

BOB GRAHAM ROUND - 3 / 4 JUNE 1989

By John Thornhill

Described as the ultimate test for a fell runner, 72 miles long and 27,000 feet of ascent, the object is to start from Keswick Moot Hall and touch the summit of 42 pre-determined peaks and return within 24 hours. It was first accomplished by Bob Graham in 1942 to celebrate his 42nd birthday.

After an unsuccessful attempt to join the Bob Graham 24 hour club last year I started this attempt a stone lighter and hopefully fitter. The weather forecast was grim, with cloud base down to 1000 ft and heavy showers promised.

To see all my support team gathered in Keswick, numbering 18 people with road support and including my long-suffering family, made me feel extremely humble, knowing that there was no way I could fail without a 100% effort on my part.

The early stages along the paths to Littletown were a pleasant jog, soon to change as we headed for Robinson, the first peak at 2400 ft, which meant nil visibility and careful compass work from my backup. The weather became kinder after peak no 7, Great Gable, when we were 4 hours into the run, up on schedule and feeling very confident. This confidence increased on catching up with two fellow contenders, Dave Sleath and Dave Crofts, who set off at the same time as me, and soon developed into a contest over the Red Pike, Steeple and Yewbarrow peaks. We then lost all our height and descended into Wasdale for a scheduled 30 minute rest one hour up on time.

I had arranged to have wholemeal pasta and bolognaise sauce here, but Anita had to throw it away when I wanted porridge and honey, my fourth "breakfast" of the day. After a change of clothes I began the long, slow 3000 ft trudge to the summit of Scafell, taking just over an hour of non-stop effort, then a rope descent of Broad Stand and on up to the summit of Scafell Pike, England's highest peak. The next six or so peaks fell quite quickly, with not a lot of descent required, but around Rossett Pike I began to feel very tired with the first signs of stomach cramp coming on. All the way to Dunmail Raise it was trousers down at regular intervals with everyone giving me advice on what to eat and drink. It seemed that rice pudding was the answer that would solve all my problems so Robin Price ran ahead to tell my wife, who refused because that was the food I had said I definitely didn't want. My half hour break at Dunmail Raise consisted of me being spoon fed while Nick massaged the lower intestine area of my feet. The rice pudding didn't know which way to go, and it's true that it tastes the same going down or coming up.

The next section was the Helvellyn range which was all new ground to me. We set off still 20 minutes up but armed with many Settlers, Rennies and toilet rolls, and with me feeling very jaded. I was led to believe that this section was the easiest, with one hard climb and a gentle stroll along the ridge, knocking off peaks every five minutes. What followed was the worst six hours of my life. After crawling up Seat Sandall, Dollywagon Pike and Fairfield I was doubled up with stomach cramp and gradually falling behind schedule.

My supporters kept telling me to keep eating and drinking so I developed a system of eating raisins and chocolate drops by throwing a handful towards my mouth and making sure most of them went over my shoulder. The pockets of my jacket began to fill up with half-eaten Harvest bars, chewed biscuits, etc. Stake Pass at 1am saw me on my knees desperately trying to keep awake, hating everyone and just wanting to be left alone. At long last the ridge ended and we descended Clough Head to Threlkeld.

This should have been a half hour rest stop, but as I was now well down on schedule it was just a change of shirt. Robin Price shoved a mug in my hand and said it was Complian and I must drink it. Afterwards he told me it was a nourishing cocktail of Complian, Accolade, sugar and glucose tablets. Now it was back to hands and knees for the climb up Halls Ridge to the summit of Blencathra with Tommo hanging on to my shirt to steady me on the airy bits. He fed me 5 Club biscuits on the way up and made sure I ate them. It was like chewing sawdust.

At 4.30am I reached the top just as the sun rose. After a cup of coffee, which I actually tasted, I was told by Robin that the next three hours would really hurt, but unless I got a move on I would fail. The previous 18 hours or so weren't exactly fun, and the same man had told me I would go to hell and back on the night section. So what next? Are all Bob Graham supporters sadists?

All my surplus clothes were removed, which left me in a pair of thermal long johns and no shorts, and I set off at a slow run to Great Calva. Surprisingly as the sun rose I could feel some strength returning. The ground was heather-covered and quite easy to move over.

At 6.30am I had my photograph taken on Peak no. 42, Skiddaw. Almost back on a 23 hour schedule, with one and a half hours to get back to Keswick, 5 miles and all downhill. As I had made up so much time on the early sections my wife and two sons had been waiting at the Moot Hall since before six o'clock. I arrived at 7.31, having taken 23 hours 31 minutes - just 29 to spare! All my supporters were gathered there. It's difficult to express your gratitude sincerely at that time in the morning. When I think of all the time, expense and effort they put in just for me..... Among my many helpers were RRH champions past and present, Ken Northard and Nick Sercombe.

I have been accepted as a member of the Bob Graham 24 Hour Club, the first to be listed under the Rolls-Royce Harriers banner (although Ian Shaw and James Ward both did it in far quicker times than me, they did so as "Viking Venture Unit").