thanks to my supporters it wasn't a problem for too long.

My notes from the recce stated we should follow the three metal poles down from the summit, a tactic that was immediately stymied by the fairly thick clag near the cairn. I relaxed a bit when we found the first pole – but after we spotted an unexpected fourth, we abandoned that plan and headed over to the ridge immediately.

We lost a few minutes on the CMD section because in the conditions we'd missed the trod down to the right of the ridge, and so were running along the ridge itself. This is more fun, interesting and technically challenging – but ultimately slower, and so as soon as we saw a possible way down to the faster route, we took it and sped up. The next few summits proceeded more-or-less bang on schedule and without incident – now we were a bit lower, we were out of the mist and were treated to some stunning views.

At the key route choice near Stob Coire Bhealaich we descended via Spinks' Ridge (determined the best choice on our recce) and I powered up and around the contouring next leg before Sgurr Choinnich Mor. At this point Allen had started to flag a bit (I had asked him and Andy to carry quite a bit of water and kit after all!) but we were all together by the summit and had gained a significant amount of time to now be five minutes up on schedule overall. We all found the scree ascent of Stob Coire an Laoigh tough after four-and-a-half hours running, and at the col after this Allen let us know he was going to drop off. After a minimal amount of kit transfer faffing, Andy and I continued – I'm sure he wouldn't admit it, but I'm pretty sure he was secretly smug at having outlasted Allen.

On the descent of the next summit was the first, and only, time we'd have to change our planned route to avoid snow. Normally I love running in snow, but this had clearly melted and re-frozen multiple times to form a thick ice crust on the top – not safe in regular running shoes – and so we took a circuitous line. We met Allen again by the tarn and he joined us on the ascent to Stob Ban and the descent to the valley, before heading off to the North. We hoped he'd meet up with the support car eventually but it's difficult to be confident when mobile signal is so sporadic!

Andy and I continued up the long, undergrowth-y slog to Stob Coire Easain. It was great to have the company (and the water/food carrying capacity!) but I think I could've gone a couple of minutes faster here. Andy recognised this and didn't want to slow me down. I'd worn a race vest for eventualities exactly like this, and so Andy was able to pass me a softflask and some Kendal Mint Cake to get me to the final summit of the leg and all the way down to Loch Treig solo. I'd done this section twice and was very confident of all the best lines – and was a massive nine minutes up on schedule at the changeover. So far, so good.



Finishing Leg 1 solo



Start of Leg 2, looking toward Stob Coire Sgrìodain

Leg 2 – Target 5:30, Actual 5:36

Support – Matt Lynas

After asking Matt to grab a spare pair of socks for me to change into after the boggy section at the start of the leg, and explaining to a bemused Nathanael how I'd managed to ditch not just one but both of my supporters, we were off. Less than five minutes in, on the flat trail path through the woods, Matt was already on the ground and bloodied! I think he blamed having to hold my socks and chat at the same time.

There wasn't too much marshy ground at the start of the leg, but after the trenchfoot of the Paddy Buckley I was terrified of similar problems and so resolved to change my socks anyway. This cost about four minutes but I think was a good call.



Perfect spot for a change of socks

If you allow for this, we were perfectly to schedule on the first ascent. Similarly, no problems on the second summit either (great visibility helped with this) and Matt showed his increasingly confident downhill speed by smashing the very steep descent to the river. Again, the visibility helped with picking the least-vegetated re-entrant on the final climb of the leg. False summit after false summit was mentally tough here, but we only lost a couple of minutes which we regained by nailing the downhill line to the railway bridge.



Reaching the summit of Stob Coire Sgriodain

Steve had cycled in to meet us with two litres of water at this point, for Matt and me to top up. This meant we (ie, Matt) had had a 2kg lighter bag than he would have had otherwise, so it was very welcome! Steve had also thoughtfully provided custard creams and even a cup of tea – which I think Matt sampled both of although I was already off along the track run by this point.



Water refill point at Tigh Ruairidh

Whilst the first part of the track up to the stream bridge was a known quantity, the c.6k Abhainn river path and the c.4k track after that to the changeover point were both unrecce'd. I'd been imagining a much easier path! It was significantly undulating and twisty, meaning it was impossible to get into any kind of running rhythm. Luckily, Matt and I kept each other entertained with our inability to deduct 2:30 from other numbers (to convert between clock time and elapsed time – genuinely a ten-minute conversation at least) in order to calculate what average pace we needed to run at in order to make the changeover on schedule. After we'd worked it out at 10 mins/km I relaxed a bit, but when the path relentlessly continued not to be straight, smooth or flat, it was a relief to finally cross the river, traverse 500m of rough ground and be released onto the good running of another track. With c.3k to go I released Matt to go on ahead and warn the new supporters of the impending shoe change and my imminent arrival. With 2k to go I realised that this had been way too early as now I didn't have any water! But I arrived overall three minutes up on schedule.



