

Rubbed Up Raw

by Andy Mouncey

Up close and very personal in the inaugural running of the Ultra Tour Of The Lake District

100 miles – Two Feet – One Day

Rest when you get there...

Running Repairs

'I bet those ****!!**** sheep must be getting seriously worried!'

The only reason I can't lift my head to check is that I am concentrating hard on the Task At Hand which is this:

I'm at 65 miles on an exposed open fellside climbing to the high point of the entire route. It's torrential rain, howling wind and I'm wearing nothing below my waist except for my running shoes.

So I know what you're thinking – and it's not that: It's this:

You see, ultra-marathon running is a contact sport and that contact comes in three parts. There's feet-to-ground, (that's the obvious one!) then there's rucksack or bumbag to shoulders or waist, and then for the fellas there's there real killer: Chafing to the undercarriage.

I'm guessing this passes the ladies by, but you're right: I've never actually asked...

Despite liberal coatings of vaseline it's all been getting steadily worse over the last 15 miles or so to the point where I'm about to start crying like a girl.

Really. And that would never do.

Fortunately in desperate times the old grey matter can come up with desperate measures, and mine has done just that.

I grit my teeth for what I hope will be the last time to gingerly apply more lube to the offending area while the wind tries its' best to ram the raindrops through my cheeks and then hurl me off the slope:

'****!!'

Then I spend frantic minutes wrestling my over-trousers back over my shoes and up my legs. Strap kit back on and tie down. Stand and test: 'Oh yes! YES!!'

A wave of what I can describe as almost sexual relief washes through me – if I had a cigarette right now I'd reach for it!

I'll run the next 20 miles or so commando-style but so what: I'm back to chafe-free running, and let me tell you, it feels goooooood!

It's A Monster. With Very Big Teeth

Some 15 hours or so earlier at 7.30pm on Friday August 8th some 30 hardy souls had set off from Coniston with 100 miles and some 19,000 feet of climbing and descending in front of them and a 40 hour schedule to beat as the first Ultra Tour Of The Lake District (UTLD) got underway.



Modelled on the Ultra Tour Of Mont Blanc on the continent which now attracts some 2000 athletes and fills up within hours of the entries going live on-line, NW-based adventure racer and endurance athlete Marc Laithwaite had decided that anything the French could do...so he and his team had come up with a clockwise loop through the Lake District that would prove to be a monster. With very big teeth.

Welcome To Our World

Now people don't generally get on the start line of a 100 miler unless they're ready, so the finish rates are normally pretty high.

Not this time.

Less than half the field would finish this first race – the rest would be either timed out at checkpoints or would retire with a few stories to tell.

There are a handful of factors which make 100 milers such an undertaking:

1. The cumulative mileage which drains body and brain
2. The night section(s) which demand concentration
3. The navigation - made harder by 1,2,4, & 6
4. The isolation which can be as intimidating as the distance
5. The amount of (rough) descending which trashes the legs
6. The weather
7. The need to stay awake and keep your wits about you

Any one of these can be the difference between a finish and a DNF.

All seven together? Welcome to the world of the UTLD!

Playing Smart

I walk the first mile or so at the back of the field which is tough 'cos I'm ready for this and I wanna play with the boys at the front. But this is a deliberate decision made for three reasons:

1. It will mean that I'll run at my pace when I get going.
2. I'll always be moving past people which always feels good!
3. I won't be giving anyone a free ride with the navigation.

It's this final one which is the biggie: I've recied the entire route including the night section at night, and I reckon very few other folks - if any - will have done the same. So I know I know where I'm going - and I want to keep it that way for as long as possible...

We head SW then curve round north to the first checkpoint (CP) at Seathwaite. I'm reckoning on doing the first 20-25 miles on momentum and am focusing on 'floating' my way through

the field expending the least amount of energy as possible. Crazy as it may sound I do regard this as the 'freebie.' I also know we'll get this first stage done before darkness after which my world reduces down to a headtorch beam for about 7 hours.

