

Traverse of Wales: Distance 368miles / 70,000ft ascent in under 82hours

This was the challenge that was set to try to raise as much money for Cancer Research UK.

A two team continuous relay running nonstop that crosses over the roughest terrain Wales can offer, in the most deplorable of weather. Visiting the main mountain areas including 50 summits over 2,000ft, we went from the iconic South Stack Lighthouse on Anglesey following the coastal path around to the Menai bridge then going onto the Cambrian way to the Carneddau, Snowdonia, Rhinogs, Cadair Idris, Brecon Beacons and Black Mountains before finishing on the Offa's Dyke path over the iconic Severn bridge to England.

I was collected by Robin in his Ford Focus at 0525hrs with Jon and Amanda, the car already packed to the roof with food, running kits and camping equipment for 4 days, but we somehow packed my stuff in as well and I changed the gears with my holdall as Robin tried to see out of the windscreen. Umbrellas were taken too so we could sit outside on seats when the stir crazy had got to us from being constantly cramped up in the minibus, but in reality we just tried to sleep in the minibus all the time, too knackered to sit outside!



The journey down to South Stack lighthouse in Anglesey was uneventful and we arrived with a few minutes to spare. We parked up so we could go down 400 steps to the suspension bridge so we could begin our journey. Some quick photos were taken between the squalls of sea spray and intermittent showers. The clock reached 10 and with the countdown over we were on our way back up the 400 steps for the first of 36 legs that we were to complete for our team. The first leg was from South Stack to Holyhead town around the coastal path followed by the second leg to

Beddmanarch bay, the weather being a mixed bag of either intermittent showers or strong gales. Both legs were completed just out of the schedule time, were we too slow?



I decided for the first section to do 2 legs and then rest for one. We totalled 7 legs to Bull bay and during that section I can only recount that we went ahead of schedule on one leg which turned out a bit of luck for myself and Mark who also did it, as we ran on private roads that were shown to be paths on the map, the kick back from the tarmac obviously helping us. The view of the coast line was quite amazing in places with the jagged rocks disappearing into the sea. I looked out for any sea life that maybe hidden in the waves but only saw the white surf pounding the rocks. We ran past the old chimneys from when the miners worked the area for the metal in the ground, they looked quite eerie reaching up into the grey sky. We soon switched with team B who took over the running from Bull bay to the Menai Bridge, which gave us time for a proper feed of fish and chips and to pick up our final pacer Amanda who had had to go back to work after dropping us off at the minibus. The time was tea time and although we had been up since dawn and ran most of the day, none of us felt the need for a sleep, which I think we were going to regret later.



The team started to make better plans for attacking the sections that we had to do. We consisted of a few experienced fell runners and experienced road runners. The trail sections were taken on by the road runners mostly, which gave some respite to the long fell legs that had to be done. I decided to do 2 fell legs back to back on our next section. From Bronydd Isaf to Ogwen, over five 3,000ft

mountains namely: Garnedd Uchaf, Foel Grach, Carnedd llewelyn, Carnedd Dafydd and Pen yr Ole Wen. Then onto the next leg Ogwen to Pen-y-pass, over four 3,000ft mountains: Tryfan, Glyder Fach, Castell y Gwynt and Glyder Fawr.



I can only say it was bloody hard for the people that went up onto the fells that night. Starting at around 1 in the morning it was a long slog up onto the ridge tops, seeing very little apart from the glare from the head light illuminating the path in front. Mark was swallowed up to his waist in bog at one stage when we had got off the beaten track. Finding our way was tricky and the further we went up the more the wind grew to blow us off the mountain. 80mph winds were forecast and I think it was probable more. I'm sure I looked back at one point and Mark was sliding backwards at 45 degrees angle into the wind, trying in vain to get some grip on the greasy rock surface. Could have been very dangerous if an edge was behind him leading to a 1000ft drop! Also the further we went up the more the ground became very rocky until we were reduced to a crawl at times trying to find our way over the boulder fields in the dark. Not only was the route obscured over these boulders but the more misery that came down on them the more they became like ice leading to foot traps. Eventually we came down to the Ogwen reservoir, where we had to pick our way through the marsh/swampland, which had either the misplaced stepping stones or the ankle deep water to the minibus that was waiting for us on the other side.

