

The Spine Race

by Andy Mouncey



'I've got hot ribena, sandwiches and sticky buns. What do you want to start with?'

My friend and training partner Andy B has run out to meet me as I descend like a giraffe off Fountains Fell. I've been on the go for over 27 hours with one 25 minute stop before a very cold and long night and this, quite frankly, is the best news I've had for bloomin' ages. It's so good infact, that...'I'd even have your children for that, fella!'

Let's deal with the elephant in the room first: I did not complete the full 270 miles of the Pennine Way as stated on the entry form – I stopped at 105miles. The race is still in progress as I write this and yet I feel the best about me and my running I've felt for a very long time.

On Friday at the race briefing in the Peak District I sat there shaking. Thank the gods of signal coverage I didn't have one for my phone 'cos talking to Charlotte would probably have made it all very messy indeed as she was already worried enough as it was, thank you. The rest of the evening, the night, the first 40 miles or so the predominant emotion was fear and the predominant thoughts were negative.

Now I can do negatives to positives with the best of 'em but for a very long time now I've become unconsciously skilled at not wanting to. The result? I've become very good at it. So good in fact that it needed a lever of outrageous proportions to change it.

Welcome my friend, to The Spine Race.

So of course the fact that Checkpoint 2, at 105 miles, was a 40 minute drive away from home helped. Would I have continued if that wasn't the case? We'll never know. What I do know is that as well as some long overdue internal re-modelling, I took a bundle of personal firsts away with me:

Just Getting On (And On) With It

Longest single shift continuous outing on two feet now stands at a personal best of 34 hours thanks to The Spine. So I'm thinking I'd be good for a 48 hour no sleep stretch if I ever needed it. Maybe...

Doing Camel

I ate far more (and still less than I think I needed) than I would do on a 'normal' hundred, but I drank wayyyyyy less than I needed – and still held it together. How do I figure that? Well, when at around 90 miles I spilt my urine down my leg post-pee – I know but give me a break, fine motor control was seriously impaired in the latter stages(!) - it burned my skin like acid. Hmm, ph balance abit shot then?

The night section was done on one 0.5 ml flask of hot water because my normal bottle froze after two hours. ('Coulda predicted that one, dontcha think?). That's 10 hours ontop of 12 hours on the move – and I know I didn't drink enough then either. So that 'run when you're

depleted' training I've been working on over the last couple of years? It really works.

And the race? It's a monster and tactically fascinating. Here it is in bite-size chunks:

Meeting last year's joint winner on the train to Edale. Gary Morrison chats easily and it's my first insight into the event. His 'Spine FINISHER 2012' T shirt is only one of three in existence and I decide then and there to watch him in the early stages to get an idea of pace and his movement discipline.

We're briefed by mountain and polar specialists. I'm impressed with the balance they strike between risk, responsibility, challenge and safety. About 50 folks will be on the start line going for either the 105 mile or full distance and we really are all shapes and sizes. Two people come over and say hello and I recognise a few of my own, but mostly I sit on my own and try and look calm while the internal turmoil rages. The two young Spanish lads are said to be swift, last years second place finisher Mark Caldwell is doing the 'short' 105 miles, quite a few of the class of 2012 are here with unfinished business, and of course Gary's Back... Organiser Scott sums it up: 'Look after each other out there.'

A few miles in and there's a small group gone off the front as we approach the climb up Jacob's Ladder. Ahead of me as planned is a loose group of three including Gary: I've already noted the poles in hand, bladder instead of bottles, easy travel over the level stuff, slow to a pole-assisted fast power walk on anything remotely uphill, and the smallest pack in the field. Hmm...

Traversing the Peak District it's bitterly cold and misty on the tops and frozen solid. Dramatic stuff as we drop out of the clouds periodically but potentially lethal underfoot. I'm chugging along very comfortably on the outside while wrestling with demons on the inside: sometimes I even get a submission though the smackdown remains elusive. We drop down Kinder Scout and pass a couple of runners: 'Hey - aren't you Andy?' 'I am...' 'We ran together at the start of Lakeland 100...' Yeah, yellow vest, dropping down from the copper

mines in the first 3 miles, I remember...Small world, huh?

Climbing out of Torside Reservoir with Sheffield away to our right about a couple of hours in and I've eased ahead to be truly on my own. I don't tend to do chatty anyway and I'm happy in my own space. It will stay this way till the early hours of Sunday morning.

Crossing the M62, the first real landmark deserving a text update to Charlotte and the start of the twisty up and down in and out Calderdale bit. I've reeled in a few more and wonder if I'll hit the Stoodley Pike landmark monument above Hebden Bridge at about 40 miles before darkness falls

The headtorch comes out just before Stoodley Pike. Familiar ground here from previous races brings a smile as does imminent arrival at the first checkpoint at 45 miles. My new Hope R1 headtorch is getting its first outing in anger and it's like having Blackpool illuminations on my head. I play with the settings giggling like a kid at Christmas.



