

Racing The Fellsman 2011

by Andy Mouncey

'Sticky clippers.'

I raise a quizzical eyebrow around a mouthful of post-race trifle to the new Fellsman race record holder (10 hours 6 minutes for 62 miles and 11,000' climbing) sitting next to me.

'I beg your pardon?'

Jez Bragg tries again.

'Did you have any problems with sticky clippers?'

'Ah!' Realization dawns. 'Now that you mention it – yes, I did.'

So we'd hurtle in to the checkpoints, get our plastic race cards clipped, and want to be out of there sharpish. The only problem was that then the damn things required some serious wrist wrestling from the attendant marshal before they would disengage.

'So how much time do you reckon that was worth?'

Cue comedy sharp intake of breath.

'Gotta be 5 seconds a checkpoint...Heck, let's be generous – call it 3'

'5 seconds over 24 checkpoints..?' I can still do the maths so I'm clearly not that stuffed.

'That's over a minute and a half.'

I look across at last year's UTMB winner who was just on another planet today.

A wicked grin: 'That means you really did around 10.04 then...only FOUR minutes off a sub-10 time. That's pathetic, Jez - what on earth were you messing about at?!'

A chuckle. 'And that sub-12 time you were after?'

A pause while that sinks in.

'Yeah, I know - I was robbed!'

★

400 yards into the race and I've already ripped up Plan A.

I know it's not big or clever - and I don't care.

After nigh on 6 weeks up and down with injury and illness and 3 missed target races and a pre-Fellsman week of intense rehab, I'm finally running freely with not a twinge from the problem calves.

So I've quickly adopted Plan B – and Plan B, (subtitled 'Needless Indulgence') says I can run as I feel for this first bit, and sod the science.

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As we start the first climb up Ingleborough I'm jogging happily along a few yards behind multiple winner Mark Hartell and someone else who has been racking up the trophies at home and abroad over the last few years, one Jez Bragg.

And there's silence behind me – I can't hear anyone.

Surely we haven't got a gap already, have we?

My 'eyes front' rule dictates I can't check this so I content myself with trying to stay relaxed and keeping space between the two champions ahead. There's a world of difference between running with them and just off them, and I'm quite happy in my own space, thank you.

I marvel at how smoothly Jez in particular is moving while he and Mark chat away in front. He seems to glide up the gradient, everything tidy, together, seemingly effortless. I recall racing with him at his first ultra in 2004 – heck, even I was young then!

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We come together as the climb steepens and we're joined by Adam Perry. I'm genuinely delighted to see him – we ran together for many of the first miles of last year's Lakeland 100 and I haven't seen him since – so spend the next few minutes catching up between breaths.

But while I'm smiling inside and out and I'm well aware that I'm also running way ahead of a 12 hour schedule – that thing which sailed out the window after 400 yards.

'You're way ahead of schedule!' Mark calls back.

He should know – he helped me put it together.

'I know. You worried yet?' Like that's going to happen...

Chuckles all around. Heck, it's just fun to be out and playing, y'know?

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The four of us make the summit together, and then gather for the plunge off the summit plateau.

'Mark missed a bus or something?' Jez is back with me after we all take a slightly different line.

'Nah – just got a good line down that steep bit with his extra grippy shoes.'

Jez & I are watching Mr Fellsman open a 100 yard gap off the mountain.

Someone decides that's just not on and we race into the first CP at Hill Inn for a quick bottle fill, our second sticky clipper moment, and shoot off down the road at what seems like stupid pace.

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For the first time in decades I'm racing wearing a watch.

This is consistent with Plan A: Run to a schedule, check your splits, Andy.

As I'm now on Plan B, the watch now has a different role.

I'm not looking at the time, but I am recording the CP splits for later analysis.

I know Mark will be on around a 10.30 pace (his course record stands at around 10.15) which will put us at Hill Inn in under the hour.

Which means I'm 6-8 minutes faster than I'm scheduled to be.

Ah.

But this is fun!

Part of me protests that this is still not big or clever, but a bigger part is still just very happy to be out and racing again – so let's just get on with it, shall we?

Together again on the climb up Whernside, and while Mark and Jez stretch out ahead by the summit, we're all together again as we start the drop into Kingsdale.

Suddenly Mark has pulled up & is right in front of me clutching the back of his leg.

What..? He's pulled something – oh no!

Now is not a time to make thoughtless remarks to the multiple winner of this race, but I want to say something as I move around him.

'It's a pull...?'

