

## Denis Rankin Round Report – Mark Burley

29<sup>th</sup> July 2023, 4am start

Clockwise, Solo Unsupported

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*Slieve Donard from Newcastle*

### Preamble

I was vaguely aware of the Denis Rankin Round even before I'd heard of the Bob Graham. An ex-clubmate (Tom Watkins from Bristol & West AC) and I completed the Mourne Mountain Marathon a couple of times in 2016 and 2017, the first of these coming 2<sup>nd</sup> in the B Class. At the prizegiving, prior to the awards for that event, certificates were presented to people who'd completed the Denis Rankin Round. There seemed to be a suspiciously low number of them, and we therefore concluded it must be pretty hard and hence gave it no further consideration.

Six years later, and a couple of weeks after the fatigue from the Ramsay Round had subsided, I was already looking for another challenge and this one made perfect sense - it had been awesome to complete the UK [mainland] Big Three Rounds and so it must therefore be even more awesome to add an extra one to the set. There was a free weekend in my calendar, which is quite unusual in summer, so I asked around likely runners to see who might be interested in either completing the round as a pair or in supporting.

The notice was insufficient – everyone already had summer plans – so solo and unsupported it was to be. I was very wary of attempting another round both solo *and* un-recce'd, keen to learn my lesson from the Ramsay experience of the same thing, but I figured that this was the easy one, right? “Only” 6500m ascent? How hard could it be? Kirsty Hewitson very kindly provided a gpx file which I interrogated to find her summit splits, and that provided a ready-made schedule. It gave me an oddly specific target time of 17:39, which I didn't really expect to get close to, but I figured I could judge from that if I was going to be under 24:00, which was the main target. I had a map of the Mournes from the Mountain Marathons, and I drew the route onto it just in case of technological

failures – usually I prefer to read the map and have GPS backup (#orienteer), but I wanted to use running poles and they aren't compatible with navigating manually.

Following only minor flight delays and no issues with collecting my rental car, I drove to my two drop-bag locations (the road crossing at the end of L2, and the car park at the end of L4) to deposit water, food, spare clothes and first aid kits. The clothes were the main thing – a couple of weeks ago I'd supported a leg of a BG and not been able to carry on with the following leg due to insufficient dry clothing (despite wearing full waterproofs) – and I figured if I was stopping anyway I might as well stash additional stuff too for the sake of convenience. The weather forecast had improved from a few days ago but still mentioned both hail and thunderstorms.

I knew I was going to have to drink quite a lot of stream water too, maybe from streams at low altitude, so I ran with both water filters and chlorine tablets.



*Weather forecast*

I learned quite soon that Mourne's roads consisted of two types of drivers – the very-slow-moving tourists who were clearly decelerating to look at the views at every opportunity, and the youths in souped-up cars competing to either go as fast, or to make as much noise, as possible. It was more difficult than you would think to hide a couple of drop bags surreptitiously whilst avoiding each of these groups!



*Deer's Meadow road crossing (end of L2)*

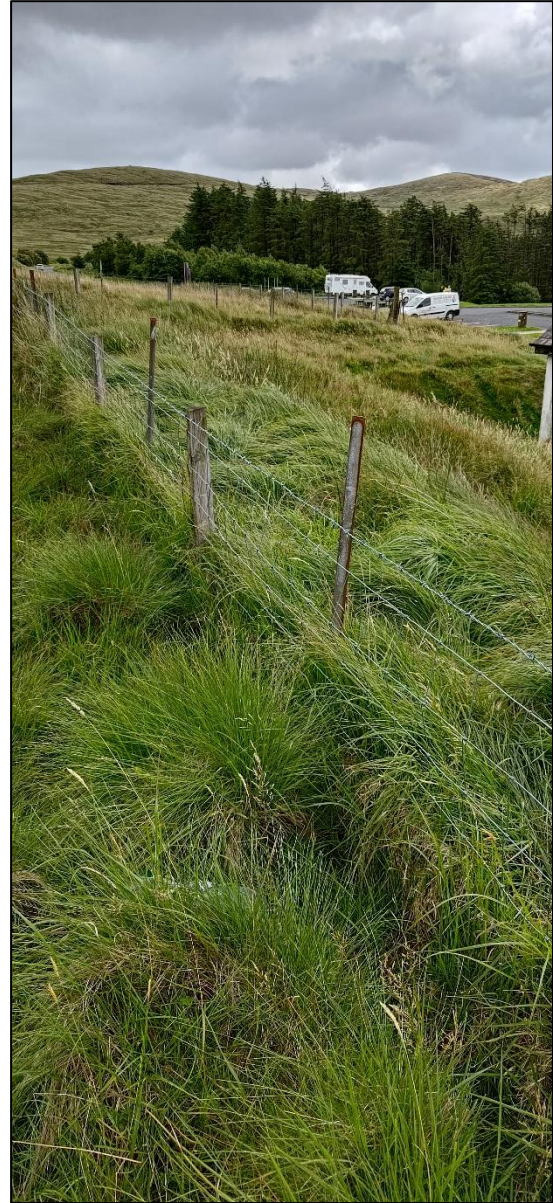


I concealed the first inside a drystone wall, then stepped back and realised it was so well hidden I might not be able to find it again – hence the mini-cairn in the foreground.