I catch a group of six lying third just before the CP and hang back so they hit the CP first. I know there are some navigation choices to be made just the other side of the CP, so my mind is clear: I'm straight in, fill my doggy bag and straight out again and off down the road ahead of them.

Keeping my headtorch off in the gathering gloom I work to get out of sight through the woods. No chance! Voices and torchlight behind me signal we are back together again, so I pull over and let the boys go ahead. Oh well! I walk and eat as we climb out north of Seathwaite and console myself with the knowledge that there are plenty more chances to come... But I do love these little games!

Working Through

And sure enough a few miles later we are all reunited as we trudge and trip through the sodden and rock and root-strewn path which winds it's way through the forest at the base of Harter Fell. I was here for my final scouting trip on this section only five days ago so I know the dark wet pools are not actually that deep and where the firmest footing is. Time to go! A brief exchange of greetings and I splash ahead.

I know there is a tricky rocky descent coming up again with navigation choices and while my torch will be visible I'm banking on the fact that I'll be moving more confidently and faster over steep loose wet rock. I check the markers off in my head: Over the stile, head to cross the stream through the gap in the wall...now where's the line between the two rocky outcrops? OK, through and drop down - CARE-FULL! - then hard left at the post over the wet bit and head to parallel the wall...WATCH IT! It's ankle-wrenching stuff here - you're supposed to be floating, remember?!

But it is working and I move steadily ahead gaining confidence as I pass the familiar markers in this first tricky night section: Next stop CP 2 at Boot.

The welcome and warmth of the pub is very tempting, but I'm not stopping for last orders. A swift cup of soup, grab some sandwiches to go, and I'm out keeping my torch off again till I'm out of sight of the group I know are only a few minutes behind.

I munch my way through the village passing latenight pub-goers. 'You're third!' shouts a voice through the darkness. Third? Let's go find second, then...

Phone A Friend?

We're now making a beeline for Wasdale which I'm reckoning to be about an hour away. This is the second tricky navigation bit because as we climb clear of Boot the landscape becomes increasingly featureless with multiple path choices – all kinda ending up where we want to be, but only one taking the direct route. I've concluded that the only way to be sure to get the right path junction in the pitch black is to count paces from the final gate – I'm not wearing a watch so timing it is pointless – but the required 700 paces later I'm still not at the junction. That was 700 – wasn't it? But it clearly wasn't 'cos I don't recognise the ground: 'Should be another flat, wet rocky bit and then it kicks up again...

I jog on sweeping my light to the right searching for the marker stone I placed on the tiny cairn. Where is that rocky bit? I know I've not passed it...

Then out of the darkness I recognise the puddles, the path kicks up and then there's my marker stone – gotcha! This is the first of the two keys to the stage – but I'm stuffed if I've lost my ability to count already!

Lights ahead – two of them. I'm closing fast which I can only assume that they're lost or unsure. I'm neither and say a silent prayer of thanks again that I've done my homework: This stage will really mess with you if you get it wrong.

A fresh breeze from my left announces our arrival at Burnmoor Tarn and the three of us coincide for the first time. I don't know it yet but Warren and Nick are a couple of seasoned adventure racers up from London and I remember them being conspicuous at the start clutching their poles. (I'd reckoned it's just more kit to lug

around – an opinion I will revise on reflection post-race...)

Brief greetings and some gallows humour about time and place, then I'm off concentrating hard on getting the right line off the NE edge which is the second key to this stage.

Hug the shore - you know it's all flooded here - and watch for the track rising slightly still on the same line. Got it! Grass for a couple of hundred yards then fork sharp right at the base of a short steep climb. I grin as I remember this is where Alex and I practically tripped over a cow lying right across the path on our night recce. Well, you expect sheep on the fells, don't you? But something four times the size looming into the torchlight is another thing entirely!

I can hear the other two are tagging on behind and smile ruefully. I've reconciled myself upfront on the 'drop or stick' choices. I know there are either specific locations where route choices have to be made, or where if I go hard, I can get out of sight of any chasers. But this is not where I am right now, and you can't exactly zip away over rocky, wet uneven ground in the pitch black anyway.