He mutters something around gritted teeth.

**** 'Stay safe, Mark.'

It's the best I can manage and it's fleeting at that. Jez has forged ahead to the CP and I hurry to peg the gap – arriving as he's still filling bottles.

Again, we're both swiftly through and onto the climb to Gragareth.

And while I don't know it my splits will show me later that I'm another 6-8 minutes up.

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The elastic stretches on the climb. We cross on the short out and back to the summit. I have assumed a 'I'm still cool' face while Jez appears deep in ipod mode.

I'll get a glimpse periodically on the climb to Great Cowm, but for all intents and purposes he's gone.

A slight overshoot on the approach to the Great Cowm CP – visions of Mark's unforced error last year – gives Adam the chance to close the gap we've had since the drop off Ingleborough, and we're together as we drop into Dent at about 20 miles.

*

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction

Or to put it in more succinct ultrarunning terms: Cock it up and you'll get it back with interest – the only question is when & how much you get to pay.

At the CP I trade calories for time and it's a

mistake. I know it's a mistake, but I can't see any sandwiches ready and I don't ask for what I can't see. I scoot out of there with just an orange and full bottles to show for it, full of misplaced pride from another swift stop and that Adam is once again behind me.

The payback begins on the climb to Blea Moor. Adam goes past me with a cheery greeting as my world starts to implode.

For a few minutes it just doesn't occur to meet to eat - I just can't figure why I'm slowing - then I try and get a Cliff Bar down my neck but I've got to practically ram it down with a pole - I do NOT want to eat that thing!

'****ing hell, I'm going down here!'

No ****, Sherlock.

*

Adam's reached the checkpoint and practically skips over the skyline and is gone. I, on the other hand, am dragging my sorry ass to the lone figure outside the tent, mumble a few words of greeting and walk listlessly off.

The happy camper of the first 20 miles picturing a smiley fast finish in Threshfield is gone. In his place is a wobbling shell who is now struggling to get his head around arriving at half way. I am entertaining all kinds of thoughts about calling it a day:

You don't really want this...

It's not that important...

It's OK, you've been injured...

Those legs feel really sore, don't they...

You could stop at Stonehouse and get a lift back easy...

Remember after Redshaw and halfway you're committed...

Bullshit - the lot of it.

Finally some sense breaks through the wallowing self-pity, and I do what I should have been doing all along: Reduce the size of the chunks I'm focused on.

Just get to Stonehouse, get some food down you and see...you're still moving and you can

still see Adam...it's all downhill from here...just get off the moor and onto the road - you can f***in' roll down from there...

It's a pathetic descent, but it is a descent and that means I'm getting closer to the CP. Once I hit the road it's a gradual half mile or so downhill to sanctuary, and to my relief I drop down a few notches on the pathetic scale.

OK...you can still move then...

It's the fastest pasta demolition job you are likely to see this side of civilization, and while I'm still not Mr Happy, neither am I entertaining thoughts of binning it right here. Adam is still here on shovelling detail as well so I figure either he's on for a serious scoff, or I haven't dropped quite everything all over that last section of the course.

I set my thoughts to the imminent climb and jog out in Adams' wake.

A run-walk combination upto the final push up Great Knoutberry keeps the distance between us pegged and my morale gets a boost, but once onto the open moor and into the wind on the out and back to the trig point I am back to grovelling patheticness.

My world reduces down to the 3 meters in front of me as Adam forges ahead into the wind. This section has hurt and even on the descent I'm slow - half-clocking the familiar faces behind me and estimating gaps.

Because there still is quite a big one behind me.

By the time I hit halfway I can see Adam already some distance beyond the CP. The gap has really stretched this time.

And while I'm not doing 'fire-in-the-eyes-gonna-getcha' neither am I entertaining any real thoughts of calling it a day.

Get some more food down you, keep moving, let's just see...

Ahead is a chance to make some ground taking a direct route to the gate on the Cam High Road. To my delight I see the distant figure of Adam following the wall on what I am convinced is the long way round.

A rictus grin and I go direct - time to get some time back! - get my lines nailed and emerge.

No-one in sight. Nothing behind and nothing ahead.

Gotcha!

Then I look again, and in the distance about to disappear on the approach to Dodd Fell is a lone figure.

Adam – and he’s gained a bucketload of time.

I’m momentarily crushed – I was convinced that was a quicker line – but right there before me is undeniable evidence to the contrary.