The second was a bit more difficult, but I figured that Spelga and Spaltha were unlikely to be frequented hills (the stile construction reinforced this view) and so the long grass behind the toilet block would be sufficiently safe for a single night.



*Access stile*



*Spelga car park (end of L4)*

The whole process had taken much longer than I'd imagined and so I didn't get to bed as early as I'd hoped. I'd learnt from the Ramsay experience however that I needed a walking-distance-from-the-finish Airbnb for afterwards, and this also meant I could get up as late as possible.

I didn't sleep well, but at least I didn't wake up to the sound of rain on the roof. It did sound pretty windy though. I set off exactly as planned from my Airbnb at 3:45am and was ready to start, after taking some quick photos, at 3:57am. I was prepared to hang around for three minutes but then I remembered that there was no one to meet me anyway and so no one to worry that all my timings were three minutes out. I started my tracker and set off three minutes early.



*The white archway marking the start and finish*

### **Leg 1 – Target 4:25, Actual 4:17**

Other than the first few hundred metres, I'd done this ascent before, with Emma a few months ago when we were in Northern Ireland for the British Orienteering Championships. So although it was dark, I wasn't worried about navigation. I had no idea what kind of pace Kirsty had set off at and so I tried to quash any competitive spirit I might have and keep it steady. It was warm at the bottom but it got cooler, windier and foggier on the ascent to Slieve Donard. Everything above about 700m was getting pretty grim. It wasn't raining but the wind had been underestimated! Not buffeting, but a constant c.40mph or so. Luckily I'd timed my start right – I could turn off my torch as I entered the clag. I glanced at my watch on the summit as a sense check, and saw I was only three minutes down on Kirsty's split – perfect. On the descent I saw four or five people coming up, who'd taken a break to shelter in the lee of the wall. One of them mouthed something at me, but it was too windy to make out.

It was cutting a corner across the 'Bog of Donard' that I got my first taste of the terrain that would come to typify the round for me. It was only a few hundred metres, but I was still wondering whether there was a trod that I'd missed in the low dawn light. I fell over a couple of times in the knee-deep grass. Eventually I found a trod going up through the rocks, and resolved to be more accurate in future.

Coming down out of the clag from Chimney Rock Mountain, there were some great atmospheric views out through the clouds over the ocean. Given there was no one with me, I resolved to take a photograph. I unclipped my poles, one of which promptly blew away somewhere, I nearly dropped the phone, stumbled, kept myself from falling over, took a quick photo, put the phone away, found the pole, started running off in the wrong direction, nearly fell over whilst trying to correct my direction, learned my lesson. No more photographs. It hasn't even captured the moment that well.





*View from NW of Chimney Rock Mountain*

After that, L1 got easier. There were a few more sections where I was wading through deep grass thinking there was probably a nice trod a couple of yards away, one place where I was definitely on the wrong side of the Mourne Wall (there definitely *was* a nice path on the side I wasn't on, as it was an out-and-back and I was on the path side on the way back!) and one section of the wall where there was a deep lake immediately adjacent and I had to climb sideways along it for 20 or 30m which is not my fort  – at least solo has the advantage that there was no one there to watch.

Other than that this leg felt much more like the other UK Rounds – steep descents and big climbs, some rocky scrambling near the tops, some (although very few) awkward sections requiring hands. There were some awesomely shaped rocks that would be great to go back and visit without the fog, around Slieve Binnian especially – I almost took a photograph but then remembered my previous experience. It was still super windy at this altitude. Coming off the summit of Slieve Binnian I was distracted by the football/rugby/insert-sport-here team who were in full kit and so I guess were attempting something for charity. When encountering other people I always like to try and look like I know what I'm doing, and so it was disappointing to have to climb back up a few metres and go past them a second time when I realised I was going East and not South West.

Great views finally as I dropped out of the clag, from Wee Binnian down into Silent Valley and the end of L1. Luckily there were good trods through the bracken on the final part of the descent, and I made it to the reservoir about eight minutes up. There was no reason to stop immediately as I still had a bit of water left, and besides the reservoir water level was sufficiently below the dam to mean refilling bottles would be awkward here. I resolved to wait for a stream later on.

