

Andy Swift's Bob Graham Round Completion 3&4 July 2015

"Head in The Clouds"

What is a Bob Graham Round?

First done way back in 1932 by Bob Graham, hotelier of Keswick, Cumberland, at the age of 42, the 42 Peak Round has become a testing ground for the supremely fit. Each summer around 100 of the most highly tuned ultra-distance fell runners will attempt the 66+ mile, 27,000 ft. of ascent/descent lap of Lakeland, within the allotted 24 hours.

Swifty's BGR Objective

Over the past 5 years, a number of members of my running club, the Rolls-Royce Harriers (RRH), have attempted and completed the BGR, with help from Congleton Harriers and ultra-runners from the Derby Fire Service. I had contributed as pacer on a number of these, chipping in with a leg or two on each attempt. Until about a year ago, I was regretting not being involved in this challenge when much younger, when I could maybe have given it a shot myself, but had to be content with being a reliable one to two stage "domestique". Then, following a successful round in June 2014, Amanda Carter included one of those devilish statements at the end of her email containing her BGR Report - "lace-em up Swifty it's you next!". I had caught the BGR bug.

Now, before we go any further, a couple of fairly important facts –Firstly, I'm not supremely fit and secondly, at 55 I'm quite a lot older than Bob was on his inaugural round and probably much older than the vast majority of subsequent contenders. However, whilst I recognised that a sub 24-hour round was probably well beyond me, the challenge of the route as a non-stop event in as quick a time as possible was ultimately irresistible, and became Swifty's BGR Objective. So, that's the objective, but I thought I should set a sub-24 hour schedule and see how long I can stick to it, backing off as my body disintegrates. A 23-40 schedule was set, with a total of only 45 minutes rest and 20 minutes to spare!

Preparation

Lack of confidence prevented me from doing as many contenders do, announcing an intention to "attempt" to my running mates and arranging a suitable weekend many months in the future. No, my approach needed to be much more low key with a development programme. Having never run more than 26.2 miles in one go until 21 months ago, and never more than 45 miles continuously at all in the various ultra-marathons in that time, my plan was to build up to it and hopefully with increasing ability and confidence have a go in June or July 2015, before it was too late. I did my usual winter training, but biased much more off road and into the hills, targeting the Fellsman at the end of April (61 miles, 11,000 ft. off road in the Yorkshire Dales). A successful sortie in Yorkshire in 18 hours 48 mins, not super-fast but finishing strongly, followed by a strong run from Wasdale to The Moot Hall in a fast time of 7-35 on Jon Kinder's BGR only two weeks later, led to that unrecoverable email to my

mates requesting support on Swifty's BGR . A small but very experienced crack team was formed, consisting of Robin Carter and Matt Tomlinson (Legs 1 & 2), Robin and Bryan Carr (Leg 3), Bryan, Keith Covell and Mark Fowell (Leg 4) and Bryan, Matt, Keith, Mark and Sarah Haynes (Leg 5), with road support from Team Amanda (Amanda Carter, Jo Coates, Janet Ilsley and Sarah). All pacers are BGRers except Matt who soon will be. All road supporters have supported the BG many times before and Amanda is a BGRer too, but being 8 months pregnant obviously had a pass-out from pacing duties. The weekend of July 3/ 4 was set.

With the weekend set, one final big training session remained four weeks before my BGR, our clubs' "Summer Epic". This year, we had chosen to run Wainwright's Coast to Coast route in 4 days, each runner targeting whichever stages they were comfortable with. I targeted a cumulative 100 miles, focusing on the legs with the steepest climbs. Following yet another right ankle twist after only 5 miles, I managed to nurse it along for 110 miles, only to re-twist the same ankle on the North Sea coastal path right at the end. This ankle was "becoming my achilles heel" with many twists in the last few years. So, it may have turned out to be a blessing, but I ended up getting lots of rest in the 4 weeks prior to the BGR, resting, icing, deep-heating my troublesome ankle, trying to get the swelling down as much as possible and restoring some mobility. Running was restricted to short hill sessions and a few 10 milers! As the weekend approached I got more and more concerned. Maybe I should have postponed, any other sensible person would have. Everything was booked, so I may as well give it a crack and if it breaks down on one of those early descents (my betting was Blencathra) at least we would all have a good weekend in the Lakes.

