

The Bob Graham Round

By Toby Wallis 06.06.25

Acknowledgements:

I couldn't have completed the BGR without the support of everyone involved. With this in mind, I specifically want to thank Gary and Oli for their road support. None of the following account would have taken place without their efforts. Thank you to those that helped me to plan everything for the day. Thank you to the runners that supported each leg (or multiple legs), your company will not be forgotten. Finally, I'll never be able to thank Ellie, Reuben and Aurora enough for all the smiles and encouragement that you've given over the past months.

Preamble:

I can't exactly pinpoint the moment I decided to start fell running, or the exact reasons for wanting to attempt the round. Initially, I started road running as a means to keep fit for other sporting pursuits. Road running felt a bit pedestrian (sorry Steve), but fell running seemed to be more in line with my other interests of rock climbing and mountaineering. I remember, as a 9 year old, watching tiny figures scaling massive rock faces in the Dolomites and starting my fascination with mountains thereafter. Ultimately, I just like a good adventure in the hills, and this was my approach to the BGR. Someday I'd like to combine climbing and running, but that's not what I'm here to write about.

This was going to be my first run over 50km and my first run over 12hours. I've always participated in some kind of physical activity since being young (apart from a period of laziness in my mid twenties), so I was used to pushing myself physically and mentally. With this in mind, I felt confident I could complete within 24 hours.

My training involved no specific plan. Just three training goals each week: no less than 8 hours of running, an elevation gain of 3000m, ideally aiming for 4000m, and at least one long run at the weekend. I devoted most of my recce time to legs 3 and 4, as I wanted to feel as familiar as possible with the terrain on these legs. My preparation was meticulous in certain areas and erratic in others.

Overall, I'd say my experience of the Bob Graham Round was tough to say the least. The attempt was nearly thwarted by a combination of sickness and weather. Somehow I managed to pull through these dark patches and greatly enjoy the experience. Here's the story...

Leg 1

Support – Mark Burley and Steve Lomas

After a very long week I finally woke up on the morning of Friday the 6th of June ready to attempt the Bob Graham round. I couldn't believe that I was now in a position where an attempt was possible, until this point the objective always seemed so far away. I felt strangely focussed and not overly nervous. I most likely spent the majority of my nervous energy constantly checking multiple niche weather forecasting systems throughout the week. It wasn't looking good for leg 3 onwards. Never mind, I'd spent the last two weeks mentally preparing for this scenario. I actually enjoy being outdoors in stormy weather. In fact, I love it. However, I have developed some common sense, and I knew this wouldn't be beneficial to my attempt, despite offering an interesting level of jeopardy.

Luckily leg one was perfect, almost no wind, hazy sunshine and relatively cool.

I met Mark and Steve at the Moot Hall at 16:45. I barely realised what was going on around me, I just wanted to get out of Keswick and up on the hills. We met a Belgian team of three who had dropped out of their attempt earlier in the day, a fourth member was still out there battling away. I wanted to ask what happened, but I also didn't want to find out. Then 5pm struck. We were away. It was great to be out with Steve and Mark, the good conversation made the climbs and boggy sections fly by. It was after crossing the river that Mark and I started to separate from Steve, who was suffering from a head cold. Blencathra's top came and went without a problem. I was excited about Hall's descent, I hadn't taken this line during my only recce of leg one, instead opting to try out the parachute descent. I like running downhill, but the parachute would have been a risky option for me to take on the day, particularly hammering my legs so early in the round. Halls fell was very enjoyable, with Mark picking the perfect lines. We arrived in Threlkeld up on schedule and I was feeling great.



Leg 2

Support – Jon Hopper and Andy Beavers

It was brilliant to meet up with the road support, but it was a fleeting visit. We set off after some minor faff concerning half of my kit still being with Steve, who we assumed to still be descending Halls fell. Climbing up Clough Head is one of my favourite climbs. It was here that I got my first taste of fell racing. I was completely out of my depth during the race and felt terribly unfit. These days, any climb up that hill feels easy and enjoyable in comparison. In the distance, the clouds were looking ominous beyond Scafell, but our current path looked clear and calm. I also mentioned to Jon and Andy that the clouds hadn't closed in any further and looked like they were static. Wishful thinking.