Dawn was just about to break as we grabbed a sarnie and then set off for the summit of Tryfan. Again the going up became a tiring slog until we found that the wind had increased its power even more towards the top of the col. We did what we could to cling on to rock and as we got over to the other side although we were now sheltered from the power of the wind the mountain became a rock climb descent in places. We soon came to a standing still as we looked down to try to uncover the enigma of the maze below us. A fall here would most likely end the Traverse of Wales and us at the same time. As we got down to the saddle there was no time to rest, we had fallen a long way back on our time schedule so we ploughed on. The ground again became a jumble of rocks which hid the path from top to top, peak by peak went by until eventually Robin left us so he could make better time down the mountain to pass the relay baton "Rammie" onto the next leg. This final leg was to be one of the more interesting legs. It not only went over Snowdon, the biggest of them all in Wales, but we lost one of the runners!

The weather hadn't changed and the clag had come down too on the top, so visibility was about 50ft. The group became slightly separated as they came down and the path split 2 ways; so did the team. It was only after about 5 minutes through the clag that they realised Andy wasn't there with

them; he had gone down the other path leading him miles away from the checkpoint and the minibus. The others went back up and shouted him but to no avail and so without the possibility of communications they came down as quickly as they could. After passing on the grim news we made the decision to take the minibus around the other side of the mountain, we didn't have communications either on this side, so maybe after looking at the route that Andy might have took we would find some there. Both teams were now aware that Andy had been missing for about 2 hours; and just before a search party was initiated; we found Andy on the road, on the other side of Snowdon. He had made his own way down, when he realised he had become separated and after trying to make contact with his team and us in the minibus. He even hitched a ride down the road to the checkpoint where we would have been; and then had to walk back up the way he had come because the minibus had just driven past!



We handed the baton over and I think everybody was glad that that section was now over. Emotions were running high, but there was no falling out with each other, I think it brought us closer together as a group, knowing that sometimes we are tested to extreme limits and how we deal with it can have a positive approach on a team. As we rested and stretched out in our tents for a couple of hours; we were not the only team to think about sending out a search party.



Team B had just as much bad weather as us and their journey across the North and South Rhinogs became just as hard. With the time falling away quickly the last 2 legs lasted into the night, the ground incredibly hard to navigate over safely, with Mother Nature trying as hard as she could to repel them. The most experienced of fell runners had fallen an hour and a half behind schedule, on just one leg. This time delay had invoked a search for them and fortunately they were found on the

right track descending off the mountain. Cold and wet, but still smiling, Bryan said, "he wouldn't want to be in any other place on a Saturday night!!"



Another time delay now meant that we were going to start our next section at 1 in the morning. Our third night of running, which if the plans had gone to schedule should have been 2 night sections for each team, now team A were going to do 4 if we got back on the schedule. Saturday night saw us going over three of the 2000ft Welsh mountains on the legs that I did, a lot less in height and so much warmer; just as wet and windy. We climbed over Waun-oer, Cribin Fawr and Maesglase following the GPS and map route and found the underfoot conditions more reasonable than before. Between us all on the team we pulled back an hour from the schedule, so we were now only 8 hours behind. We drove to our next section at Strata Florida and again set up camp to stretch our legs from the confines of the now rather smelly minibus. Calculating the times ahead we were going to be able to listen to the England match now instead of hearing glimpses of how well or not they were doing between the legs, but this would be at our rest time expense. Again a couple of hours sleep and then getting a bite to eat from the canteen that Bev and Malcolm had brought in their car, to getting bitten from the mosquitos as night enveloped us to the disappointing commentary of how the England side seemed to be so unfit.



Team B came to the checkpoint and handed over the baton, so we could start the 39th leg. Were we going to gain any more time from the schedule? No! Firstly the fell legs had been planned to do in daylight, so the algorithm that had been used was set for a faster pace, secondly the course had not planned for the Welsh swamp tussocks where it had to go right through the middle of!



For some strange reason I have yet to remember why I decided with Mark that I would do the first 2 legs and with hindsight much regret. It started off ok, through a bit of marsh, into a forest that was pitch black, where I tripped over a tree root and dead legged myself into the bargain and then out onto a tussocky hill. This is where the ankles can get turned over very easily. For Jon and Andy this part went as well as it could at night with us struggling back to the safety of the minibus; with all of our ankles being quite sore and swollen by the time the leg was over. We had lost only 20 minutes considering. The next leg for me became the horrendous leg!