Well, you could if you were Jos Naylor, and we are heading into the great man's backyard...

I know that if Nick & Warren decide I am running decisively - i.e it looks like I know where I'm going – 'odds are they'll tag me: I know I would!

The 64 thousand dollar question: Am I prepared to expend energy to deliberately drop them, or do I conserve and see how the elastic expands or contracts between us as we go?

Phone a friend??

In The Slipstream Of Steve

We slither down into Wasdale Head together, in and out the CP sharpish, and set our sights on Lake Buttermere to the north. Our route will take us over the first two of the high passes: Black Sail and Scarth Gap before dropping down to the lake. I grin when I remember that it took my wife Charlotte as long to drive between these two checkpoints as it did for me to run this stage – which I chose to interpret as my speedy running as opposed to her limited road choices!

We will have two big, steep, rocky, wet descents to negotiate on this leg – and I came a right cropper on the second one during my night recce. Let's keep the runner on the feet this time, please!

I find Wasdale Head such an atmospheric place. Hemmed in on three sides by steep mountains, I hoped I would see it with a clear starlit sky. No chance! The clouds have thrown a blanket over everything though the cloud-base is above our high point.

Up and down the first climb with no worries and just the sound of water rushing down the mountainside around us. Torch light is glimpsed behind us as we switchback – but it is a long way down. But my focus is on the way ahead: Eyes front, sunshine!

Smoothly up and over the second smaller climb, and safely down the long descent to the western shore of Buttermere. Then at the CP in the village we get the first news of the leader: 'Steve is 50 minutes ahead of you.' I figure I've misheard. 'You mean 15 – one, five don't you?'

Er, no.

Steve Birkinshaw has flown off the front and coming upto a third of the way round is indeed 50 minutes up. Bloody hell! We've haven't exactly been dawdling, but then I remember that if he did fly off the front from the start he probably gained half that time on me on the first stage. Well, fair play to the fella: If he comes back he comes back – now let's get back to focusing on what you can control, man...

Breaking Free

We're still heading north and this next leg will see us in sight of Keswick and hopefully into sunrise! Before that, we have to thread our way on narrow, faint climbing paths. It looked straightforward on the map: My recce's have shown me it is anything but, and the potential for disaster is huge.

So it's an ideal stage to play my advantage, but to do that would have meant getting out the CP ahead of Warren and Nick and go hard to get out of sight. And I've lost that chance. If I let them go ahead I'll catch them and even if I get past they'll have my torchlight to follow.

So I really made my choice coming along the

lake shore.

I smile ruefully as I go through an inventory – then admit that at least part of me will be glad of the company on this final dark stage.

It's a perfect stage navigation-wise and we are even blessed with a clearing sky part way through. We all stop and stare up into the star-scape: 'One of the reasons we do this, man...

We hit the CP at Braithwaite on the outskirts of Keswick still chasing the dawn – still no sign of the sky lightening. Bowls of rice pudding and pasta devoured in quick succession then we gird our loins for some road bashing into Keswick.

It's here that our elastic snaps for the first time. A call of nature delays me, the boys miss a turn ahead of me, I dive down it and come out ahead.

Clear for the first time for hours, I put my head down and work to put some time on them as we climb back onto the fells northeast of Keswick.

It's fine balance between effort and control but I keep my eyes firmly ahead and my attention of the controls. Once the forest above Keswick has been left behind, this whole section is open. Even if I'm considerable distance ahead I know they boys will be able to see me on the dogleg across the valley. So I work on the principle practiced by small children the world over: If I can't see you, you can't see me!

Warning Lights

Blencathra Centre is the last CP before Dockray – and Dockray is half way.

The marshals emerge cold and windswept from the shelter of a wall. It's not exactly city station out here! I am now lying second – and I'm told Steve has increased his lead again on schedule for a 12 hour first half.