The Round

The week before the big day was blisteringly hot and the forecast was for thunderstorms and high winds in the Lakes for July 3 and 4th! Every time I looked, the forecast got worse, so I stopped looking. I just packed the full range of kit from running vests (ever hopeful!) to multiple waterproofs. Matt drove me up on the Friday afternoon and following a rendezvous with most of the team at Denton House, I was quickly kitted up and marched down to the Moot Hall for a 9pm start by my mates as the latest RRH sacrificial offering to the Mountain Gods. There I stood at the start, on what was still a fine July evening thinking "is this really happening to me", when the team counted down from 10 and before I knew it, I was off, skipping through Fitz Park with Robin and Matt. I'd memorised my intended Leg 1 target of 3 hours 50 minutes, breaking down to 80 mins to Skiddaw, 40 mins to Great Calver, 70 mins to Blencathra and 40 mins descent to CP1 at Threlkeld. Suddenly, looking up at the towering Skiddaw as the sun set (for the first time !), 80 minutes felt utterly ridiculous.

Leg 1

As we climbed Skiddaw, the clouds were now unbroken, but still high, however the wind was getting restless. As we summited in 77 minutes it was a raging gale. I asked Robin if this was a Skiddaw thing or a taster of things to come? "A Skiddaw thing" he yelled (through his teeth!), then gave me a mild rebuke for getting there 3 minutes too early. Great Calver appeared on cue, the River Caldew was a mere

trickle, I didn't even get my feet wet and following excellent night navigation by Robin and the long trudge up Mungrisdale Common, Blencathra was reached a few minutes ahead of schedule. I was eating and drinking well. The descent of Blencathra saw me take a tumble "at one point your feet were several feet above your head Andy", but remarkably I was fine. There was now thunder and lightning coming from the direction of the Pennines. Robin warned "we may need to make a difficult decision".

We arrived at Threlkeld road check point at 0:44 am, 6 minutes up on schedule and following a short 7 minute stop to drink coffee, coke and eat some rice pudding, I continued with Robin and Matt, hot-cross bun in hand and 10 minutes in the bank.

Leg 2

The climb up Clough Head was very dark, very steep and it was starting to rain with greater intent. Clough Head and the Dodds were ticked off on schedule. The thunder and lightning continued, but fortunately was centred off to the east, might be nasty on Cross Fell I thought! Raise greeted us with a heavy but short hail shower at 30 degrees to the horizontal, at which point we donned over-trousers. The peaks to Dollywaggon Pike were reached without mishap and daybreak was emerging from the gloom. Head torches and over trousers were off at the foot of Fairfield, where the pacers left their packs for the out and back (more about this de-tour later). The combination of still being on schedule, daylight, the promise on the horizon of better weather and still feeling good spurred me on and the "sprint" up Fairfield was only eclipsed by a storming descent (for me!). I was really enjoying this. "Watch that ankle" rebuked Robin who then guided me over Seat Sandal and with perfection found a nice trod down the steep descent to check point 2 at Dunmail Raise which appeared well below as we dropped out of the clag.

We arrived at Dunmail Raise at 05:20. Leg 2 had taken a bit longer than planned, probably due to the weather, but due to the minutes banked before, I was bang on schedule. My game plan had been to run Legs 1 and 2 in my older Inov8's, banking on them getting wet through in the River Caldew and during Leg 2 when most of the rain was forecast, then changing into my comfy Speedcross 3's for the rocky sections to follow. As it turned out, my feet weren't too wet, but I elected to change for comfort. This turned out to be a big mistake – see later. With drinks, weetabix and soup on board and a shoe/sock change, I left Dunmail Raise just 2 minutes behind my schedule. Robin continued while Matt took a well-earned rest until Leg 5 (assuming a miracle would still be happening) and Bryan Carr replaced him. This felt like Barcelona, Real (Madrid) and Accrington Stanley on the same pitch, the initials being completely appropriate and descriptively proportional to our fell running skills!

Leg 3

We marched up the steep Steel Fell into the clag once again. In miserable conditions of rain, wind, distant thunder and lightning, Robin and Bryan guided me flawlessly through the mist shrouded featureless peaks of Calf Crag, Sergeant Man, High Raise and Thurnacar Knott to the Langdales, half the summits now completed. Somehow I managed to hang on to them and the schedule to that point though fatigue was beginning to feature as I was struggling to remember my peak to peak

target times for the first time, a sure sign that things are going to get tough. The traverse across Martcrag Moor and climb to Rossett Pike took longer than planned and the steep climb of Bowfell longer still as I was struggling to gain purchase on the wet rocks. I'd been on the go for 12 hours and for most of that time (and the only time in my life) a sub-24 seemed vaguely possible. I'm now convinced that prospect kept me optimistic and highly motivated, but now fatigue and wet rocks were beginning to slow me and I knew at that point Sub-24 was rapidly slipping away – "The dream has gone". I always knew I would have to confront this difficult moment of convincing myself to press on for who knows how long, certainly well in excess of another 12 hours to achieve my real objective of a non-stop completion of the BGR in as close a time to 24 hours as I could.

