

Paddy Buckley Round – Solo Unsupported



It was just before 5am, the “electric mountain” lay in front of me, the cart path going up into the clouds. I was excited, yet the weight of two prior failures was at the forefront of my mind. The first was a year ago; nothing went right from the start, nausea and sickness meant that I could not eat anything, my heart rate was through the roof even at a normally easy intensity; I pulled out before the end of leg 2, making my way down the Pen Yr Helgi Du ridge with the rain. It was the first time I had pulled out of an attempt, which was certainly a psychological blow. This year I was in a better place physically, I had spent more time in the big hills and recced all the legs (some multiple times). The weather looked perfect for the 1st June; I had initially planned a recce weekend of legs one and two, then leg three the day after. At the last minute I decided that if I felt good at the end of leg two, I would carry on and attempt the round. Leg one went amazingly... and then the nausea kicked in again, I got into my own head, and next minute had talked myself into calling it a day at the end of leg two... Even though I had initially planned to just recce those legs, it was another psychological blow. I went home feeling like I had one more attempt in me.



Heading up the cart path toward Elidir Fach for the third time, I kept well within myself. I had rested in the interim between my last attempt, I felt fresh and excited to be in the mountains. Unlike previous times, I didn't eat anything for the first couple of hours, letting my body get into gear before asking too much of my sensitive digestive system. Most of the first leg was in the clouds, I was mainly alone except for a few



passers-by, one setting up markers for the Eryri Skyrace as I made my way up to the mythical Glyders. By this time the sun was burning through the clouds slightly, the angular rocks becoming more and more defined, like dragon's backs. The rocks were still wet from the night before, making the descent off Tryfan particularly sketchy, I took my time and made sure I was on the best line the whole way down to Lyn Ogwen.

There were more people as I made my way up Pen Yr Ole Wen, and the clouds were clearing off the summits. I was still very cautious, knowing that this climb had taken the wind from my sails in the past. I spotted some semi-feral Carneddau

Ponies roaming the hills at this point. I looked back and saw a classic view – the imposing figure of Tryfan with the Glyders behind. In order to have enough to drink, I was carrying water filters that screwed on to my soft flasks and an extra soft flask for the particularly long sections. I filled up at the stream to the side of the climb and then made my way to the summit, feeling good the whole way. Part of the reason for doing this unsupported was to feel more connected to the landscape I was travelling through, filling up from streams is part of this, the very water of the hills going through you and allowing you to keep going forward. The runners from Eryri Skyrace came thick and fast in the opposite direction as I made my way to Carnedd Dafydd; there are nice runnable sections on the rest of this leg, which I



tried to take advantage of. Next was Carnedd Llewelyn and then a descent down to the Pen Yr Helgi Du Ridge, which is one of my favourite spots of the entire round. The names of the Welsh hills add to their mythical nature; Pen Yr Helgi Du means 'hill of the black hound' and Pen Llithrig y Wrach, which is the following summit, means 'slippery peak of the witch' – the descent is rather slippery! Making my way into Capel Curig feeling good was certainly a confidence booster, I filled up using the public tap behind Joe Browns before starting the climb up Moel Siabod. I have many memories of Siabod, from supporting others attempts on the same round, to heading up it on my first ever race which gave me a passion for the sport. I felt great at this point and throughout most of the leg. I was slightly nervous about navigation, as some of the summits are hardly noticeable and very easy to pass by. The ground was characteristically wet, with feint trods running along the fence line. Other than Scotland, this part of Snowdonia feels like some of the most remote terrain in the UK



(in reality it is not far from towns or roads); the fenceline is the only sign of civilization for the first half of the leg. There are small bodies of water in various places, adding a stillness to my own mind. At one point I got my leg stuck in a hole as I was running and could have easily done some serious damage, but I got lucky and kept on going. I kept on treading in bogs – from now on my feet would be wet for the rest of the round... I passed a pair of runners of who were both attempting the route and we wished each other luck. After a shorth while, another runner came into my sights, he was also doing the round. I caught up to him at the bottom of the descent in the valley before the climb up to Moel yr Hydd. The terrain changes significantly at this point; the slate mines leaving a human scar on the

landscape. But the mines themselves have almost become one with the hills as time has passed; they have their own qualities that offered a pleasant contrast to the isolation I was experiencing for the previous few hours. Going up to Moelwyn Bach, which is another out and back, a pair were heading down, also doing the route! I caught up to them heading to the base of the Cnicht climb. They were very nice, we wished each other luck, and for the rest of the route they were nearly visible behind me, only on the last leg did I form a bit of a gap. Overall, leg three went very well, I felt good but maybe got carried away slightly... it was during the road section between the other side of Cnicht and Aberglaslyn that I hit my main low point of the route. I started to get a wave of nausea and slight tummy pain, I dialled back the effort slightly and didn't eat anything else until I arrived at Aberglaslyn. There were support crews there for the other runners with coke and snacks... how tempting it was to ask for a glass of coke from them, but I knew that that would mean that my attempt wouldn't be unsupported. I thought of the distance already covered, the effort already made, and carried myself to the other end of the car park and tried to eat some of my food that my taste buds had grown sick of by now; it took longer than I would have thought to get through it. I then quickly made my way out of the car park and away from the coke before I gave in to temptation.