This means that I am 'late' – but I don't figure this till I look at the timings after the race as I have set no schedules, I don't have a watch, and I'm not interested in the time. Right there, all I know is that:

I need to keep eating and drinking

The tough night stuff is behind us

And I still have my proverbial **** together

I'm only gone a couple of miles into the next stage when I hear a shouted greeting behind me. No prizes: Warren & Nick are a couple of hundred yards away.

Okayyyyyy – so much for that whopping great gap you thought you opened up then!

We finally come together for the last four miles into the CP, and by then we are all focused on the fact that we are in touching distance of half way:

- It's stayed dry
- We all have new kit and food to look forward to
- My feet are still in one piece
- And I still have my **** together!

But I know I have a problem developing, because among the green dials there is one starting to flash amber. I've been on mainly solid food for the first few hours, and much of it has gone through me which has necessitated multiple emergency dumping action.

I've since switched to gels but it would appear the damage is done...

My shorts have also been starting to chafe – I've tested this short/pants combo over 7 hours so clearly it's good for that and no extra(!) – and worryingly, no amount of vaseline seems to help. It's not an area you really want to have problems with when you are on your Jack Jones in the middle of a mountainside with miles left to go. Yeah, if you're gonna have a sense of humour failure over anything, sunshine, this one will do it in spades...

Put simply I have one priority: At halfway I really need to sort my **** out.

Rubbing Up The Wrong Way

Sometimes stuff has to get worse before it gets better: The weather deteriorated to the wind and rain we would get for the rest of the day, (and night) and my next 15 miles were dominated by increasing discomfort, decreasing vaseline supplies, and increasing number and duration of emergency stops to administer to my tenderizing undercarriage.

In between all this I was still running strongly – I'd just get to a point where I'd have to stop, make an adjustment, and scream at something for a bit – so once again Nick, Warren and I were all leapfrogging each other – a pattern we kept till the last quarter or so of the race.

Then at Pooley Bridge just short of 60 miles there's my wife with our baby son Tom who wastes no time in practicing his own brand of waving to his grinning daddy. They've been here since Steve blew through – hours ago – because that was our Plan A as well...

Smiles and cold kisses all round: 'Hi honey – be with you in a minute – just need to dive into these public toilets..!' I'm such a romantic.

Full Circle

Salvation awaits me at Ambleside. Not only are Tom and Charlotte waiting, but the CP is in the Lakes Runner shop – and as far as I am concerned, shop only means one thing: New shorts!

I am weary and I'm sore and I've been getting progressively slower on the climbs. I just can't move my legs any faster! It's also been dreadful weather since breakfast time – but you know what else? I'm a little over 80 miles to the good and I do still have my wits about me. I know that I just need to sort myself out, smile with my favourite lady and our new small boy and we'll be in business for the last bit.

'Have you still got your headtorch, Andy?'

Huh?

'You'll need a light, babe – it'll be dark before you finish now.'

I'm momentarily confused as I'd never considered the prospect that I'd be finishing in the dark, but Charly is right – and I ditched my torch at 50 miles.

Thank god we're in a shop then!

I'm off and moving again as the town is closing up for the day.

Darkness does finally set in for the second time when I am at about 6 miles to go. Well before that I have decided that I will walk it in when that happens because it is more important for me to:

Finish

Finish safely

Finish without putting myself into a bigger box than I already inhabiting...

But it is a very slow walk. It's still raining (!) and the tracks are now mainly raging torrents. The last few miles are at high level in the pitch black with the mist reducing visibility down to 20 yard torch beam while Mother Nature does her thing with a thunderstorm in the near distance.

This is a sting in the tail and no mistake!

But I'm a happy camper even though my world has shrunk down to the bare essentials.

Very close now...

I'm tortoise slow down the final big steep rocky treacherous descent, remembering how I danced down this in training – and then all that is left is the walk back down the track we started out on.

I get lost trying to find my way through a short cut in Coniston - and I can practically see the finish, for god's sake!!! – but eventually at some point just before midnight I am walking up the drive to the Sports Club towards a very familiar silhouette.

'Hi honey.' A big long hug. 'It's very nice to be back.'