I was worried that I'd been pushing the pace a little, so slowed down. I was also enjoying the company. I knew that both Jon and Andy were experienced support runners – Jon always focussed on the best route and Andy always seemed to pop up at the right place at the right time to take my poles. I was so awestruck with Andy's pole carrying expertise and perfect timing that I promised to mention it in my report (if I completed).

The run across the Helvellyn range was uneventful and we descended to Grisedale tarn without an issue. Fairfield was thick clag as expected, so Jon asked Andy to stop and act as a lighthouse close to the top while Jon and I continued to locate the top. This helped us find the return path on the way back down. We had a slight issue locating Seat Sandal but Jon quickly got us on the correct line, not costing any time at all. On the descent to Dunmail I felt sad to be losing Jon and Andy but I knew that there was an excellent support team waiting to take over leg 3.



Leg 3: A whiter shade of pale

Supporters: Nathanael Booker, Allen Bunyan, Rebecca Till, Steph Wood

I felt very excited sat in my chair at Dunmail – I was feeling great, no aches, no pains and a good level of energy. I felt almost as fresh and ready to go as I did when I set off from the Moot Hall. Little did I know that things were about to drastically change.

My planned nutrition was primarily chews and gels. I'd experimented with multiple foods and found this combination to work the best. At road crossings I'd planned to have small amounts of solid food, such as a small pizza slice, some porridge and jam, or a packet of crisps. At Dunmail I'd decided to have a bag of crisps and pizza (In hindsight ate this far too quickly – it also wasn't a combination I'd experimented with and perhaps too salty/fatty for a stomach that was used to gels as a primary source of fuel).

I'm not ashamed to admit that I set off from Dunmail feeling confident that I would go below my 22 hour target. The second half of leg 3 and leg 4 were where my strengths lie. I'd eaten well and looked after my legs. Little did I know that within 15 minutes, my outlook was going to change significantly. Halfway up the climb I became acutely nauseous. I couldn't believe it. The feeling came on so quickly, I didn't have time to tell anyone. Instead, I stopped and asked everyone to carry on. I planned to have a private moment to be sick and carry on. As the leg progressed it was clear that the nausea wasn't going to pass quickly. The issue started to cost me significant time loss and by the time we'd arrived at Pike of Stickle I was feeling absolutely awful!

I tried to stay calm and maintain my focus on getting to the next top or next climb etc. Weird bouts of nausea would come and go, never being sick but desperately wanting to be. I tried to make myself sick on a couple of occasions and that didn't work. I started a plan to capitalise on any periods of feeling good by pushing on a bit faster. I had a massive surge of energy just before Lords rake, managing to make the whole climb without any bad patches, which gave me confidence. Rebecca worked out that caffeine seemed to be the only thing having a positive effect on me. I'd taken on very limited fuel over the previous 4 hrs and the caffeine seemed to work wonders – one of my memories leaving Wasdale was Rebecca strongly advising leg four supporters to keep me caffeinated.

Quitting flashed in and out of my thoughts during leg 3, but I never really took this seriously. I mentioned this to Steph and she helped to shut down those thoughts. I'm not sure what she said but I remember it helping. The other thought that kept swirling around in my head was just how lucky I was to be out here feeling nauseous, being completely under fuelled, cold and wet, but still being in a position to even attempt this round. Although I wasn't doing great,

I felt that I was managing the controllables well enough. I also reminded myself that this is just the level of jeopardy I like (possibly, minus the sickness).

Everyone helped out so much on this leg. Nathaneal and Allen did a fantastic job of navigating through some very poor visibility that combined with heavy showers and longer spells of rain. Their vast experience of these fells was invaluable. Steff and Rebecca offered the moral support which was so desperately needed.

A harsh lesson in the damage that trying to quickly eat a packet of Hula hoops combined with a pizza slice can do to me. Overall, I'd rate the experience 5 stars.