On paper it sounded all too easy. More descent than ascent by some 700ft on average over the course of it, little did I know this Welsh land of hidden depths. We started out from a remote telephone box at about 1am. Mark had the GPS on and as we got started the path had disappeared. Drake's Cambrian way had vanished to be replaced with a land filled with swamp and tussocks. Obviously it was flat but going over it was agony. For the first 100 meters we tried to find the hidden path which we criss-crossed this god forsaken part of Wales so many times I lost count. We soon realised there was no path; if there could have been it would have been 3ft below the water line. Up to our waists the three of us Amanda, Mark and myself were or face planting the tussock in front, which we had just fallen off or over. My ankles had become a swollen mess and my frustration began to show. We soon split up, each searching for a bit of respite. The harder you tried to get through it the slower the torture it became. Falling over and over, getting soaked through and not really knowing what you would find beneath your feet drove me mad. Sometimes there would be a lull in the ground where purchase could be found and 10 meters was gained easily and then it opened up again and you were back to clutching out for the reeds and grass tussocks to stop the water from completely swallowing you up. We had 2 km's of this to cover and a lot of swearing was covered too. I told Amanda that I swore when I fell was because I'd like them to know where I was or at least in the direction of where I had fell, in case all that could be seen was a hand, waving a final goodbye! We eventually got to some higher ground and the path soon showed itself. Letting us start to make some headway on this torrid leg. The running became easier underfoot although for me more painful for my ankles. The quicker we went to get the time back, made each step more unbearable. I was thankful that we came to a rise so we could walk but an error on the navigation meant we had to turn back down the hill until we found the stile we needed. The run into the end of this leg seemed to last a long time as we twisted our way down the valley following the river. The sight of Robin near the minibus couldn't have come sooner as I was done for. I had put myself forward for another 2 legs in this section, but I knew I was only good for one more. Thankfully

Amanda stepped in on the longer leg which enabled me to recharge a bit in the minibus; I thought at the end of this section she wished she hadn't have but I was very grateful she did.



We had come to a decision time when the teams met up as we were still too far behind the schedule with not enough time to make it across with other factors thrown in. The minibuses had to be back at a certain time along with some of the runners who had work to go back to, namely me on nightshift, there were others too but getting off work would have been easier for them if we over ran. The contingency plan that was invoked due to this late running was we were going to miss a mountain section out. The course from where we were was going to go back up in the Black mountains and over Twmpa (Lord Hereford's knob) and Hay Bluff, but if we linked up the bottom the traverse could still be done as a whole. Also if team A whose turn it was to rest relinquished that rest and ran simultaneously with team B then the traverse could be done on time. Team B chose to do the link up and their sections whilst we had an hour to rest and then start our section. Great! Still no sleep and now it seemed we were being shafted. Funny how this helped to make us more determined to finish and also now we had a cunning plan. As both teams were competitive towards each other we saw that if we completed our section first we could then start doing team B's final legs, ensuring that at the end of the journey team A would have done more miles and more ascent than team B. Winning the best overall team.



The last section we followed the Offa's dyke path after linking into it from the Cambrian way. Most of it was on trails and the fact that sleep deprivation was coming on meant that those legs that I did

became unmemorable. We came to the end of our section and Team B was still on theirs, so without further ado we pressed on and started taking out their last few legs. One memorable sight was seeing the Severn Bridge from Boughspring, the whole expanse in magnificent view meant we had nearly achieved our goal. As we started the penultimate leg we learnt that team B had finished their section and were on the way to Bulwark for the last leg. We could join up as one and complete the journey together. The last leg back into good old Blighty from Wales was quite emotional. Running over the Severn estuary on the iconic Severn Bridge was quite breath taking, pardon the pun. The weather had abated and the sun breaking out put an end to quite an amazing journey, which at times seemed impossible to accomplish, but well worth the effort that everybody had put in.





With the traverse now finished, we all showered and changed into fresh smelling clothes, god knows what the receptionist could smell when we all piled into the lobby for the rooms that were allocated to us, and headed for a well-deserved meal in the pub just down the road from the travel inn. This wasn't the end for all of us, as one chap who shall remain nameless, definitely wasn't me, found him last out of the hotel after foo-fooing himself up too much, asked where everybody else had gone, the receptionist said "the pub just down the road, a 20 minutes' walk, across the bridge and it's on your left hand side". So with no further ado he set off and crossed the bridge, the Severn Bridge, again, the one that he'd just spent 40 minutes running over! The penny dropped after he got halfway and so he came back again, but unfortunately was too late to enjoy the celebrations.

Attached are the leg data of the schedule and what each team and member did. Hopefully this might inspire you to take up running or try to raise some money for charity. I apologise that there wasn't much time between putting this event out on the system and actually doing it, but if you feel you would like to donate some money to this great cause then what about 1p per mile that I did. It's not a lot but if everybody put in a little we may raise quite a bit. The answer is found on the attachment.

Thank you for taking time out and reading my exploits.

Cheers and kind regards

Keith Covell

