

Andy Walker - Lake District 110km Ultra Marathon Charity Run

Mind games in the mountains!

I have the opinion that human beings are able to achieve a lot more than we think possible. I also believe that strong willpower and mental resilience are very important factors that can help immeasurably in the face of physical challenge and can even offset lesser training or technical ability. It was a couple of months ago I had this conversation with a triathlete who threw the gauntlet and urged me to prove it in an ultra-marathon and I made the mistake of foolishly taking it up.

Starting and finishing in Ambleside, the Ultimate Trails Challenge takes in a complete circuit of the central Lake District – on foot! It is a tough challenging ultra-marathon course through the most dramatic mountain scenery and is regarded as one of the hardest but most picturesque ultra-marathons in the UK. The 110km route includes 6 mountain passes, 5 lakes, 14,000 ft. ascents and descents, so competitors start at midnight on Friday 26th June and have to run the course throughout Saturday to finish within 24 hours. Some say it is equivalent not to three marathons, but if terrain, night running, technical challenge and ascent is taken into account it will feel more like attempting four full marathons in one day!

All competitors had to carry a backpack with a number of mandatory items such as spare dry clothing, waterproofs, first aid kit, emergency rations, head torch & spare batteries. I also took two trekking poles as these can often help with sharing out the effort and physical stress. Unfortunately using these in hill training a few weeks before resulted in an injury to my calf muscle which seriously hampered the preparations, to the point that I didn't feel I had achieved an adequate number of miles on my feet prior to arriving at the start line. I worked out that walking would not be quick enough to finish in time as each of the eight checkpoints had a cut-off time that runners had to beat otherwise they would be pulled off the course. My tactics were straight forward - if quite conservative - and that was to have my pack as light as possible with only the mandatory emergency kit, run slow and fuel up at each of the checkpoints. I had a water pouch so could fill this up with electrolytes which should be enough to keep me hydrated for the 2-3 hours between refills at checkpoints.

So there I was at the start line ready to drag 88kg of my 55 year old body around something that most sane people would not even contemplate. With my previous injury and lack of training I was not looking to compete with anyone but myself; my primary goal was therefore to finish within the 24 hours. Though I did have a secondary goal in my mind; a matter of pride and that was not to come last. Well as I say it's all in the mind and at midnight I set off from Ambleside under the light of my head torch alongside 300 other runners.

The first leg went reasonably well on good tracks and I was ahead of my estimate by the time I arrived at the first checkpoint. It was my plan to get through this with the minimum of fuss so only had a quick drink and filled up my water pouch then straight back out running so as not to lose valuable time. It was quite a magical atmosphere running with head torches, though even here I had to control my mind games. When going uphill it was rather disconcerting to see strings of head torches from the many runners in front of me stretching for miles and indicating how much more climbing I had yet to do. I countered this by looking back to see that there were also lights from the runners behind me. As most of the runners were athletes, by the time I got to the next two checkpoints, many were ahead of me, as a consequence there were no noodles or porridge left which I'd banked on for essential carbohydrates. So early in the course, not even daylight and my nutrition plan was already failing. This became a theme with other checkpoints being poorly stocked and running out of either food or electrolytes such that I was only able to get small boost of energy from the few jelly babies and energy gels I had, but the bigger concern is that I was now starting to get dehydrated. There was nothing I could do but carry on and hope that things got better.

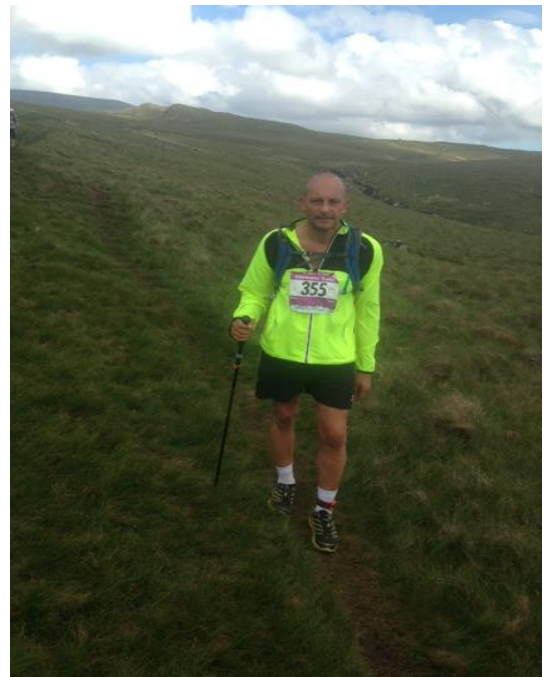


After hours in the dark, dawn was a welcome sight

A few hours into the event and we were treated to a picturesque and uplifting sight as daylight started to break over the hills and lakes. At this stage the course also started to change dramatically, no longer were there steady and easily navigable trails but the routes up the mountains became extremely tough, the legs burning with lactic acid, the lungs gasping to take in oxygen and the body absolutely dripping with sweat. This was more like mountaineering than a run however it was certainly living up to its billing as an extreme endurance challenge. On reaching the peaks we were not rewarded with a steady and safe run down as the descent was also over very uneven rocky ground such that I was continually having to concentrate where I

placed my feet. I noticed that at this stage I started to trip and stumble frequently and realised that I was inadvertently not lifting my feet to clear obstacles as my legs must have been getting tired.

