

Welsh 1000m Peaks Race - Saturday June 7th 2003

The Welsh 1000m Peaks Race is a Class-A Fell race, run every year by the Gorphwysfa club. Originally a military exercise, it involves running around and up Snowdon armed with map, compass, rations and a total disregard for ones own personal safety. Snowdon is the highest peak in England & Wales.

Two courses were on offer - a 10 miler, starting at Ogwen and finishing at the Snowdon summit, some 4000 ft of climb later – and a 20 miler for the truly deranged (eg Glyn Smith), starting at Aber and joining the short course shortly after Ogwen. Competitors could enter either race as fell runners (travelling light) or mountaineers (boots and pack).

Friday June 6th saw our entourage debunk to the Plas-Y-Brenin Mountaineering Centre at Capel Curig in the shadow of Snowdon. A hearty pasta meal was consumed with several beers, whilst fell virgins (Andrew, Sarah and I included) were told terrible tales of the mountain by strange people with unblinking stares. Before retiring to Pen-Y-Pass Youth Hostel (the halfway point on the 10 mile course) Andrew and I peered into the gloom of the Pyg Track, snaking steeply upward towards the summit, and tried to put the task ahead of us into perspective. We couldn't.

We were greeted by a bright and clear morning, and made our way down to Llanberis and the bus which was to take us to the 11 am start. The 20 milers (Glyn, Andy Middleton) were long gone already and the tension on the bus was high, with our group understandably apprehensive about the task in hand. Suddenly nobody seemed so certain about the correct way to use that newly purchased map and compass. Christine provided the focus here with huge experience in the event, having run her first Peaks Race in 1975. We could only pray that the weather held – fog, wind or rain would make for a different race.

At this point my tale becomes a more personal diary. From the start the going was steep and rocky. I scrambled up the first ridge, on all fours at one point through a chattering stream, the rate of climb an immediate shock. With lungs ready to burst I cleared the first ridge, over the stile, and carefully picked my way around the treacherously steep and loose rocks of Bwch Tryfan until I cleared the next. Stretching ahead was the Miner's Track and the steep, rocky descent to Pen-Y-Pass. In normal circumstances a descent would have made welcome relief, but this was to prove the most difficult part of the course for me. Smaller rocks scattered underfoot whilst larger rocks masked deep holes. Having made good time on the way up, I now found myself overtaken by heavy boot-clad mountaineers who simply threw themselves downhill, crunching rock and ignoring the terrain underfoot. I had opted for lightweight fell shoes and was conscious of the ankle-breaking potential of each rock as I danced and weaved to find a path through. Intense concentration appeared to be the only guard against serious injury.

As the ground levelled out it became softer and spotted with patches of heather which tore at the feet. I reached the river and waded through, ignoring the slippery rocks which formed a crossing of sorts. Running again I was somewhat surprised to suddenly sink into a bog – up to my waist!. After a couple of exhilarating seconds I regained my composure and dragged myself out on my elbows, laughing aloud. Somewhat bedraggled I pushed on up to the top of the ridge and picked my way down the craggy cliff to the car park at Pen-Y-Pass. Welcome refreshments were on offer here, and I took a few moments out to recharge and regroup.

The second leg took me out of the car park and onto the Pyg Track. The path was steep and consisted of large boulders arranged as steps, each maybe two feet high. After a while it levelled out and I picked up the pace. I overtook a group of soldiers at one point and we exchanged knowing glances. I made a point of staying ahead, but became aware that I was running in bursts of effort as I became more tired. The guys behind were maintaining a more steady pace, but were keeping up.

The final third of the Pyg Track climb was agonising, as I again was forced to scramble across boulders and pick my way between rocks. The rate of ascent had increased markedly and my pace had dropped off. I was running out of carbs. It was at this point that the lead soldier, obviously sensing my discomfort, began to spur me on with verbal encouragement. I owe him a debt in that respect, as it was this that got me to the top of the path and the finger post, where I paused for breath. He pushed on ahead. I followed at a reduced pace until I reached the control point at the summit of Cryb-Y-Dysgl, shrouded in low cloud and bitten by icy wind. I was starting to feel quite poorly at this point, and struggled to pull on the windcheater which I had stowed in my small pack. I was close to the finish at this point and so slowly pushed on, back down to the finger post and up the short, steep track to Snowdon summit.

The final few yards seemed like miles, and I half expected to renew my acquaintance with breakfast at that moment. Grinding to a halt a few feet from the finish line I had to be persuaded (told) to cross it! Stumbling down the path to the summit café I found Sarah and Andrew queuing for coffee, having finished in good time, and headed towards them. I was promptly sat down and force-fed a jammy doughnut – at which point I must have hit ‘the wall’, as I burst into tears. Thanks Sarah. I understand that Andy also turned into a jellybaby when he crossed the line with Glyn – full marks for a full 20 to both! Molly’s news that we would have to walk down off the mountain was greeted with some incredulity, but the five mile descent to Llanberis proved to be a good warmdown with tales told and good humour intact.

In the evening we attended the prize-giving ceremony, where we ate, drank and made merry. Sarah won an individual prize for finishing second woman overall in a superb time of 2:25. West End also won the First Team prize of a T-Shirt apiece, despite being the only team entered! It was decided unanimously that we would all return next year and have a go at the long course. If Marathon running no longer challenges you please do feel free to come along...

Chris Smith