Rising frustration in thick woods approaching the checkpoint. I can see the damn lights in the valley below a couple of hundred yards away but this path zigs zags, I'm positive there's no other way, I'm now hungry and want to GET THERE but ****!! I start to re-trace when a headtorch comes bobbing towards me. 'It's OK, ' says Mark Caldwell, 'It is down here, it just veers away abit...' Last time I saw Mark was heading off the front at the start which means he's slowed and/or maybe gone off piste...

The Spanish have arrived. Joel and Eugeni are shovelling hot food in as Mark and I enter the checkpoint – which puts us in 3rd and 4th and to my mind also means they've either slowed and/or got lost. Mark confirms his error to me around mouthfuls: 'Which way did you come into Hebden then?' 'Er, the Pennine Way..?' It's about half past seven and we've been on the go for a little over 11 hours.

Mark heads out a couple of minutes ahead of me after about 25 mins break which puts us the first two folks out on the trail. My friend Pete has texted to say he will meet me at Widdop Reservoir about an hours romp away over Heptonstall Moor.

A familiar figure emerges under the glare of a headtorch as I make Widdop: Pete – and then another headtorch bobs past from the opposite direction: Mark – off piste again it would appear. A few precious minutes with Pete has me smiling on the inside and out but he's smart enough to read between the lines. His text to Charlotte reads ...looking good and moving well, but motivation could be a problem later.

Chasing Mark's light over Wadsworth moor under a clear sky with a brief foray into the mist as we crest 400 meters then losing it completely as I make a monumental navigation error losing a chunk of time trying to get down to Ponden Reservoir – eventually going for the brutal direct line bulldozer-style.

It's blinking freezing as Keighley slips by to my right. I know this 'cos all my fluids and gels are solid and chocolate has taken on the properties of granite. I'm forced to stop and add more layers bringing it upto 5 including down jacket and 2 waterproofs.

Sometime in the early hours Eugeni, Joel and Frenchman Phillippe join me. I'm half glad of the company but conversation is limited as we are all gritting teeth against the cold and forcing concentration on the navigation. Eugeni lopes along breaking into an easy run at any opportunity but showing no sign of wanting to break away.

Daylight by the time we hit Malham at 75 miles and the halfway stage of this leg. I finally get to do something about my dehydration and we all shed layers and even start to talk to each other. We are rewarded by incredible golden light bathing the limestone scars as we head off the top of Malham Cove towards the tarn. My European contingent stop and stare and the cameras come out: breathtaking.



Pulling to a halt at the start of the 600m climb up Fountains Fell realising I'm starting to go down big-style. It's either my animal magnetism or everyone else was feeling the same as wordlessly we all rummage in bags for food and inspiration.

We climb into a beautiful snowscape on the top where I momentarily lose my bearings and any rapport I have with my map. Phillippe ignores me and goes where GPS points.

Clubmate Alex and family arrive to swell the party with Andy B as we approach the 700m climb of Penyghent. Charlotte tells me later that Alex had been enthusiastically hunting the race on his mountainbike from earlier this morning before belatedly realising he'd been a little optimistic in his timings. Once more food and drink flows magically from a rucksack and is shared around Spain and France as Alex does his United Nations bit.



© philippegatta.fr

Feeling vaguely embarrassed as Andy B watches me reduced to a pathetic crawl up the steep southern flank of Penyghent followed by some vague parody of a smooth and speedy descent down the other side. ‘You’re looking better than my dad did on his Bob Graham Round!’ he tells me. He’s then most impressed when I remark on the beauty of a couple of passing lady hillwalkers. ‘You’re very lucky. ‘ I tell him. ‘I don’t usually get to do that – I’ve usually got small children or a wife in tow...’



And that’s it for the running. I walk the rest of the way to Hawes as the snow starts to fall in the afternoon. On the final climb of the stage up the Cam High Road Eugeni and Phillipe disappear into the clouds as the temperature plummets. Just short of the top I finally surrender, chuck some painkillers down my neck – and that’s a first for me - and bring the number of

layers upto six. Hooking up with a badly shivering Joel, we make the descent as the flakes thicken, darkness falls again and the painkillers work their magic to arrive at the checkpoint just before 6pm.

In the early hours of Monday morning Charlotte’s Husband Radar has given her a nudge. She turns and opens one eye: ‘You OK?’

‘Yeah.’ I’ve been awake for a while.

Pause. Then a smile in the darkness.

‘Just planning going back next year.’

<http://www.thespinerace.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/TheSpineRace>

<http://www.summitfever.co.uk/>

Thanks to Andy Beanland, Philippe Gatta and John Bamber for the photos.