Unexpectedly technical path section

Leg 3 – Target 8:30, Actual 10:14

Support – Nathanael Booker, Robbie Peal

I didn't really need to change my socks again, but I'd resolved to change shoes as the pair I'd worn for the first two legs were pretty new and there were blister warning signs. If you're changing shoes you may as well change socks anyway, and again mindful of the Paddy Buckley experience, I applied two pre-emptive Compeed to suspect areas of each foot – and we were off.



Changeover at the NE end of Loch Eilde Mor

With only minor moaning from my supporters for making them carry so much on the 90-minute walk to the changeover (sorry!), we had some good chat up the first climb. But for the first time in my ultra running experience, my Clif-bar-every-90-minutes strategy began to fail me and I really struggled to finish one. The pace up the first ascent hadn't felt too slow, but we lost a significant chunk of time. My confidence started to waver for the first time.



Final part of the ascent to Sgurr Eilde Mor

This section was still within the unrecce'd part of the leg, but we got a good line on the descent to the contouring trod. My right knee was feeling pretty sore following the road/track section, and I briefly considered painkillers, but decided to save them in case it got worse. On the ascent to Binnein Beag I managed to eat some Kendal Mint Cake which made me feel a bit better. We clawed back several minutes, and the belief started to return.



Looking down toward the contouring path to Binnein Beag

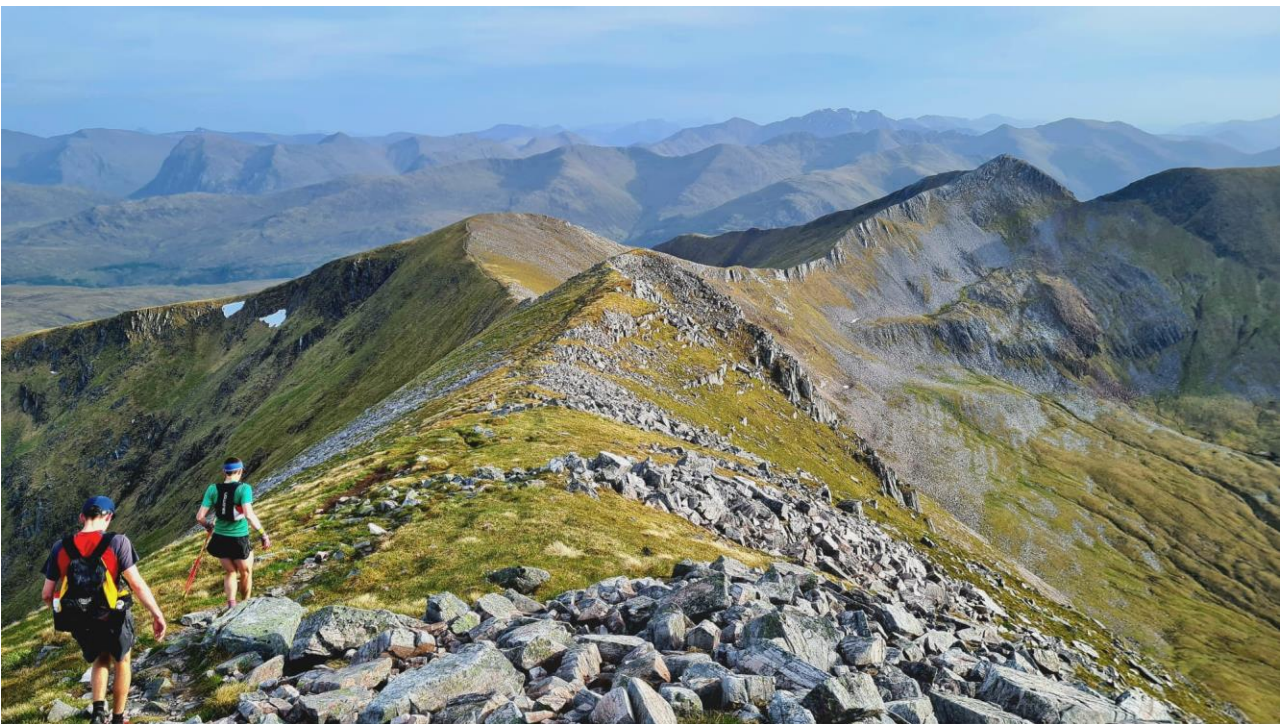


The scree descent of Binnein Beag



The scree of Binnein Beag, from the ascent of Binnein Mor

But it was short-lived. On the final ascent to Binnein Mor, the 16th summit, my breathing had taken on a panting-like quality which I haven't previously experienced. This continued for the remainder of the leg – I was fine on the descents other than the knee pain, but on the ascents my pace had become glacial. Whenever I tried to eat anything I'd have to have a small nibble, and then wait ten minutes for the nausea to recede before I could have another go. I was drinking fine, though.