Leg 4

Support – Joe Pickard, Laura Telford, Ben Crossley, Rob Gittins (+ Allen continuing)

Leg four wasn't far off my target time and I felt reasonably comfortable. The energy deficit had taken its toll from not eating much on leg 3, but an experienced support crew, admirably led by Gary, got me in shape to carry on.

We worked out that the only thing I could currently stomach was Kendal mint cake and the odd caffeine gel. I didn't want to voice it out loud, but I knew that if I was able to get out of the chair at Wasdale, with a reasonable amount of time left to complete the round, then I was definitely going to complete. This sounds extremely bullish considering leg 3 had taken almost 7 hours... but I'd been mentally preparing for this moment, and I had confidence in myself. I also knew that I was heading out with great support for leg 4 – Allen also continued on to leg 4, which gave me an extra boost.

Everyone kept circling back to check whether I needed anything and reminding me to eat. Their conversation kept my mind off the pain that was developing in my hip, and it was great to hear about their future running plans. I was even managing to keep the nausea at bay for most of this leg. We had a real mix of weather conditions and some great atmospheric views because of this. I was definitely starting to enjoy myself, although I probably didn't look like it. Joe did a great job of providing motivation and making sure I was updated on the splits – I like to know where I am. For example, when I'm on a flight, I'm the type of person to watch an in-flight tracker constantly just to know the progress and location. This became increasingly important when knowing when to increase or slow my speed. I also took advantage of the periods in between the bouts of nausea to put on the afterburners (well, that's what it felt like to me). Luckily this coincided with rocky sections, which is my favourite terrain.

Coming into Honister was very special. I was overwhelmed and humbled by earlier support runners and other club members coming out to welcome me in. Seeing Ellie, Reuben and Aurora gave me the extra motivation that was needed to see this out.



Leg 5

Support – Joe Pickard, Rob Gittins, Kathleen O'Donnell, (Ben and Allen continuing)

The climb up to Dale Head felt easier than it should have, all things considered, and it was good to have Tom join for this climb. Thereafter, the nausea returned with a vengeance. I felt sorry for Kathleen having to put up with the slow moving, retching creature that I had yet again suddenly become. Nevertheless, the encouragement kept coming.

By the time we got to Hindscarth I was having to physically pick up my right leg with my hands when coming up against anything remotely like a step. I found it to be a comical scenario mixed with frustration. I knew I was going to make it, but I had to accept that it was going to be slow progress and no easy stroll in.

The road section change over will be forever memorable for me (and possibly everyone else involved). Oli managed to turn the act of changing trainers into something close to an F1 pitstop, followed by a Mardi gras carnival thereafter. This period of fun made the first road section go quickly. It was also great to have my father-in-law run alongside me on the road section – unfortunately, my dad isn't around to see me complete the round, so this meant a lot.

I've had several hard days out with Joe this year, so I think it's fair to say that he could judge my mood better than most. He did a great job of keeping me on target towards the end of leg 5, which I'm grateful for. Even playing a psychedelic version of Chariots of fire, followed by the original, to keep me going strong through the road section.

Suddenly, I found myself running through the streets of Keswick at, what felt like, lightspeed. Ellie, Reuben and Aurora accompanied me to the top of the steps and that was it. It was finished. I touched the door and then mentioned to Ellie that it had "been a day". Nearly a whole day. 23 hours and 47 minutes.



After thoughts

What happens now... I'm proud to have completed the round within 24 hours, even more so in the conditions and with stomach issues. However, there's a feeling that I'm now missing something. The BGR has been on my mind every day for the past 5 months. Although I'm not the most serious of runners, the round has governed my being during these 5 months. It's currently mid July and I'm almost repaired. There's plenty of races left in this year's calendar that I'd like to try. However, the thing I'm looking forward to the most is the potential to help other club members with their ambitions over the coming years.

In hindsight there were a number of things that I could have done differently - a few more longer events of 12+hours and a better evaluation of my food tolerances are the standouts. Overall, I've learnt some valuable lessons, but I'm pleased that I never felt out of control of the situation – this is due in large part to the effort of those that supported me. Thank you once again.