Anyone who knows the terrain around this part of the BGR will have noted my earlier comment about lack of grip on wet rocks and how significant that would be on the boulder highway between Bowfell and Scafell Pike, particularly beyond Great End. I lost a few more minutes to Esk Pike, but held schedule on the 30 minute section from Esk Pike to Great End, largely because the terrain was less rocky. From Great End it was a nightmare, I simply could not stand up without my feet sliding off the rocks. The Speedcross 3's served me well on the Fellsman, even on the wet flags coming off Ingleborough Hill, but they were useless on the Scafell massif type of rock. The terrain was well known to me and rain up here is not unheard of, so why hadn't I thought to try them out here in the wet? - A school-boy error! No fell shoes are great in these conditions, but clearly some are better than others. Both Robin and Bryan were having to be careful but not slipping to anywhere near the same degree as me. I wasn't just concerned about slipping and twisting my ankle, but worried about much worse consequences. Robin saw my difficulty and with safety first wisely said "Andy, we're just going to have to take time here". Knackered and losing a lot of time, this was a hammer blow, mentally at least.

I rapidly went from enthused about a potential sub-24, to accepting the reality of possibly finishing the Round, to wanting to get off these rocks to Wasdale by the safest route and abandoning. I kept these thoughts private at the time. Somehow, we got to the Pike, then a very interesting route via Lord's Rake and the West Wall Traverse to Scafell. I was very tired after that, but fortunately the mist concealed what I felt was a 2000 ft. drop to Wasdale. The guys took me down a great scree to the valley. At least I could now stand up and the Speedcross 3's were given hell on the way down – payback time!

Knowing I would arrive at Wasdale 75 minutes behind a schedule with only 20 minutes margin, it was all about somehow completing the Round now and I turned to Robin to apologise for being his first BGR "failure". His reply was "As a V55, if you get all the way around, I'll call it a success". Great concession I thought, but "no pressure there then" was my retort. In truth, I couldn't see how I would finish Leg 4, let alone complete the Round, but then it occurred to me that Mark Fowell and Keith Covell had travelled up to Wasdale from Derby in the early hours to support me, so there was no option to throw the towel in at Wasdale. Let's see how many summits I can add to the 30 so far, was my new objective.

We arrived at Wasdale at 13:15, 75 minutes off the pace. The road support team did a great job, feeding me drinks, beans and sausage and a pastie and as I was happy

to trade comfort for grip they changed me back into the Inov8's. That should make it dry up I thought. With the clouds lifting and a few chinks of sunlight, the thought occurred to me that I'd seen hardly anything of the Lake District since darkness descended during the drop off Skiddaw. Dark until Nethermost Pike, then thick cloud since then apart from the drop into Dunmail Raise and now Wasdale. A knew effect was making itself present – my hands were swelling up for some unknown reason. "It's because they've been swinging around whilst hanging down for so long" was one theory, to which my response was "With any luck it's happening to everything that's been swinging and hanging down all this time!"

Robin took a well-earned rest after piloting me whilst carrying his running pack for 3 long Legs, just one week after coming 2nd in the Lakeland Ultimate Trails 110km event in under 12 hours. Yes, that's the high caliber of help I was getting and all the other pacers play in the same league. Steve Birkinshaw would be proud to have that kind of help. Bryan continued on his usual Dunmail Raise to Newlands support epic and Mark and Keith joined me.