Checkpoint 5 was about 60 kilometres into the run so I was now over half way through. Although my experience so far had been tougher than expected I was still confident I could make the remaining distance. However because of energy loss and dehydration I wanted to try and reduce the weight in my bag so contemplated getting rid of the two trekking poles and saving a little weight, however in the end chose to keep them as there were still tricky sections ahead. Little did I know how significant this small decision was going to become. It was just a few kilometres later, on a strenuous and particularly rocky mountain that disaster struck. I was navigating down a steep and difficult descent, when the old injury returned and pain shot up my calf muscle. I had to slow right down to a hobble as an overpowering feeling of despair mounted with the realisation that my run could be over. I may even have to be pulled off the course. Unfortunately as I was only a third of the way down an exposed mountain, evacuation was not going to be a straight forward affair so using one of the trekking poles as a walking stick I elected to walk on. Having got reception on my mobile I called my partner to break the news I was delayed, have a moan about the lack of refreshments at checkpoints then pushed on. I scrambled down the remaining rocks to where the ground became boggy which seemed to be a little easier. What added to the discomfort was that in trying to protect my leg I could not jump across pools of water so the result was that I got a thorough soaking. It was not long before my wet shoes and clothes were now beginning to chafe my skin, though I couldn't afford to stop to sort this out as I had more pressing priorities on my mind. True to form the next checkpoint had no electrolytes, no water and certainly no ice for my leg. I felt as though now more than ever I really was on my own, more concerned with survival than completing the run. Though I was still in the game. For some reason I could not just give in so decided that I would try and keep moving until either my injury incapacitated me or the sweep up team pulled me off for failing to meet a cut off time. Down but not out just yet!



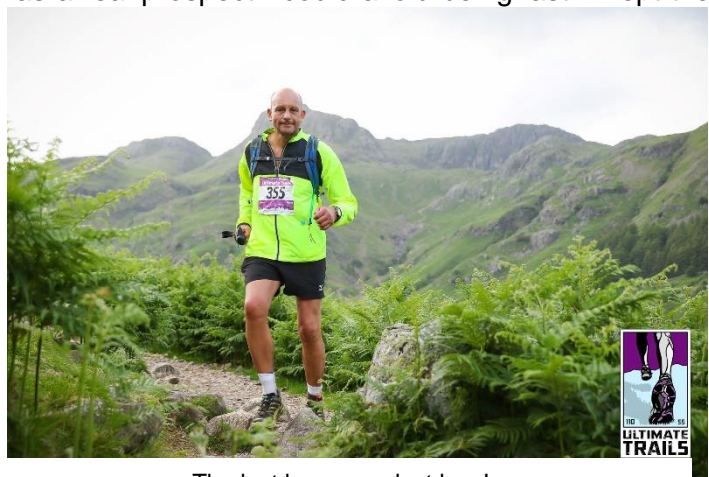
Down but not out thanks to the walking stick!

The next hour was pivotal and gave me chance to think. My family and friends would all back me to finish this event and then there were the two charities that I would have to face up to; failure was one thing but there was no way I was going to give up trying. In the absence of a miracle I needed to work out if I could possibly increase my speed to beat the cut offs without causing more damage. By a combination of changing my gait so my foot landed flat and leaning on my pole I realised that the pain in my leg was bearable. It was then that I concocted a half-baked plan – not a great one but it was all I had. I was going to try a light jog for five paces on the flat to see what happens. Five done, no further pain. Walk for a few minutes. Try again but ten paces this time, no reaction so walk again. I kept these mini cycles of walking and jogging going, steadily increasing the steps I would jog until I achieved fifty paces. That was enough, I could now gain time on the flat whilst protecting my leg on the uphill and downhill sections. Now I had a new plan that gave at least a ray of hope!

