

Marathon of Britain Aug 1-6th 2004

by Andy Mouncey

Missed your train or car run out of petrol? Need to get to Nottingham from Worcester? No worries – the Good Lord gave you feet, didn't he? He surely did, though I can safely say they've never been subjected to 175 miles of footpaths in the space of a week before!

Marathon of Britain took place for the first time last year, and is the brainchild of ultra-dude Rory Coleman, recently returned from running from London to Lisbon – as you do. Modelled on the famous Marathon de Sables, it retains the format but not the sandunes. The UK version links Worcester and Nottingham by footpath over 6 days with an emphasis on navigation, self-sufficiency and an ability to last the course. You are fed at the start and the end of the day, housed in communal tents, but apart from that you carry everything you need for 6 days.

I first heard about it in the spring, and as I had a bit of a hole in my diary when compared to last year (!) I thought, 'what the heck' and signed up. The route itself looked fabulous, winding it's way through the sweet spots of Middle England, so if the weather was with us I figured we would at least be in for some spectacular scenery. In that at least, we were not disappointed.

I realised pretty quick that I had very little idea of exactly what I'd taken on. OK, I'd done endurance stuff over 3 days, but that was multi-sport which at least spreads the effort. This was a single sport over SIX days! I remembered how I felt 72 miles from London last year when my running legs gave out – now I'd committed to more than DOUBLE the distance. Time to start filling in the blanks then...

Now if there's one thing that London to Paris taught me, it was how to do Big & Scary stuff. It's all about those Six Steps. Here's a flavour of what that meant to me:

Step One: Set Goals To Really Grab You.

Now I thought this whole gig was pretty cool and sufficiently out of my comfort zone to get my attention, so all I had to go was to get spe-

cific. Objective and subjective Goals: Goals relating to the Outcome as well as those of the Journey. HOW did I want to do this thing? What was in it for me when I did? What about those closest to me? I decided I had to just do my own thing. That meant not being aware of stage times and not looking at the results list all week: ignore the thing and don't listen when other people were talking about it! The ole competitive juices wouldn't quite lie down though. I knew last year's winner was entered again, so I resolved to run with him for at least part of Stage 1 to see how fast he went and how he did it. I'd heard he wasn't too hot on the navigating, but as record holder for Land's End to John O'Groats, (9 days something covering over 85 miles per 24 hours) Andy Rivitt obviously knew something about being on his feet! I also knew I'd learned a truck load about this stuff as well since last year, and I also knew that I could do recovery and perseverance really bloody well. Stage 5 would be the longest stage by a big margin: my strategy was to get to the start of this intact and without killing myself. I figured more people than not would struggle on that Stage. My plan was to be part of the few that did not.

Step Two: Build A Support System

Doing Big & Scary is real tough on your own... but with 38 starters that was 38 potential recruits to Team Andy – but NOT if I was so far up my own arse that I simply switched folks off! Sharing the experiences and the challenge and the learns with the other MOBers was a key. Unique opportunity, and all that. Help, support, encourage and celebrate with others. I could still do this AND nail my performance goals. Humility. People like humility...

Then there were ways in which I could support myself during the preparation and the event itself. The priorities I had. How I chose to spend my time. What I said to myself. What I believed about the event and my abilities.

Step Three: Keep It Simple

Everything breaks down into bite-size chunks.

And the whole thing? In my head it was never 175 miles. At it's very simplistic level that was just time on my feet – all I had to do was to keep moving. Take it stage by stage and page by page on our Route Book.. Don't think about the whole thing – then break each stage down as well: checkpoint to checkpoint, and smaller than that if I need to. Perseverance and recovery would be the glue to hold the chunks together.

