The Dragon’s Belly 2013 – shuffling on the shoulders of giants.

The thing about this great sport of ours is that it is truly inclusive of all comers, yet can challenge us all individually, testing each of us to our own personal limits. If you’re dumb enough to put on fell shoes and take to the Derbyshire hills for an hour or two on a Wednesday night, then you’re dumb enough to run a Watershed, a Bob Graham, or even for two hundred miles through the highways and byways of central Wales. What’s more, our sport lends itself to the telling of tales, the weaving of lines and the re-running of trods once told.

When Nicky mentioned to me one Winter Monday’s training evening that she and Charmian Heaton were planning a re-running of the original 1992 Dragon’s Back route, I near enough bit her hand off. Like many others, I’d followed the tale of the 2012 race with a mixture of awe, fascination and a little bit of envy that I’d not signed up – but also with growing curiosity as the differing narratives of the race began to leak out. Nicky and Charmian’s Dragon’s Belly offered the perfect opportunity for me to walk with these giants of the Welsh hills; to test myself in a way that I’d not been tested before over five relentless days of running (OK, shuffling); and perhaps to learn a little bit more of the mythology of the Dragon’s Back.

Preparations

Knowing how to prepare for a multi-day event is not easy. I was aware how hard it would be – that there would be considerably more running and tarmac than I would like – and that getting to the end would depend as much upon keeping feet, body and soul together as anything else. With this in mind, I targeted challenges which would hurt – a double Trigger, the Fellsman, back to back Dozen and Killer. I had neither the time nor the inclination to mimic a full dress rehearsal, so resolved instead to start slow and hope to get fitter as the five days progressed. And aside from checking I had full map coverage for the route, I deliberately avoided poring over maps or reccying in advance. This was, after all, a journey and not a race – and Andy Heading had proffered the finest piece of advice (or, perhaps, the piece I seized upon with most alacrity): ‘Plan to get to the start line fit, but fat’. Can’t say fairer than that, thought I, as I packed ten changes of running kit and sufficient fell food to keep me going for three weeks.

Day One – the calm before the storm

Our route finding from the car park below Conwy Castle walls to the appointed departure point was a little questionable, but fortunately our blushes were spared since the trackers didn’t kick in until the appointed hour of 7am. Photo calls complete, we set off en masse across the top car park, through a gap in the walls, and down a tree-lined avenue, whereupon our assembled giants – to a man and woman – scurried left and right to answer calls of nature; a sign that the previous evening’s beer-based hydration strategies had been a complete success. Honour satisfied, we meandered through the sleepy suburbs of Conwy before hanging a right through fields to the foot of Conwy Mountain, our first departure from the ‘original’ 92 route.

Tim, Chris and the Spinks soon indicated their intentions by drawing out a small lead, whilst I indicated mine by taking up the role of rear gunner. I was pleased to have Clare to keep me company for the first two days since I had no intention whatsoever of trying to stay with the lead group. Meanwhile, Wendy kept us entertained with tales from several decades of fell-running, and we were soon enough climbing the long north-eastern ridge leading ultimately to Carnedd Llewelyn. The views back to the coast opened up progressively and we had the pleasure of worselling Wendy on a couple of occasions, albeit she’d likely claim she was simply trying out alternate lines. As we gained height, so the wind picked up, and by the time we reached our high point for the morning, the weather loomed over the Glyders ominously.

Charmian was waiting with tea and treats for a quick changeover at Glan Dena, then we were off and up the west face of Tryfan. Our traverse across Tryfan and the Glyders was anything but pretty. Schadenfraude being a state of nature, the one redeeming feature was that Clare proved even more timid on wet rock than me. We were both distinctly relieved to have ticked off these three slippery beasts, and to be descending to Pen y Pass where we were again greeted with hot tea, and the opportunity for a full change of clothing. All that remained was a final weather-bound slog up the Pyg Track and over Snowden to the campsite at Nantgwynant. A total journey time of 12hrs 30mins and, arriving two hours behind the advance party, we had to get a shift on to get washed, changed and fed before bedtime.

Day Two – clagged in and chilled out

The Spinks’ caravan pulled out of camp a little before Clare and I, so it was something of a surprise to shuffle into Maentwrog only a few minutes after they had departed. Evidently our claggy lines over the damp Moelwyns had worked well, and it was a pleasant change to glimpse a view from the lower slopes of Moelwyn Bach towards Tremadog Bay. The long slog over to the Rhinogs found us tracking three pairs of fell shoes through the muck, and donning and ditching waterproofs periodically as the weather refused to make up its mind. The Rhinogs themselves, formed by harsh Cambrian rock, are fierce heather-clad wartin’ country. Even Cap’n Harmer would think twice before leaving the path in this neck of the woods; that is if he could discern the path in the first place. Having spent some time determining a likely route off the first summit, we were pleased to be overhauled by Max and Dave, who duly led us over the final three peaks, and home to camp at the end of a quite splendid day of varied landscapes and slowly improving weather. I was feeling reasonably fresh, though there’d been times in the latter part of the day when I was struggling to keep with Clare and company. It had taken us 13hrs 47mins, and the morrow promised a different challenge entirely; it had been determined that I would be running with the A team …

