

In Support of the Original Mountain Marathon

You may have seen on the recent news reports about an event in which hundreds of fell runners nearly perished in the mountains of the Lake District. Well, it was tough, but not nearly as bad as the media led us to believe.

The event was the Original Mountain Marathon. It was founded 40 years ago as a 2 day mountain orienteering competition for teams of two - testing their fitness, mountain navigation skills and endurance over 2 days in the mountains. Competitors carry a tent, sleeping bags, spare clothing, food, and other equipment to be self-sufficient for 36 hours.

It is always held at the end of October to provide the additional challenge of bad weather. This year the forecast was for “heavy rain becoming torrential. Wind 50 – 70 miles per hour, gusting up to 90 mph.” (it was later revised to “gusting to 110 mph”)

As we travelled up the motorway in the worsening weather, we thought it could be an epic weekend, but had no idea how famous it was to become.

Tony (my running partner from Macclesfield Harriers) and I have competed in nearly 20 mountain marathons, often in bad weather. This year we had challenged my two sons, Martin & Pete, in the medium score class. We hoped that our experience would counter their superior fitness.

In response to the weather forecast, I decided to take a heavyweight gaiter, an extra fleece and a balaclava. The organisers had opted to the shorter “bad weather” courses, which cut our class from 6 hours on day 1 to 5 hours.(in the score classes, you have a set time to collect as many points as you can, & lose points for every minute you are over the allowed time)

We decided that we would keep as low as possible, in the lee of the hills, and aim to finish rather than take risks.

As we set off from the event centre in Seathwaite towards Styhead it was starting to rain. By the first control (near Raven Crag) it was pouring and by control 2 (high on the col near Fleetwith Pike) the rain was lashing into our faces so hard that it hurt. The next section was easy – a gentle downhill jog to Honister Pass helped by 80 mph gusts – scary!

We had taken 2hrs 40 to run less than 8km, getting 2 controls worth 45 points – a pathetic score – but we felt good, and were coping with the conditions. We decided that we had time to get another 2 controls high on

Dale Head (another 45 points) before jogging down to the overnight camp in Buttermere.

The conditions worsened. Have you ever tried running on a compass bearing across open moorland into a 70mph wind in torrential rain? It's slow and painful.

However, we found the other 2 controls and set off to the overnight camp – just 4 km to go and an hour to do it.

Unfortunately, en route, we met an official who informed us that the event was called off (the overnight camp was totally flooded) and we were advised to return to the event centre.

It was with a mixture of relief and disappointment that we turned around and made our way back to Seathwaite. Relief that we were no longer running into the biting rain. Disappointment that Martin & Pete would probably already be at the overnight camp waiting to gloat if we had failed to match their score.

We waded through the floods to reach the event centre, changed into dry clothes, had a meal provided by the organisers and slept comfortably in the car.

It was quite a surprise to hear on the early morning news that we were all stranded on the mountains, unaccounted-for and in serious danger!!!

Martin & Pete returned to the event centre on Sunday morning. They had reached the overnight camp with 95 points, pitched their tent and were told to return to the event centre. They packed away the tent and set off, only to be sent back by police who insisted that the road was closed. They slept in a barn near the overnight camp.

On Sunday morning, we pushed the cars out of a muddy car park and made our way home, with time to reflect on the event.

If we had been allowed to continue on day 1, we would have arrived at the overnight camp with exactly the same points score as Martin & Pete – leading to an exciting race on day 2. We were disappointed that it had been called off.

However, the weather conditions were probably the worst I have ever seen in the mountains. Over 7cm of rain fell on Saturday, on hills that were already wet. I have never seen such torrents cascading off the hills, nor experienced such winds.

It must have been difficult for the organisers, but I agree with their decisions – both to go ahead with the event, and to call it off when conditions deteriorated beyond all expectations.

The biggest problem was the way the media exaggerated. It was tough, but all competitors were experienced, well equipped, and it wasn't life threatening. Being "unaccounted-for in the mountains" is exactly where we intended to be!

There were some injuries (as always in an event like this) and we are always very grateful for the support of the local mountain rescue teams.

The official report of the event includes the following statistics:-

Number of 2 person teams starting	1427
Number of teams completing first day	795
Number of teams "led to safety"	0
Number of runners "forced to sleep in a barn"	0
Direct donations to Mountain Rescue	£7000+

I can't wait for next year's event.

Jim Knight

Nov 2008.