

Jon Kinder on the Thames Ring 250

All of the 34 competitors were sweating on the start line even before the race had begun. The anticipation of running Britain's longest and toughest race had as much to do with this as the weather which was well into the 20's even before 10am. There was a strong presence from Derby with Cheserpeakes Stuart Shipley, RR Harriers own Allan Pollock and myself. Departing Steatley on the long run down the Thames into London the first stage was quite steady where we spent time weighing up the running conditions and the opposition. I tried to take comfort in the fact that like me, maybe not every one in the race was an Ultra-Distance fanatic however I found that this was not the case as all of the group in which I found myself were chatting about their experiences of the 'Spartathlon', Deca-Ironman or the 'MDS', etc. I therefore kept quiet about my racing pedigree and just marvelled at how beautiful the Thames was and how affluent those are who populate its banks.



As we reached the first checkpoint at 27 miles, I breathed the sigh of relief I suppose it was a similar feeling to those guys who get to £1000 on 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire' get, i.e. if I give up anytime thereafter I won't look like a complete fool! It was during the next stage that the lead group, which I had strayed into, became whittled down to just 5 runners and then 4 runners as an Ozzy named Ernie became troubled by blisters. We were exposed to the posh end of London with their recreational industry in full swing, the Henley Regatta, Windsor Castle, countless pubs and restaurants, it was so hard to ignore every sense in my body that was telling me to stop for a rest but I had to go on!

Due to our speed through the check-points I found myself taking the lead with a very experienced ultra runner of Polish decent called Alicja. Together we put in some good mileage and managed to thread our way in and out of London without incident, it was unbeknown to us that later on 2 fellow runners would fall victim to thugs lurking in the shadows as the night descended in the city.

By the time we had finished the 4th checkpoint and seen off the first 100 miles, we were both very tired, Alicja badly needed some sleep but knowing that the boys Neil and Stuart Gillet forming the other duo weren't far behind, I broke up the partnership and set off on my own. To my surprise however I wasn't leading the race, another guy had seemingly put in a colossal effort and managed to gain 2.5 hours on us in a single 26 mile leg slipping passed us somewhere without us noticing! I pressed on keeping a steady running pace going throughout the 5th leg, knowing that the logistics of getting to the finish if I stopped running didn't bear thinking about.

The route winds its way up the Grand Union Canal through Leighton Buzzard, Milton Keynes and around Northampton. I then reached the 6th checkpoint and here I learnt that sadly Allan had pulled out, however I also found out that the 'leader' had been kipping in hotels and catching taxi's to get him around the course which as well as being amusing was a real boost to morale, maybe I wasn't doing too bad after all! The second night stint then followed which was also the lowest point for me. The towpath at this stage turns down the Oxford Canal and becomes very narrow, eroded, overgrown and wild; we also had rain bringing with it a fine mist hovering over the water and path. The conditions were so difficult to negotiate in my condition that I took a number of wrong turns at junctions, running was near impossible, I almost went for a swim a few times, so I opted for 10 minutes under my space blanket, it was freezing and there was no way I could sleep, but at least I could give my head a rest! At long last the sun peeped over the horizon and I actually began to come around, I reached Banbury and then Oxford, the thoughts of finishing this monster were then aroused.

I was told at the second to last checkpoint that Stuart was going strong and was only a couple of hours behind, any chance of a rest was therefore cancelled, I knew it was imperative to deny him any sniff of my presence! It was another hot & muggy day as I made my way through Abingdon and the final checkpoint. My shoes had started to fall apart but they seemed comfortable and I didn't want to tamper with my feet and potentially make them worse! Despite the heat I kept a steady run going, as my brain was only managing to operate my vital functions (what's new!), I checked all of my navigational decisions with GPS, and luckily no mistakes were made at this crucial stage.

At last, at long last I reached Streatley and crossed the finish line just before the 3rd nightfall at 21:49, clocking up a total distance of 248 miles in 59 hours 49 minutes. Words cannot describe the sense of relief at being able to lie down and close my eyes, I never thought the simplest things in life could give so much pleasure!

Stuart came in just under 7 hours afterwards and then Alicja (1st (and only) Lady) and Neil some 20 hours later. Due to shortage of support team, I tried to do my bit to help over the next 2 days, after 4 continuous nights I witnessed some monumental determination, these guys were really toughing it out, one guy literally pegged out for 7 hours or so due to lack of sleep, another wondered the wrong way up the Thames from Oxford and despite wanting to carry on was unfortunately timed out after 100 hours on his feet. But the biggest cheer was reserved for a guy who was forced to take refuge for several hours just 3 miles from the finish, simply because he had totally lost the plot!

Before the start of the race the organisers were not sure if 'The Ring' could be done in one go, they even contemplating a 'last man standing' result, however in total 12 competitors including Stuart Shipley made it to the finish line, this fantastic result, exceeded everyone's expectations. Believe it or not most runners seemed to want another go at it some time in the future, so expect to see this race as a regular fixture in the Ultra-Distance Calendar.



Jon Kinder