

# Traverse of Wales – 22 to 25 June 2012

## Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> June

Driving over to North Wales, torrential rain lashing the team B minibus, we discussed the latest weather forecast: heavy rain with winds gusting to 80 mph over the high ground of Snowdonia. “Can’t think of a better bunch of guys than the A team taking on those hills tonight!” said Bryan, a wicked grin on his face. “With a bit of luck we will be snug in a tent somewhere whilst they are out battling the elements”. Team A, who had left earlier for their 10am start on Holyhead, was already in action on their first team section around the northern coastline of Anglesey.

At the first team changeover point at Bull Bay where we met team A, their runners reported that holding the schedule on the initial legs had proved tough in the conditions, a warning of things to come. Team B then took over the relay baton and ran their legs around the remainder of the Anglesey coastal path to the Menai Bridge, the next team changeover point. Here our mobile catering facility provided by Bev and Malcolm met us for the first time late Friday evening with some very welcome hot food and drinks.

As team A headed off into the darkness for their first night section over the Carnedd mountains, we were just 11 minutes behind schedule after 75 miles of running. But we were all conscious of the fact that all we had done so far was merely a warm up with the real challenges still to come.

Whilst team B spent a reasonably restful night camped in a car park at Nantmor, team A had spent a very tough night out in the mountains. Their team section involved crossing 10 summits over 3,000 feet including the Carnedd, Tryfan, Glyders and Snowdon. A combination of poor visibility, rain, very strong winds and wet slippery rock meant progress had to be steady to avoid accidents and navigational errors. At some points runners were almost blown off their feet. Despite these difficulties only a little time was dropped until the leg over Snowdon itself where on the descent Andy got detached from the other runners in front and at a path junction took a different route off the mountain.

Because of the thick misty conditions this wasn’t immediately apparent to the others who stopped lower down the mountain to wait for Andy. As for Andy, when he realised he was on his own, he sensibly made the decision to continue down into the valley and then try and find his way back to the team minibus along the road.

Eventually they all met up again safe and sound but by the time the team A runners and minibus reached the team changeover point at Nantmor we were now well down on schedule.

## Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> June

Whilst team A drove off towards Barmouth and a well-earned rest after their exertions, team B pondered their next section. The 37 miles from Nantmor to Barmouth included crossing Cnicht, the Moelwyns and the northern and southern Rhinogs with 13 summits over 2,000 feet. This section was scheduled to take around 10½ hours. The original plan of clearing the Rhinogs before dark was now looking a little tricky. Despite putting our teams 3 strongest

runners on the leg over Cnicht and the Moelwyns, more time was dropped compared to the schedule. Clearly the scheduled pace was turning out to be way too ambitious on the mountain sections in the wet, windy and misty conditions.

Crossing the northern Rhinogs to the remote Cym Bychan, only 5 miles as the crow flies, took 2½ hours. The terrain is complex and difficult to navigate in thick mist with lots of rough craggy ground and hidden fissures making it hard to traverse with any kind of speed.

At Cym Bychan the light was fading, the clag was down and the rain was falling hard. The next leg to Barmouth over the southern Rhinogs was over 14 miles with nearly 5,000 feet of climb and descent on steep rocky ground including the tops of Rhinog Fawr, Rhinog Fach and Y Llethr. Though not the highest of mountains the Rhinogs are some of the roughest terrain in Wales if not the UK and I knew this would be a demanding leg in good conditions, never mind taking it on in the dark and rain with near zero visibility.

At the checkpoint I discussed my concerns with Bryan Carr, a vastly experienced mountain runner. Bryan told me not to worry, there was nowhere else he would rather be than up in those mountains on a wet Saturday night. We agreed they would forget the scheduled time, take it very carefully and carry plenty of food and gear. We wished them well as the two Bryans with Jon and Bryan's dog Hollie set off in the gathering darkness towards the Roman Steps and the distant top of Rhinog Fawr.

Having explained the situation to team A at the next team changeover point in Barmouth, who had prepared for an early evening changeover, there was nothing we could do except try and get some rest sitting in the minibuses waiting for our runners to turn up. Even at sea level the wind was rocking the minibuses and the rain was absolutely pelting down. So much for Summer! Just before 3am I got a call from Bryan saying they were approaching Barmouth, the first time he had any phone signal, and a few minutes later they were with us. The leg had taken them 7 hours. Jon in particular looked very cold and wet and even Hollie looked dog tired.

Whilst team A set off into the dark on their next team section; 37 miles from Barmouth to Commins Coch including the big summit of Cadair Idris (2,930 feet), Bryan explained their experiences on the previous leg. It had certainly been a tough night out for them and I think we were all glad that we had crossed the Rhinogs without any serious mishaps even though it had taken much longer than planned.

### **Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> June**

Progress on Sunday through the central mountains of Wales went more to plan without any of the major epics experienced the previous day but the fact we were now around 8 hours behind schedule overall had an unintended consequence. Team A, who had already done two night shifts, were due a day shift instead. As team B ran their last leg into the team changeover point by the ancient Abbey at Strata Florida, darkness had just fallen and team A were back on the nightshift again. This prompted some inter-team banter (badgers were mentioned) and even conspiracy theories that the master scheduler (i.e. me) had planned this deliberately so team B, of which I was a member, could get another comfortable night's sleep. Totally untrue of course but every cloud has a silver lining!