Day Three – head down and hang on

I lay awake in my tent until silly o’clock packing and re-packing my bags. The day dawned brightly, we said our farewells to a homeward bound Clare, and were off at 6.30am sharp. As we climbed the ridge to Cadair Idris the weather changed from sunshine to rainbow to clag. By the time we hit the top, it was truly horrid, and I was regretting not having packed my waterproof mitts. Fortunately for us, Hugo Iffla from Odyssey was on hand with bacon sandwiches in the shelter on Cadair and, much to my surprise, I wasn’t left for dead as we picked our way off the craggy summit. I allowed myself the luxury of looking at a map once or twice, and even thinking survival might still be possible. By the time we were temporarily lost in the clag on Tarren Hendre I may even have presumed to take the lead for a moment or two; but half an hour later I was hanging on for dear life again.

At the changeover in Machynlleth, Nicky’s shin was starting to play up for the first time, so Wendy set to it with magic pink tape, before giving me a masterclass in the application of Compeed. In town Tim foraged for ice lollies, whilst Chris related tales of Owain Glyndwr, and climbing through the forests to the south I felt confident enough to pause to take photos and Tweet – only to be reminded by the Spinks that faffing was strictly verboten. Though the A team were humouring their new charge, there was a limit; and soon enough it was time to grit my teeth as we made the final steep climb of the day to the summit of Pumlumon. I took strength from the thought that this hurt marginally less than the final ascent of Kinder on my Killer, and was rewarded with views back to the far horizon and Cadair Idris, whence we’d set out twelve hours previous. The temperature was dropping and a wind getting up, so we didn’t hang about, descending to camp at a trot. 12hrs 49mins, and still alive to tell the tale; just.

Day Four – breaking the dragon’s back … and suffering for it on the road

I was up again at five, only to find reason for a last minute faff, slapping on insect repellent and suncream in equal measure. We were away by 6.33am, and as we crested the first hill, I realised I’d forgotten my map. This was, I suspect, a source of some relief to the A team, since it should have meant no recurrence of the back-seat navigating I’d started to indulge in the previous afternoon. Nicky, who herself had managed to depart without a compass, quickly relieved me of mine, and I settled back to enjoy a delightful early morning, with the sun slowly burning off a gossamer mist, whilst sheep stood on guard on the hillsides round about, looking down on us like silent Apache.

From Pont Rhydgaled there’s a long pull on forest tracks and tarmac to the head of the Elan Valley. Nicky was struggling more with her shin than perhaps we’d realised, and there followed an extended debate about the best line from here to Elan Village. Chris’s vote for the eastern bank of Craig Goch Reservoir proved inspired. It was, however, now getting very hot, and by the time we hit the summit of Pen y Bwlch the sun was definitely getting the better of us. There followed a comedy of navigational error as we tried to run three different lines at once, with inevitable consequences. Entirely free of culpability (I’d forgot my map, remember), I chuckled my way down into the Elan Village, and another gourmet changeover.

There followed another couple of miles contouring beside reservoirs, chiefly made memorable by Tim running smack into a tree branch and the appearance, shortly thereafter, of a naked sun-bather. We entirely failed to take the line recommended by Wendy up to Drygarn Fawr, so I struck out on my very own bearing, only finally relenting when it became apparent that everybody else - Wendy and Charmian included - were making happier progress on a quad bike track, whilst I was finding nothing but tussocks. Drygarn Fawr is a very fine hill indeed, topped by two magnificent beehive cairns, and with views worth running 150 miles for. We spent twenty minutes drinking in the scene, and I was entirely at peace, living in the moment, and not caring about the final gruesome six mile stretch of tarmac which seemed to have dominated my companions’ thoughts for most of the day.

We descended past waterfalls into a delightful valley, reminiscent of the White Peak at its best, a bit of road, a bit more boggy traverse, and then back onto the tarmac. As promised, it was not good, not good at all, and made worse still by the offer of a lift from a kindly bearded gent who, having driven past us a mile back, had returned to ferry us camp-ward. Despite Tim’s polite refusal and eager recounting of our journey and charitable purpose, our new friend nevertheless made a second pass, repeating his offer, and in the hot late afternoon sun, with feet grumbling with every step, and no prospect of a rapid conclusion, being made to decline his offer a second time was perhaps a little less friendly. By journey’s end, and a further 13hrs and 42mins on our feet, I was near enough hyperventilating. Lynda’s lasagne that night, however, made everything worthwhile.