Wasdale Check point



Climbing Kirk Fell

Leg 4

Off we trudged, with the little matter of Yewbarrow to tackle which I did in 55 minutes verses an original target of 50. At least I was still moving and the sky was clearing, albeit the winds getting stronger. Red Pike, Steeple and Pillar followed, each one was getting tougher and more time was lost. Eating was becoming a problem, but I knew I had to. I left Wasdale with a chicken cob to nibble on. No matter how much I chewed, I couldn't swallow it. Small fragments were being expelled from my mouth as I breathed heavily whilst I chugged up the hills. In the now howling gale, the stub of the cob in my boxing glove size right mit had become stale, till somewhere around Steeple I left the remains to the ravens. By Pillar the clouds had lifted and the views were spectacular, albeit the proper grown-up winds battered us. By the foot of Kirk Fell, the Inov8's were causing a lot of pain so we stopped for a few minutes to treat an impending blister to some vaseline. By now my mental target was to get on top of Great Gable for two significant reasons. Firstly, I knew that was the last serious climb and more importantly, that was summit 36 and I would beat Kinder who

managed 35 on his first BG (his problem was navigation not legs though, but that's a detail !). Great Gable was a big test, but I got past it. The problem was that the defensive mentality created by the simple aim of completion meant that urgency was lost, time was ebbing by and I knew it would be past 8 pm by the time I got to check point 4 at Honister.

Eating had become a real problem, only able to force gel bars and bananas down. Lesson learnt- moist stuff is best. From Great Gable to Honister my mind had temporarily won, convincing me that 39 peaks (the total at Honister) was good enough for a V55 and that attempting Leg 5 was completely beyond me physically and therefore pointless. Of course, my mind also concocted a plausible excuse that it wasn't fair to keep the support team out until the early hours to complete the Round. As we jogged off Brandreth, I trialled my excuse on Keith who declared he was prepared to "stay out all night if necessary" and warned me that my worries wouldn't wash with the team. Nevertheless, by Grey Knotts, I'd made my mind up to throw in the towel, but when I told Amanda on arrival at Honister, she stared at me with steely eyes and quietly said "let's sit you down and talk about this" As I whimpered in excuse something about having no climbing ability, no descending ability and no flat running ability left, Bryan just looked at me aghast as if to say "so what, you're still breathing aren't you?" Robin whispered "by not carrying on you may be making a decision you'll live to regret". I felt like a naughty school boy and realised that my first excuse about keeping the team out late clearly wasn't going to work (and I should have known better, just as Keith had warned), so the only alternative I could think of for not continuing was that it was too hard, I hurt all over and would have to admit defeat. Robin's words at Wasdale about not counting it as a failure if a V55 got all the way around started to play on my mind. At that moment, for about the first time in my life, an uncommanded and totally unapproved comment spurted from my mouth along the lines "well, if I'm going out again I need to change fell shoes" at which point I was being re-fuelled and re-treaded by the team at F1 pace and sent on my way with a posse of supporters.



Honister Check point



Dale Head summit. Newlands valley & Skiddaw

Leg 5

We left Honister at 20:37, still within the 24 hours ! As it turned out, the climb up Dale Head was less difficult than I had feared and I even trotted a bit on the down and flat bits of the tops between Dale Head, Hindscarth and Robinson. By now the sky had cleared and the view of the whole BGR route was spectacular. The view down the Newlands valley to Keswick was breathtaking and the silhouettes of Skiddaw and Blencathra dominated the northern skyline. All the Dodds down to Helvellyn to the east, the Langdales, Bowfell, the Scafell range, Pillar, Kirk Fell and Great Gable to the south and many of the conquered summits in between. I thought to myself, "Surely, this must be the World's best pitch that any sport could be played on". The sun had set for the second time during one run (for me that's a first and probably a last) and we got off Robinson before full darkness descended. Off the mountains I got my running legs back down the valley track to the car at Newlands, followed by a swift cuppa then a jog/walk down the darkened moonlit lanes (to Sergeant Major Covell's commands) through Portinscale en-route to Keswick. As we jogged up a deserted main street I spotted a guy ambling along with the aid of two walking sticks. I have to admit that the thought crossed my mind that my need was probably greater than his and that if I'd got the legs I'd have chased after him and relieved him of his aids, but alas he was out pacing me. Finally I arrived at the Moot Hall finish where I started this epic adventure 27 hours and 37 minutes earlier to cheers from a relieved and tired support team. I elected to knock on the ground level door, leaving the climb up the steps to the upper door and balcony for those sub-24 hour heroes and heroines. I now had a better understanding of just how supremely fit and hard they must be. The traditional handshakes, hugs and photos were taken.



The Central Fells from Dale Head



Swifty on Robinson, summit 42



The finish at The Moot Hall. Left to right – Keith Covell, Jo Coates, Sarah Haynes, Matt Tomlinson, Robin Carter, Mark Fowell, Swifty, Amanda Carter, Janet Ilsley, Bryan Carr.