### **Leg 2 – Target 2:54, Actual 2:49**

After a poor start to the leg navigationally (the paths up out of the valley are plentiful and confusing – something else I recall from the Mountain Marathon) I suffered my first of two injuries on the Round – just prior to the summit of Slievenagh I realised I was on the wrong side of the Mourne Wall to the summit cairn and I would have to climb over it; the gaps are few and far between. It's a big wall (Google it) and obviously I was anxious not to damage it – so much so that I damaged myself instead with a nice gash just above my knee. It didn't hurt but it bled quite a lot, enough that I

stopped momentarily to ensure it wasn't worse than it looked. But no harm done – just a flesh wound. I'd forgotten about it by the time I stopped to fill my water bottles from Miners Hole River, which was flowing strongly after all the recent rain. The next section was a long stony track run, which gave the Round some more variety, followed by another short steep ascent to a rocky summit. At this point I glanced at my watch again and saw that I was well up on schedule, nearly 20 minutes. Cue expectations of being an hour up on schedule overall; "well y'know, it was a pretty straightforward Round really".

Pride comes before immediately making a navigational mistake (pretty sure that's the saying) and I was enjoying the nicely technical decent of Doan before I realised I'd been heading towards the wrong summit – Slieve Meelberg (summit 34) which is due North of Doan, rather than Ben Crom (summit 12) which is due East of it. So some more bushwhacking required here, and a little bit of my nice time cushion eroded. A mile or so more difficult terrain, and then the last couple of summits on the leg were easier wall-following prior to a steep and very awkward descent down to the stash I'd left at the road crossing. This was a notable descent because the whole thing was marsh – it's unusual to find a sizeable marsh on sloping ground! This felt very slow and slippery in trail shoes, but I made it to my cairn successfully and was able to change my t-shirt, grab some more food, and stick a Compeed on my thumb – the second of my injuries; rubbing from my pole-gloves.



*Final L2 descent*

### **Leg 3 – Target 3:09, Actual 3:14**

I tried to make my stop as brief as possible as I judged this was likely where I would make up the most time, and this was proved correct as I made it to the first summit, the nicely-named Pigeon Rock Mountain, 18 minutes up. It turned out it was to be continual decline from here, but I didn't know it yet.

This is definitely a leg of two halves. The first half is pretty similar to the latter half of the prior leg... and then suddenly, it turns into Bleaklow. There's a mile section which is full of peat hags, random sections of stony ground which have equal chances either of being-the-path or fading away, and incongruous Christmas trees. I pretty much headed South and hoped for the best, which turned out to be okay (although I doubt the most optimal line) and I emerged at Shanlieve more or less

unscathed. And then the terrain changed right back again, to thick knee-deep grass all the way down to the forest.

Forest running is unusual on the Big Rounds and I wasn't sure what to expect, but this section was glorious – a lovely trot through nice cool woodland. Halfway through the woods though, once on the main fire track, I felt the first few spots of rain on my face and heard a rumble of thunder in the distance.

By the time I'd emerged out of the other side of the woods and was on open ground again, the rain had increased significantly and the thunder was louder and longer. I was vaguely worried about lightning until I saw the large radio mast I was running towards and then told myself the risk would be minimal anywhere near a massive metal tower. The rain did start to feel like hail and become torrential, and by the time I had my waterproof trousers on I was already soaked to the skin. This was where unsupported started to hurt – I was 20 minutes away from the end of this leg, but four hours plus away from any dry clothes. At least the final summit was straightforward, and the brutal rain settled down to more of a drizzle within that time.

#### **Leg 4 – Target 3:05, Actual 3:43**

The first couple of summits on this leg were very low, which usually means vegetation is prolific, and my expectations of this were met entirely. This wasn't my favourite part of the Round. A section of forest tracks was a welcome respite from the tough terrain though, and I stopped at Yellow Water River for water and to remove some awkward pieces of grit from my shoes that I probably should've acted upon miles before. I took the opportunity to change my socks and so had the luxury of temporarily dry feet – for about ten minutes. The river was well named – the water did not look particularly appetising – and I needed to go upstream a bit further than intended as the first place I tried harboured a dead...something? Small badger? It was the size of kitten. I was glad of the filter and the chlorine!

From Tievodockaragh to Rocky Mountain some trods started to emerge and there were sections of good running, but I was getting too tired to appreciate them much. Then from Rocky Mountain to Cock Mountain was a dispiriting ascent through marshy thick long grass which were I to do again I'd be tempted to go directly up the spur and go via the South West top first, rather than directly to the North East one – more climb and steeper but minimises the distance.