Day Five – deliverance (mad dogs and Englishmen)

It was, once again, time to dig in. I’d surprised myself how easily I’d settled back into running each morning – with every step beyond day two for me a step into the unknown. Dave, having surprised himself just as much I think by running the entire distance from Conwy, was dragged out of his bed at 6am and summarily told he too would be running with the A team. And so it was that we departed our final overnight camp, yours truly this time forgetting to don his hat on the hottest day of our journey.

Tim insisted I wear his, then settled into an hour of gleeful banter with Dave and Matt (Chris’s mate), respectively the Ordnance Corps squaddie, the para and the marine. It’s reassuring to know, I suppose, that the military’s chief benchmark of hardness – how long you can survive naked in a bed of nettles – isn’t too dissimilar to the one employed in most public schools. I laboured somewhat in everybody’s wake – more tarmac – but was very glad of a brief respite in Llandovery, where Tim excelled himself with the purchase of three steak pies and a whole cooked chicken.

Meanwhile, I dived into a newsagent to purchase a second map of the western Brecons, having discovered that the map of Llandovery I was carrying ran out of coverage an hour into the day’s journey. You really do get a sense of travel when each day you cover the length of an entire 1:25k map and then some; and the only thing you need do to orient your map is turn it so that the writing’s upside down.

Tim treated us to more comedy sprinting as he hurtled headlong into the water at the Usk Reservoir. We said our farewells to Wendy at the changeover - it had been a real pleasure to spend time, however briefly, with one of fell-running’s legends – and we all then set off, Steve included, on the final leg of our journey. Ever so gradually the Fan Brycheiniog escarpment hauled itself up in front of us. I began to enjoy the softness of the grassy terrain, and the opportunity to climb steeply again. At the top we stopped, ate briefly, and as Steve and Dave turned west to follow the main escarpment to our final destination, Chris and I bickered half-heartedly about the best line south over Fan Hir. A red kite courted us as we surveyed the afternoon’s terrain, then we set off down a glorious two mile grassy descent to Glyntawe.

At the Craig-y-nos Country Park we paused for double-helpings of ice cream, then turned our faces to the last big, long, long, haul of our journey. Though I tried to protest otherwise, Chris had the best line to the summit of Cribarth. Only problem was the trig point was three metres lower than the spot height 350 metres to the north-east, and I was insistent that we visit both. During the 92 race, it transpired, Cribarth was one of a couple of summits taken out of the equation altogether on the final day so that, as at a couple of other points on our journey, we were truly delineating our own Dragon’s Belly route. Indeed, as other’s have observed, this was our route and our journey, not to be compared – for good or ill – with anybody else’s.

The eight miles or so of yomping from here to Foel Fraith via a number of indeterminate rocky outcrops was tough. The bone dry grasses almost as harsh on the feet as the gritty rocks they engulfed. It was fortunate that Matt was there to keep moving us forward at a half-decent pace as it was quite clear that two days in the baking sun was playing havoc with our decision-making faculties. Chris and I spent five minutes debating the location of a spot height which we were, in truth, entirely agreed upon from the outset, whilst Tim was more interested by this point in throwing himself in any puddle of water that presented itself than he was in moving forward in anything approaching a straight-line. Meanwhile, Nicky’s mojo was returning in the rougher terrain, and I was fast beginning to flag. Notwithstanding the symphony of skylarks all around, I was mightily relieved to reach the final road crossing of our journey in one piece, where Chris was reunited with his partner Tracy, whilst I collapsed into a chair and grunted.

And so to the last six miles to the castle. The terrain remained harsh, and my route-finding progressively more incompetent, but by this point I really didn’t care. The views were terrific, Carreg Cennen Castle – when it finally swung into view – a proper crag-topping ruin worthy of the distances we’d covered, and the birdsong and early evening summer sunshine quite magnificent. We were even greeted by an impromptu stone dragon – more likely a dog if truth be told – on the final summit of Tair Carn Isaf. And, should you be interested, it took us 14hrs and 12mins to complete this final day.

I hung back, shedding a quiet tear or two, and feeling enormously privileged to have been able to spend six wonderful days in the company of a dozen like-minded souls, all of whom had contributed fully to quite simply the best week I’ve been lucky enough to enjoy in the hills. We will each take away different things from the experience, I am sure, but equally I have no doubt we would each also recommend the journey to anybody else who fancied giving it a whirl. I had intended to close with some observations on the stories I was told along the way – about both the original and the revived Dragon’s Backs – and how these tales and our own journey inter-twined, overlapped and diverged over the course of the week; like three chuntering Warts negotiating Kinder on a claggy night. But perhaps it’s better to let sleeping giants lie. Instead, I must simply extend my heartfelt thanks to all who were involved in the endeavour, and in particular to Charmian, Lynda, Gerald, Tammy, Max and Steve, for nurturing us every step of the way.

Oh, and lest I forget, one last request. It’s still not too late to donate to Odyssey at <http://www.justgiving.com/teams/dragonsbelly>; one way or another, whether it’s mine or the runners’ collected page which pulls ahead, we’ve got to make sure Nicky doesn’t win this race too.