“Leg 6”

Now Bob Graham is one of a dozen characters from history I would like to share a pint with and have a little chat. Firstly, I'd thank him for doing 42 peaks to match his 42nd birthday and not delaying it until 55 at 55 !. Secondly, I want to know what on earth he was thinking of by including the significant climb up the Fairfield out and back when he could have replaced it with a much easier summit en-route such as Scoat Fell? There are other questions I won't go into here, but most of all, I want to congratulate him on his choice of the Moot Hall finish line because it is a mere 10 yard stagger to one of Jennings finest watering holes. Furthermore, at 00:40 on Sunday 5 July 2015 it was still open, still serving beer and a live band was playing! What a genius, how was he to know that?

So it was drinks all round on me and as the photographic evidence below shows, just a few sips of Sneck Lifter, the finest recovery juice known to man, was sufficient to anaesthetize the aches and restore life back into a wrecked body – “I have become comfortably numb”. The effect was so dramatic that one local refused to believe I was the guy who had completed the round on the simple basis that I wasn't slumped asleep in the corner. Alas, the bar closed just as we were settling down for

a session. If Keith had done his homework properly, he would have known that the bar was to close just after 1 am, advised me of the fact instead of the “run 3 more lamp posts” encouragement that my spirit appreciated but my legs were trying hard to ignore, and I’d have put some real effort in on the lanes into Keswick. – Motivational lesson learnt I hope Keith !



A happy Swifty minutes after finishing in Oddfellows with Bryan, Jo and a Sneck Lifter

Recovery

My recovery so far – I was surprised how mobile I was on the Sunday morning, able to hobble to and from the café for breakfast, though some kind of transformation to a totally rigid state occurred during the journey home. Bending and walking were a major challenge and stairs near impossible. I fell asleep on the sofa on Sunday afternoon. I was much improved on Monday (I’d booked a day off) and by tea-time had my mobility and appetite back, though worryingly didn’t have the urge for another pint for several days. I managed a steady cycle to and from Uttoxeter train station on the Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday and the full 44 mile return on the Friday, but on the hills the legs were dead. My hand swelling went completely by Monday, my left knee hurt and was swollen (result of my tumble on the Blencathra descent I think) and my bad ankle is about as it was before the Round, so that’s a big bonus. I lost about 3kg during the weekend, despite all the gel bars etc. As I write this just over two weeks later, the aches and pains are gone, but I still fall asleep about 8pm.

Thanks

So, you’re right Bryan, most of it is in the mind and waking-up at Denton House on the following Sunday knowing I had fulfilled my objective of completing the BGR route in one go, was much more satisfying than a mere 39 peaks and definitely better than just 35 ! (sorry JK, couldn’t resist that). I will be eternally grateful to you all Robin, Bryan, Matt, Mark and Keith for amazing guidance around the route, on no occasion did we have to retrace a step and I thought the lines were near perfect. Also to you all for carrying all my stuff around without a moment of complaint, even though it was amusing at times to see how you were individually squabbling and encouraging me to drink from the bottle you were carrying. Likewise, many thanks to

the road crew, Amanda, Jan, Jo and Sarah for keeping me fed and re-supplied without a moments delay at the check points, Sarah even came out on “pacing” duties from Honister to Newlands. Most of all, thanks to you all for your continual encouragement throughout the BGR route and most importantly for convincing me to carry on at that low point at Honister. To all my “team” a massive Thanks for enabling an experience of a lifetime.

Now for the Joss Naylor Lakeland Challenge next year !,

I think Joss can claim to know more about fell running generally and old age fell running in particular than Bob. As such, Joss allows 25% more time for a V55 attempting the JNLC relative to the standard time of 12 hours, which if converted to BGR times, allows 30 hours for a V55, so I smashed it. Ok, it won't get me in the BG 24 hour Club, but I'm content with Joss' assessment.

As the great man said himself, “Happy Days”

P.S. I Hope this account has encouraged you budding young (and not so young) road, cross-country and fell runners out there in the RR Harriers to lace-em up, train up and have a go at the BGR, but do not leave it till you're 55 ! If Swifty can get round, anyone can. And there's probably one of the best BGR support teams out there within and associated with our own running club to help and encourage you along the way. You have no excuse!

Cheers, *Swifty*

(Holder of the longest non-stop BGR completion in RR Harriers history)