Scottish mountain running at its best

It was psychologically tough to be losing five minutes plus on every summit, no matter what the distance between them. The first ridge out-and-back proceeded without incident, although the climb up to the summit on the end of the ridge was larger than I'd remembered.



The out-and-back ridge to An Gearanach

I'm not sure whether it was my worsening mental state, but there's a section, I think looking up to Am Bodach, which looks identical to that looking up to Na Gruagaichean. Significant déjà vu to the extent I did wonder whether we'd somehow taken a wrong turn and had to do a peak again!

Somehow, Nathanael and Robbie kept me sane. They seemed to have confidence that missing the 24-hour target wasn't really a possibility, and they said it so often and with such assurance that it was difficult not to believe them. Despite Robbie first losing his sunglasses (still out there somewhere) and my sun visor (reclaimed), they both remained resolutely upbeat.

We paused on Devil's Ridge outbound for me to put on a long-sleeve top, waterproof trousers and a buff, as I was getting cold. We also got out our buried torches as we knew we'd be needing them soon – sure enough, they were required for the return trip. We agreed that this ridge was significantly less 'ridgy' than the other one and didn't deserve such a worrying name.



Devil's Ridge

By this point my mental state had gone downhill quite a bit and I could only really manage single word sentences. Robbie had misled us (unintentionally, *he says*) that the last two peaks were gentle and grassy – after a ten-minutes-plus boulder descent of the penultimate one we were learning not to trust him. In fairness I had totally misremembered the final summit too, which had a far rockier start of descent than I'd promised them.

I think Nathanael's offer of jelly sweets really helped keep me going here – they didn't seem to make me feel as dreadful as everything else – and I knew it wasn't far to go now.



Stob Ban to Mullach nan Coirean in the dark

At the final summit we had a 40-minute buffer and I was finally confident – we couldn't possibly lose 40 minutes on a single leg. I was amazed we still contrived to lose 21! The descent was much slower in the dark than I'd anticipated – comparing splits with other rounds here to produce a schedule wasn't that accurate due to their different start times meaning darkness on different sections – something I hadn't considered.

I was pleased that we managed to find the small cairn that Allen had mentioned to me, despite the vague "about 150m after joining the track" instructions, in the dark. We also made use of the other forest-corner-cut, similarly marked with a tiny cairn, that Robbie and I had scoped out the day before, to get us to the road a bit sooner and avoid a small amount of additional ascent.

Upon reaching the youth hostel with just 19 minutes to spare, I was emotional enough for a few tears to escape. I'd spent most of the last ten hours really believing that I was going to have to accept that I'd given it everything but I just hadn't quite been good enough to get round in the time limit. To have that proved wrong was such an immense relief I didn't really know how to cope with it.

I rung Emma on my (thankfully very short) drive back to my glamping pod. By this point I had pins and needles in my hands, face and chest. I could barely talk. I was pretty worried to be honest. Emma kept talking to me during the trip to ensure I got back safely. Thankfully it was after 2am and I

didn't see a single other vehicle. I somehow got through the door, wrapped myself (down jacket and all) in my 15-tog duvet and collapsed onto the bed. After a while I realised I was lying on my back – and manoeuvred myself into something more similar to the recovery position – just to make sure.

Overall – Target 22:00, Actual 23:41

Aftermath

This was definitely the toughest running experience of my life. I'm very proud to have completed this Round, and hence the last of the Big 3 UK Rounds. But I couldn't have done it, especially this one, without my friends coming all this way to support me, and providing not just carrying capacity but also the camaraderie that makes big days in the mountains so special. So thanks guys - it means a lot.

[I didn't recognise this at the time, but I think the most likely explanation for my deterioration during the final leg was dehydration. I'd been going for the little-and-often approach to hydration, but I think that this might've been either too little or not often enough. It felt like I was drinking all the time – and I think my supporters would probably agree based on the number of times I was asking them to pass me softflasks – but maybe I needed to have been drinking more on each occasion. For seven hours plus of Leg 1 I'd been wearing a coat to mitigate the windchill, and I think I must've been sweating underneath it more than I realised. It's the first time I've suffered with dehydration on a day that hasn't been wall-to-wall sunshine. I'm not sure of the exact amounts – I think I drank between two and three litres on Leg 1, two litres on Leg 2 and between two and three litres on Leg 3.

To be fair, at the end of Leg 2, Matt did comment that he thought I should be drinking more. I wish I'd have listened!]