After what seemed a full day hobbling and jogging I arrived at checkpoint 7, where I was met with pizza, pasties, biscuits and electrolytes. I didn't know at the time but my partner had notified the event staff who had quickly ensured the final checkpoints were restocked. Even isolated on a mountain I'd got some support. This surge of energy and water lifted my spirits to the extent that I again felt positive, but time was not on my side, I had to leave quickly. Whilst other runners were changing socks and shoes I quickly drank electrolytes, filled my water pouch and got as much food in my mouth and pockets as I could then left for what was one of the toughest legs on the course.

An hour later I was facing what seemed to be a near vertical mountain. I was also obviously moving slow as two runners overtook me and informed me that everyone behind had either given up or been swept up. Looking back several kilometres down the valley confirmed there was no one at all behind me. Great, I was now the person in the very last place of the whole event. Though I only had one checkpoint and one cut off between me and the finish line about 20km ahead. Time for a tough decision as the chances were with my current slow pace I would miss the next cut off. I decided to take a risk and use all the energy I could summon to make up time and push as hard as I could to the top of the mountain. The plan being it would then be a relatively straight forward descent to the final checkpoint where I could replenish energy and fluids. The reality was brutal. I had to drive my pole hard into the ground to protect my leg and propel me up. Now my arms were getting tired as well such that by only half way up the 500 metre climb, I could only manage short spurts before becoming doubled up over my pole gasping for air with sweat running in free flow off my head. However progress was made and I caught up with the two guys who had passed me. I welcomed their company for the 4 km descent down to the final checkpoint. I had made the cut off.

I noticed that several runners were resting and making good use of the refreshments, so I filled up my water pouch, washed down some pain killers with a cup of hot soup, grabbed a handful of chips and got straight out running as quickly as I could, gaining a few places in the process. It was now evening but light and apart from a couple of small hills the going was easier, much of it flat or down hill. My goals were coming back and there was a real prospect I could avoid being last. I kept the pace on as fast as I could, feeling confident my will power would get me through to the finish line. To see Ambleside in the distance lifted my spirits, however there was a final sting in the tail. This leg should have been 10km however the organisers seem to have extended it to around 15km. So rather than go direct the route twisted off back out into the country over more hills. I was hurting and hadn't expected this extra distance so just wanted this whole event over. After what I'd been through though, nothing was going to stop me now.



The last leg on my last legs!

Eventually as dark came down I crossed the finish line at around 10:30pm - an hour and a half before the race closed. It had taken me a staggering 22 ½ hours on my feet to complete the 110km, however I had learned much along the way. I was placed 177th out of only 199 finishers, though I was happy with that position. I had completed the challenge within 24 hours and not come last!

The aftermath – counting the cost!

In keeping with other competitors the physical cost was swollen feet, losing toe nails, pulled muscles such that I could hardly walk the next day. Aches and pains continued to the extent that it was difficult to step up or down for one week afterwards.

The disappointing lack of stocked feed stations at checkpoints meant that the event was harder than it should have been so from that perspective probably didn't give great value, however considering the memories and the lessons I learned along the way it was priceless.

I learned that preparation is great however if your plan is totally dependent upon other people, it's best to have a back-up. I had it confirmed that determination and mental resilience can help overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges. However staying determined against struggle is difficult and just trying harder not always the answer, sometimes we need to be resourceful and even change our short term goals. I found the important factor in successfully overcoming my obstacles during my darkest times in this event, was simply to find a way to just keep moving forwards. I may have finished 177th however I think this was one event I came out feeling a winner.

The real winners though are the following two charities that I would like to benefit from my pain and your donations:

Kidney Research UK is the leading national charity dedicated to research that will lead to better treatments and cures for kidney disease.

My partner Sue and several other members of her family have the condition Polycystic Kidney Disease. Polycystic kidney disease (PKD) is a genetic disorder where fluid filled cysts grow in kidneys and destroy normal renal tissue. It is the world's most common inherited kidney disease affecting around 12.5 million individuals. The only current treatment for this is dialysis or for those lucky enough, kidney transplant. However Kidney Research UK are currently researching/trialling new treatment which would hopefully prevent further deterioration of the kidneys however this can only continue with help from the general public.

Lesser known is the **PID UK**. People affected by primary immunodeficiency (PIDs) have parts of their immune systems missing or not working. This leaves them with reduced or no natural defence against germs such as the bacteria, fungi and viruses, which surround us every day.

My son, Lee was diagnosed in infancy with primary immunodeficiency and has had to visit hospital and have drips every few weeks to replace antibodies into his blood as his body does not make them itself. Now as a 21 year adult he does these infusions himself at home, allowing him to live as much a normal life as he can. He is only able to do this due to recent medical advances therefore your donations will really make a difference to the estimated 5000 people in the UK who have some form of PID.

I hope you found my account of the 110km Lake District Ultra Marathon entertaining.

Many thanks for your support,

Andy Walker