Step Four: Focus On What You Can Control

A clue to what these things are? Role Model: Find folks who have been there, done it and got the T shirt and LEARN from them. So I trawled the web ultra-running chat rooms, the MOB web forum, read, researched, spent time with mad ultra-folks, then tried the stuff out myself! The real test is can you maintain this focus when things go wrong? This was the situation I faced Week 5 of the six week prep period I'd allocated myself. I'd over-trained and picked up an injury. I'd been training differently – running with a rucksack filled with medicine balls and building up to running twice a day with quality runs over a block of 3 consecutive days. In the end it was too much. Week 5 was therefore spent focusing on being a model patient and doing everything I could to speed the recovery. It worked, and with 5 days to go I was running easy and pain-free again – but it was a test!

Step Five: Rest, Reflect & Recuperate

Why does a pre-race taper work? 'Cos this is when the body adapts best from the training! Same principle here: this is when the real learning happens – the trick is to plan it in as a priority and not leave it to chance. So I kept a diary during the event. After each stage the guys got used to seeing me scribble away. It helped keep perspective, reflect honestly and learn from the events of the day. That helped me feel good about myself and THAT was damn useful when you've got 175 miles to cover! I took a mat to sleep on. Many folks didn't want the weight – but I knew I'd need to maximise my chances to rest! I also had little treats and habits to maximise the impact of the recovery time. I took sachets of Cool-Gel to use during my post-stage self massage. I showered after each stage. (6 days sleeping in a field and getting very sweaty and run down was a great way

to pick up infections and exacerbate any foot problems).

Personal hygiene I felt was going to be a real issue. There were no showers or hot water but there were plenty of bottles of drinking water. So I used to grab a fistful of these, got my bits out and got on with it. And guess what, I FELT better afterwards! Because we had to carry everything we would need for 6 days, weight was a premium. Many folks just didn't bring wash kit etc. Their choice – but more people looked and felt crap by the end of the week than didn't – and I saw some feet in states you wouldn't believe!).

Step Six: Smile, Celebrate & Re-Set The Goal

A jelly-baby every time I turned a page of the Route Book made me smile! Another food treat and a healthy dose of positive self-talk at every checkpoint. Paying attention to the view as we went along – it was a stunning route in places – and then every time the next step and the next step, knowing that it was all bringing me closer!

And The Race Itself?

Stage 1: 16 miles / 3 Checkpoints Malvern Town Centre to Croome Country Park

Straight upto Malvern Beacon, along the ridge-line of the Hills then drop down and head NE for Croome. 38 started in glorious weather which soon narrowed down to about 5 of us going flat out for the Beacon. Nice steady pace? No chance – this was flat out fellracing with 174 miles to go! This soon got everyone spread out as there were all shapes and sizes and abilities here. Everyone from the racing snakes at the front to folks who were walking the whole thing at 3-4 mph. (I later figured out that those racing at the head of the field from last year were running to a simple tactic: work hard to establish a gap on Day 1 – then protect that gap. Me, I was just out for a jolly at that point...)

But I did want to get close to last years' winner Andy Rivett on this stage to have a look and see how fast he ran. I'd heard he wasn't too hot with a map – and I was right! – but he was here last year so did have that advantage. By the time we got off the Hills a loose group of about 3-4 of us were away. A couple of dodgy

map moments trying to find footpaths through and around fields in various combinations split us up and the heat over the last 5 miles did it's work too. Despite having to use my emergency jelly babies in the last miles I trotted in 2nd place about 10 minutes behind Andy R who had blitzed the stage over 10 minutes faster than he ran it last year. One down, 5 to go and loads of Learns in the process.

Winner: 2 hrs 25 min / Me: 2 hrs 36 min (2nd)

Stage 2: 29 miles / 5 Checkpoints Croome to Broadway

After a second night under canvas most of us are still sleeping crap – not tired enough yet to sleep on and through anything! The other change is that today our legs are also hurting – and I realise belatedly that descending like a lunatic off Malvern Beacon probably wasn't such a smart move after all! So it is a much steadier start with the field pretty much together for the first flat few miles. Today however, is the BIG HILLY day: we have 4 big climbs including a fearsome one to finish upto Broadway Tower. It's also blazingly hot. The first climb takes us onto Bredon Hill for stunning views across the Cotswolds.