Whilst team B were fast asleep in their tents, team A had another entertaining night out in the Welsh hills. Though this section did not have the big climbs of the northern mountains, they were soon to discover that what looks like flat sections on the map in mid Wales can be equally difficult terrain to cross after weeks of heavy rain. Keith Covell in his report of his experiences of the Traverse of Wales gives a graphic description of crossing a flooded bog full of tussock grass in the middle of the night, possibly the worst terrain you could encounter in terms of running progress. Needless to say the scheduling algorithm hadn't allowed for this either so more time was lost but the team did well to complete these frustrating sections with only a (limited?) amount of cursing and swearing.

### **Monday 24<sup>th</sup> June**

Finally the rain stopped and Monday dawned fine and clear. Our next team changeover point was in a lay-by in the Brecon Beacons and as we arrived Bev was already preparing breakfast. Here Bev demonstrated her tremendous multi-tasking skills by simultaneously running a production line producing delicious breakfast cobs whilst keeping Malcolm, who was trying to slink off somewhere quiet, busy with domestic duties. "Malc, put kettle on", "Malc, get some more milk". "Yes dear" came the reply.

As we were now around 10 hours behind schedule we discussed various options. One was just to carry on but we had a hard deadline of returning the minibuses by Tuesday lunchtime, a number of people needed to report for work and we had 9 rooms booked at a Travelodge at the finish for the Monday night.

By now team A had turned up looking very tired after another hard night out in the hills and as they were eating breakfast we started to explain our proposed plan. They were immediately suspicious – was this another devious plan which would result in team A spending a further night out in the dark?

Eventually after much discussion a compromise plan was agreed. Team B would continue on their next section through the Brecon Beacons, which included the 2,907 feet summit of Pen y Fan as far as Crickhowell. From Crickhowell we would take the shortest line possible to Pandy to join Offa's Dyke path, missing out a loop northwards through the Black Mountains to Gospel Pass and Hay Bluff. This link was completed as a 9 x 1 mile relay run on minor roads following the minibus.

In parallel, to claw back more time, team A had driven to Pandy and after a short rest had started to run their next team section down Offa's Dyke path. This section was scheduled to stop at Redbrook, some 19 miles from the finish, with the final section being the responsibility of team B. Despite the tired legs, progress was now faster on the easier terrain and on arrival at Redbrook, a quick phone call confirmed that team B was still in the Brecon Beacons and not ready to take over. So team A, even though they were completely knackered, decided to carry on knocking off the remaining team B legs. This decision, which was a true team effort, was prompted as much by inter-team rivalry as by the thoughts of showers, clean clothes and beer which were gradually getting closer. It also gave them bragging rights later in the pub for the most miles covered!

As team A approached the Severn Bridge, team B arrived and we all joined forces for the final leg over the iconic bridge, the first time both teams had been together on a leg.

Crossing the bridge was quite an experience with almost all the team taking part. It was just a steady jog, everyone was chatting and taking photos, the tiredness temporarily forgotten.

My overwhelming emotions were relief and satisfaction. Relief that no one had been injured and satisfaction that we had completed a Traverse of Wales, despite all the difficulties we had faced.

Amazingly, despite all the shenanigans over the schedule, the clock registered 19:59 at the finish, exactly one minute within the original schedule of 82 hours. Of course this didn't take into account the fact we had run some sections in parallel and later calculations showed the total running time was 86 hours 53 minutes over a modified route distance of 350 miles.

Although we had changed the route by missing out the Black Mountains section we had still completed a Traverse of Wales from end to end with no gaps.

Finally, special mention must go to Jon for contriving to miss the team celebrations held at the finish. The chosen pub was on the other side of the M74 motorway from the Travelodge where we were staying, accessed via a footbridge. So whilst the rest of us were enjoying our meals and beers, Jon, who had clearly misunderstood the hotel receptionist's directions, was busy walking over the Severn Bridge back towards Wales!

Runner		Total Miles Run	Total Ascent (Feet)	Total Descent (Feet)
AC	Amanda Carter	49.5	10,966	12,314
AE	Alan Eccleston	25.5	3,578	3,051
AP	Allan Pollock	28.2	4,262	5,495
AS	Andy Swift	71.0	11,911	11,673
AW	Andy Ward	41.3	6,047	6,509
BB	Bob Bond	41.1	3,861	4,005
BC	Bryan Carr	82.8	17,083	18,539
BL	Bryan Lomas	82.8	17,100	18,621
BS	Bill Southgate	45.4	7,628	7,474
CC	Cliff Cooper	35.6	8,074	5,822
JK	Jon Kinder	96.0	15,448	15,200
JL	Jon Leek	85.6	18,016	18,049
KC	Keith Covell	98.1	19,144	19,083
LS	Laura Stubbs	49.2	8,630	7,747
MF	Mark Fowell	107.7	22,465	20,688
PA	Pete Adams	42.4	6,036	7,586
RC	Robin Carter	102.9	22,073	20,133
SL	Steve Leach	37.0	5,190	6,939
HC	Hollie the Collie	74.8	15,596	16,880
Runner miles (excluding Hollie)		1122.2	207,511	208,930
Average miles per runner		62.3	11,528	11,607
Route Miles		349.5	66,066	66,109

Steve Leach – Route Planner