At the start of leg four, you make your way up through a woodland off the road and then out through the other side into one massive bog. I was hoping the bracken wouldn't be too bad, but it was. For half of the climb up Bryn Banog I was trying to find a line through the waist deep bracken and bog but did not succeed. In hindsight, I think you are probably best picking the straightest line and getting through it. I was very conscious of picking up ticks as I seem to magnetise them towards me! The sides of my feet below my ankles were getting sore at this point; I feared that they were badly blistered, so I decided to change my socks at the summit – I'm not sure how well this worked as my feet just got wet again! A short downhill followed before the climb up to Moel Hebog; past memories of suffering up the same hill came to my mind as I struggled up to the summit. I had really slowed down at this point and my

mental fortitude was starting to waver. The views on this part of the route are stunning; you get Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon) to the right and the vast expanse of the sea to the left. Food had become increasingly difficult to stomach and I was feeling even more nauseas. The tempting thought arose to call it a day at the end of the leg, asking the crew who were supporting the pair behind me to give me a lift back to the station. I had pretty much settled on this and my main motivation was to make it to the end of the leg before them. After Moel Hebog, the leg goes by relatively quickly with two smaller summits before dropping down toward the edge of Beddgelert forest and then making for the Nantlle Ridge. The terrain then takes you back to the more “alpine” feel of the Glyders and Carneddau; it is one of the most exposed parts of the route in terms of the drop of one side. I picked a slow line along the ridge, the more technical aspect demanding my full presence and taking my mind off the pain and quitting for a short while. At the other side of the ridge is Y Garn, instead of the taking the normal descent I retraced my steps for a while until I was back in the saddle and then descended. This allowed me to hit the source of the gushing stream which runs down into the forest below. I found a little waterfall which I refilled at and then continued down into the forest. The stretch through the forest felt much longer than it had done when I recced it! I was second guessing whether I had made a wrong turn... finally I crossed the train track and made it to the changeover.

There was a cloud of midges around my head as I sat down and tried to stomach some food. It was starting to get dark. Somehow the knowledge of being at the last leg rekindled a fire within me to see this through. Again, I thought of all I had been through to get here, of the failed attempts and the feelings I had afterwards. I knew I could be done with the Paddy if I just kept going. I looked at my watch and saw that I had more than ample enough time; I could have walked the entire leg and still get in under twenty four hours. I got up and made my way through the boggy field on the other side of the road and up the worst climb of the leg towards the summit of Craig Wen. The night closed in halfway up to the summit and I turned my headtorch on. I was hoping for a magical full moon experience, but it was not to be. As I looked up towards the sky, I could see the clouds thickening. For what felt like an age, I fumbled up the slopes of Craig Wen, until finally I came up on top of the ridge just before the summit. The fog had come in fast and I could hardly see in front of me – the headtorch just made things worse. The rain started falling lightly as I continued on towards Yr Aran. Navigation was really challenging and I was starting to yawn with tiredness which wasn't helping... Luckily, I had recced this leg recently so could just about make out where I was, although I did have to use my watch for assistance in parts. I passed a wild camper and soon reached the summit of Yr Aran, the weather felt increasingly cold as I gained altitude. The poor visibility made me much slower on the descents than I would have been as I headed towards the saddle before the final push up to Snowdon. By this point it was completely dark and the rain and wind had gotten heavier – on the bright side, the cool sensation on my face kept me alert and I soon forgot my tiredness. As I got closer to the Snowdon summit, I realised that bar any incidents, I was going to finish the round. This gave me a new lease of energy as I touched the trig point – there were no views this evening! I thought I would be the only one up there, but even in the freezing wind and rain I was not alone. My hands were starting to get numb and my legs were cold.

I put my gloves on and wanted to get down to lower altitudes as quickly as possible, but I still had to get over to Carnedd Ugain before I could do this. I was really cold at this point and had totally forgot about eating. On the way down the rangers path I slipped and rolled around the grass a couple of times until I made it to the saddle before the climb up to Moel Cynghorion. I put some waterproof pants on and wanted to put another layer on under my jacket, but was so cold I didn't dare. My waterproof gloves at this point soaked through, when I clenched my hands, water would pour out. I had saved some caffeine gels so tried to eat these as I went up to the next summit. The descent of Moel Cynghorion took forever... but finally I made it to the last group of hills that surrounded the final summit of Moel Eilio. I well knew beforehand that even after Snowdon, there is a long way and a good deal of climbing still to go, but at this point I had the bit between my teeth; I had faced the worst of the weather and did not for a minute think of quitting now, it was only a matter of time. The rain got even worse but I pushed on up to Foel Goch and Foel Gron. I was quite disorientated and kept thinking "this was the last ascent", but another would come. Finally the summit shelter of Moel Eilio became more defined out of the mist and I was at the top of the 47th and final peak. I tried to take it all in as I descended off the other side towards Llanberis; this had been a crazy goal for the last two years, something that took more than just fitness, but all of the skills and self-sufficiency I had learnt. A diffused glow pierced through the fog and slowly the lights of civilization materialised. I reached the road at the bottom of Moel Eilio and onto the final stretch into town. I had visualised this section for so long and now it was finally happening, as usual different than I imagined it would be. All of a sudden I was back where I started. It was certainly strange to have no one there as I sat down on the benches in the middle of Llanberis. But in a way it almost felt fitting for the style in which I had set my mind on; the self-satisfaction of completing the round was all I needed.

Once I had contemplated my journey for a minute, I met Ste – who was supporting the runners behind me - in the car park on way to the slate museum. He congratulated me, took a finishing photo, gave me a coke (which was like nectar!), and offered me a lift back to my yurt after we had seen his runners off on the next leg (they both finished in Capel Curig). Self-supported routes like this are a massive challenge mentally and physically, and it is certainly rewarding to be self-sufficient in the hills. However, I would say my biggest take away is not a growing a confidence in myself, but a growing appreciation of my dependance on others and the value of companionship.

Leg 1 – 3:30:54

Leg 2 – 2:50:02

Leg 3 – 6:21:46

Leg 4 – 4:03:24

Leg 5 – 5:02:32

Total Time – 21:48:42