Hanno, one of the German contingent has set his heart on a stage win today and is pushing on ahead using the most awkward style imaginable – but it's deceptively fast! We let him go and I focus on keeping it all under control. It's hotter than a snakes ass out here. The day is not without drama with the only 2 retirements of the whole week. One of them is last year's winner who collapses at halfway. He is fortunately found soon after but it's a close call and he's whisked to hospital a very lucky bunny. I decide to take a detour round the local Coop in Broadway to stock up on food, so trade calories for time: I figure it's a good deal and finish tired but OK at the end of a day which has wreaked havoc on the field. The evening clinic with our 2 race doctors is very popular and very vocal. The best treatment for blisters is simple and ruthless – particularly if you want to run on 'em the following day. The routine was perfected during last year: Lance 'em with a scalpel, drain 'em, flush 'em with iodine, and pad and strap 'em My trusty plates of meat are standing up well, so those of us who are affliction-free sit back and listen to the screams rending the

evening air..

Winner: 5 hrs 38 min / Me: 6 hrs 22min (6th)

Stage 3: 33 miles / 5 Checkpoints Broadway to Stratford Racecourse

Definitely sore pins today and very much damper after a couple of huge thunderstorms yesterday evening. One of last year's top finishers makes a break early on, and I think 'sod it – let's cover it!' So the first few miles are fast till we all settle down again. Then the biggest map-reading error costs a group of three of us about 15 minutes and to add insult to injury I hit a bad patch and grovel about pathetically for a few miles as we wind our way to Long Marston and the start of the Greenway and the long run into Stratford. I pick up, hook up with Sammy the Sqaddie and positively fly down towards Stratford making up chunks of time and distance.

Then the cruel bit: we run right past the finish and onto a 10 mile loop which will bring us back on ourselves. But it's all very strong stuff, and Sammy and I continue to push and we finish strongly only a few minutes down on the stage winner. Not long after the heavens open and we get the mother of all storms to really test the tents and the morale of the rest of the MOB field yet to finish. Spirits are strong though, and everyone makes it in over the next few hours very bedraggled but delighted to get here.

Winner: 5 hrs 52 mins / Me: 6 hrs 2 mins (4th)

Stage 4: 35 miles / 4 Checkpoints Stratford to Coombe Abbey Country Park

Perversely, my pins feel better today! So clearly, three days to 'bed in' then it's just a normal day, huh?! I'm planning another big food stop today at about a third distance in Warwick. Again, I figure the calories for time trade is worth it. We pass the 100 mile point at Kenilworth Castle – hurrah! But I really struggle over the next few miles and have to curse myself into keeping moving. I realise belatedly that I'm simply overheating, and swapping a T shirt for my usual vest does the trick. I'm not out of the woods yet though, and can feel all is not well under my left foot. There's little I can do except finish and sort it out then, but now I'm worried as my plan of getting to the start of the BIG

DAY intact is going out the window. It is today that eventual MOB 2004 winner Jez Bragg puts the race away: he simply runs away with the stage and puts nearly 45 mins on the second place finisher. Not bad for a young man in his twenties with only a few years' running in him.

I walk the last few miles tired and hobbling but pleased to limit the damage as my 'bad' day is still relatively good. But it's my turn to scream later as the doc has to do some serious scalpel and iodine work to the sole of my foot. I really thought I could 'do' pain, but this is really something else – but so is the risk of infection. We pad and strap it and I leave wondering how the heck I will do 55 miles on it tomorrow over rough terrain. Ah well, let's figure that out in the morning.

Winner: 5 hrs 49 min / Me: 7 hrs 8 min (5th)

Stage 5: 55 miles / 6 Checkpoints Coventry to Soar Valley Meadows

Today is THE DAY. I figured that more people will struggle today than go well. I had not put myself in a box upto now because I wanted to get to this point in relatively good shape. The legs feel OK but I need to take my traumatised foot for a spin. Remarkably a few test-jogs prove that the pads and straps are doing their job – and I'm soon grinning like a loon: LET'S GET IT ON!