The last peak and the descent were fine, and I was very glad to find my drop bag still nestling in the grass at the end of the leg. I wrapped some duct tape around the Compeed on my hand (the rain had not been kind to the stickiness and it wasn't in great shape) and set off as quickly as I could on the final leg.





*L4 from the start of L5*

### **Leg 5 – Target 4:06, Actual 4:22**

The first three summits were more of the same – shallow climbs and descents but long thick grass, marsh and heather to contend with. Then there came an abrupt shift back towards L1 terrain – suddenly I was back onto reasonable paths but the ascents and drops were longer, steeper and rockier. I'd been crying out for this earlier on, but with the extra altitude came stronger winds and cooler temperatures. The gathering dusk was starting to look more ominous, and I kept checking my watch to work out if I was going to be out of the mountainous section before full darkness (which had been the intention). I calculated that I might just make it, but it would be tight.

I found that, especially in the conditions, lots of the summits looked very similar to one another and because of the shape of the route, it was hard to remember if I'd already tackled a particular peak in the distance ten hours ago, or if it was next on the list. Slieve Bearnagh looked particularly imposing from the descent to the col and I was hoping that I'd been there earlier – no such luck.

By this point I'd started talking to myself, to make sure I was still capable of talking! By the end of the Ramsay I had pretty much lost the ability to do much more than grunt by the latter stages. Although I certainly didn't feel amazing by the last few summits on the ridge, the prospect of finishing soon spurred me on and I still seemed to be fully functioning. Back up into the clouds for the final time to Slieve Commedagh, the second highest peak on the Round, then a glorious descent down the ridge with Newcastle lit up in the twilight and a lighthouse blinking away in the distance. Halfway down the final spur I paused to put on my headtorch and remove my coat – it was warming up again as I descended out of the wind, and although it wasn't quite fully dark I knew I'd need more light once I got under the trees.

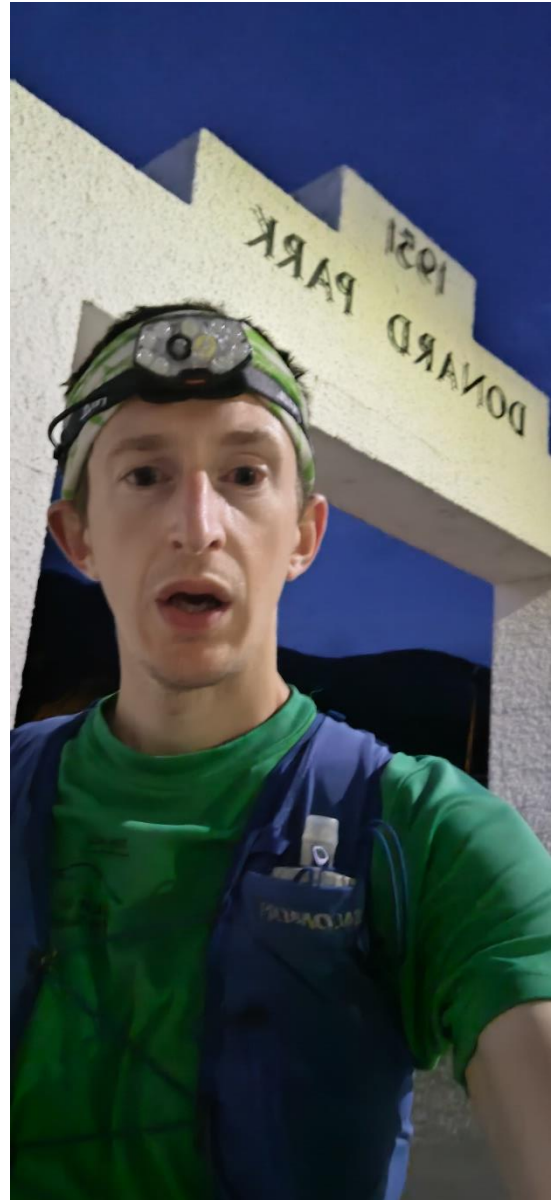
I got slightly lost in the forest a couple of times and resorted to jumping over the river to get back to a path I recognised. Eventually though I could hear the sounds of the (very busy) car park which led me back in nicely to the white archway marking the finish.

**Overall – Target 17:39, Actual 18:25**





*Before*



*...and after*

On paper, the Denis Rankin Round has both considerably less ascent and is shorter than the other three UK Rounds, which makes it theoretically quite a bit easier. In practice I don't think that's the case! The energy-sapping terrain makes it a challenge not to be underestimated. But a worthwhile and satisfying one nonetheless.