I retreat back into my cave, and though I’m moving reasonably well, there’s nothing remarkable about it at all. I arrive at Fleet Moss just as Adam is leaving. A shouted greeting and I register he’s going for the direct route.

Okayyyy...that’s interesting...

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I’m swift through the CP and head out on the runnable southern route which skirts the moss. My pace and focus picks up helped by periodically clocking Adam ahead who seems to have ditched the direct route and emerged not too far ahead of me. The gap is closing. I get my lines spot on and close some more upto the blue mug stile

He tells me later he slowed over Yockenthwaite Moor and the approach to the new CP. It shows as well. The entire field are on new ground with this 11th hour course change, and there’s no use in looking for Jez’s footprints. He was, I remind myself, floating anyway. I put my faith in map and compass and arrive at the new CP the closest I’ve been to Adam since Blea Moor.

Then it’s choice time: Direct over difficult ground to the newly-moved Hells Gap CP or go for the handrail which is a wall to the south and hope for more runnable terrain if slightly longer.

I made my choice before the start, so as Adam heads direct I go for the wall. To my delight there is indeed a small path on the north side – it’s a relief to be able to run smoothly again after jog-walk-stumble across the groughs.

I emerge onto the Cray track about 200 yards south of the CP just as Adam runs past en route to Cray.

OK, so that kinda worked...

Quickly upto the CP to give the marshals a scare (‘Where the heck did you come from?!’) and back the way I’ve just come.

Again, it ain’t speedy, but it ain’t pathetic either – and someone somewhere registers that I’ve still been putting in a respectable pace over these last few sections.

Someone also registers that it’s still very much daylight, and my goal for a daylight finish looks very much on.

★

Another swift CP – that has been a feature this time – and I’m girding myself for the steep pull up Buckden Pike. It’s blowing a gale on top but I figure as we’re not up here for long it’s best to keep plugging away. I cool down frighteningly fast which only serves to add urgency into my traverse of the summit plateau.

The plunge off into warmer stuff is much appreciated – though the clocking of the fact that Adam has once again stretched the elastic, is not.

Park Rash CP: The start of the final climb of the race up Great Whernside. Last year I was grouped here with 6 other runners in readiness for the onset of darkness. A little victory grin creeps out at the realisation that this year will be different.

The climb feels long, and I’m not betting much on the turbo boost effect from a couple of cocktail sausages grabbed at the CP. I’ve opted for another swift stop and just get on with it, consuming from my own supplies.

Emerging once again into the teeth of the wind I’m buoyed by the thought that once I’m down off this baby, then there really only is the run into the finish. Not short, for sure – but flat.

I’m required to pull over for a pit stop on the descent, and while in full moon pose, my little world with just little me in is shattered as first lady Nicky Spinks glides by.

Where the f..?!?

As I’ve been doing ‘eyes front’ all the way the last time I saw what was happening behind me was the out and back of Great Knoutberry.

She is, I belatedly realise, running a perfectly paced race.

Hurridly assuming the vertical position once again I'm once again allowing someone else to dictate my race. But I need some information quickly:

How's she moving?

Can I catch her on the steep stuff?

How's she going over the flatter ground?

Was that a burst she put in the get past me, or..?

I am indeed catching her on the steep stuff – but that's all.

Holding the gap on the flatter ground is requiring some serious focus and heavy breathing. I am acutely aware that I'm right on the edge between holding and blowing – and there's still a few miles to go yet.

The elastic stretches.

F***!

I'm not willing to raise it to what will be around a 40 minute sprint to the finish. Half that – who knows – but at the CP at the foot of Great Whernside I pull my focus back on me.

The elastic snaps.

*

And then it's just about holding on. A serious wobble has me delving into my sack for emergency mint cake about half a mile from Yarnbury – after remembering to do so out of sight behind a gate from anyone behind me.

Yarnbury CP – about 20 minutes running left.

'You're on for a sub 12 finish!'

I partly register it, but really am just locked into holding my form on the long level road section before the drop into Grassington, and am concentrating like crazy.

Once it drops, then you're close. Hold on, fella – relax – run tall...

Grassington at dusk, and there's no sound of thumping footsteps descending behind me.

Hold on...

Over the river and up into Threshfield I finally look behind me: Nothing.

A grin. There's the school.

'Runner finishing!!' The finish desk is choked with runners just off the pick up bus registering their DNF. I crank up the volume and give it another go.

Cue elbows & more shouting.

Tally clipped, wrestled away & clock stopped: 'What's the time?!?'

A pause.

'12.00.35'

F***!!!!!!