It will be another baking hot day. The folks at the back of the field have set off at 4.30am and 7am. It is estimated that some of them will take over 24 hrs for the stage – and at the front of the field we will probably pass some of them at about a third distance. These are the real heros.

Through Wolvey and we are soon on the canal heading for Hinckley. All very familiar stuff now as we head by the water towards Market Bosworth. I'm working with a new tactic today: my watch set to bleep every hour to remind me to eat – no chances taken today. Our lead group splits along this stretch and we start to pass the back markers. We have all got to know eachother pretty well over the past days and there is a huge sense of camaraderie. We know an awful lot of folks are in for a very long day, so take time to wish them well.

I'm cruising along quite happily on my own by

Bosworth and scare the customers of a local cake shop by breezing in and dripping all over the counter! Then it's over the fields on the Leicester Round to Markfield and Bradgate. I catch one of the early leaders and hit Bradgate feeling great! I've promised myself I'll call Charlotte on my mobile when I get to Old John – as at that point I will be able to see the power station which is the stage finish. I'm 10 minutes down on the 3 leaders so decide to push hard over this next section into Loughboro' putting my local knowledge to use: I want to catch and pass 'em!

A breathless call to my wife catches her right out (!) and my spirits stay high as I work hard to the 45 mile point along the canal in Loughboro'. 2 minutes! I get a time check, and sure enough in the distance I can make out a familiar figure. I throw my trusty mental lasso and pull, but then clear of Loughboro' heading up the river to Kegworth the lasso breaks. I grind to a halt: I have simply pushed too fast too soon. Oh, well, back to Plan B: Just Keep Moving! So I walk and eat and drink trying to get the energy back up. We are on a section broken with fences and styles so I do a deal with myself: walk a section, run a section all the way to Kegworth. This works for a while, but I find it difficult to keep my spirits up on this endless stretch of river: where the **** is Kegworth?!

Then the mother of all storms drops on us: thunder, lightening – the lot. I can barely see straight never mind anything else. My spirits plummet and I just get my head down and stomp in a fearful temper along the path, swearing and cursing my head off at everything and nothing. Oh dear – but at least I'm moving.



The last checkpoint means I'm about 3 miles away. I curse myself into a run as the storm continues to wreak havoc around us. The final stretch seems endless but finally I see the glow of floodlights in the camp, and I'm in. Thank f*** for that!

Winner: 11 hrs 3 mins / Me: 11 hrs 30 mins (4th)

Stage 6: 10 miles / 1 Checkpoint Soar Valley Meadows to Nottingham Castle

Throughout the night people have been finishing in various states. Hardly anyone sleeps. Those of us who are in find ourselves helping those who stagger into our communal tents.

The defining moment of the whole week comes at 7.30am. Some 27 hours after starting the stage, Big Dave and Yogi walk into camp after going all night through the storm Yogi is in this for a bet, looks like shit and just keels over across the line. Dave is built like a brick shit-house, has walked over 500 marathons, but even he looks alittle jaded. The rest of us just stand, stare, and applaud in absolute awe: Some are crying - all of us have a lump in our throat.

Two hours later they are on their feet again for the last 10 miles: well, what the hell else would you do?

For the rest of us, the final stage is completed in a variety of ways. For me, that meant a steady wind up for the first 5 miles to break away, threshold for 3 miles to try and keep it, then a ferocious battle for second in the last few miles. 175 miles ends with a flat out sprint upto the Castle to just about throw up over the finish line!

The things you do for fun, huh?

Winner: 1 hr 29 min / Me: 1 hr 31 min (3rd)

Total Winning Time: 32 hrs 58 min / Me: 35 hrs 14 min (3rd)