

Mark Hartell's 77 Peaks

The Lake District 24 Hour Record Is Broken

The breaking of the Lake District 24 Hour Record will always be a defining point in the history of mountain endurance running. It is without doubt the toughest challenge of its type in the UK and probably the world. Bold words, but can you think of any other non-stop mountain challenge which involves 92 miles + 40,000ft of ascent. The existing fine record of 76 peaks was set by Mark McDermott in 1988 and was the equivalent of almost exactly 1½ Bob Graham rounds. To even match the record, a contender needs to keep going for 24 hours at a pace fast enough to speed round the Bob Graham in 15 hours, a time which to the best of my knowledge has so far only been achieved by Billy and Stuart Bland. This puts the challenge into perspective.

Mark Hartell's build up for the 1997 attempt, his third, was better than ever. He had reciced all the sections a number of times, sometimes linking two or three sections together carrying a sack and he had run the night sections at night. He had designed a schedule based on Mark McDermott's times in 1988 and matched these times in training. During the months leading up to the attempt he was in the winning High Peak Marathon team and he won the 59 mile Fellsman Hike in early May. Disappointed with the way he felt on the Fellsman, doubts crept in and Mark considered forgetting the whole thing as he had no wish to 'let down his pacers again'. However, with Jim Davies he won the overall running on the Scottish Island Peaks Race in mid-May and with Mark Seddon he won the Elite Class on the Lowe Alpine MM on the Isle of Jura at the beginning of June. To some, this all seemed a 'bit' excessive but for Mark this was the way it had to be and a deadly serious, 'do or die' third and final attempt to break the record was on - **Martin Stone**

To Mark's article, contributions have been added at suitable points by his pacers.

Mark Hartell writes:

This would have been a dream for Aneka Rice. I had no fewer than 23 people who had pledged to give up their time to look after me and support me day and night. No doubt, she would have used this as an opportunity to build a house or re-roof a church. Me ?..... I just went for a run.

Having said that, you have to realise that this was no ordinary carefree trot with some of my mates. No, this was the culmination of years of training, planning and dreaming. This was going to be the "big one". To understand why I came to be standing in a thin drizzle on a campsite in the Lake District at 04.55 on a Saturday morning it is necessary to wind the clock back seven years to where I realised that my successful completion of the Bob Graham round of 42 peaks in the English



14 hours to go as Mark leaves Great Langdale
Photo: Rex Stickland

Lake District was going to be the beginning of a journey rather than the end. Up to that point I hadn't realised that each time I made one of these dreams come true, I would simply find new, harder ones to fill the gap.

A few months later, I was at the presentation ceremony to receive my certificate of achievement from the club president, Mark McDermott. It is a founding tradition that the current president of the club is the holder of the 24 hour record so here I was meeting the man who had beaten Joss Naylor's record set back in 1976....and he looked normal. Small thoughts start to form.

Summer 1992 and, having given up smoking, I manage to get round the Paddy Buckley Round (a Welsh equivalent of the Bob Graham) in just over 18 hours; well ahead of my expectation. Small thoughts get bigger and I pluck up the courage to get hold of the list of peaks traversed by Mark for his record. Immediate despondency, once I realised that the 76 peaks based around the Bob Graham involved complete new sections was replaced by a gradual determination as I used nearly every weekend over the coming year to reccy sections of the route.

July 1993 and like a lamb to the slaughter, a young and nervous fell-runner with more aspirations than common sense is standing at the start on a weekend where a forecast of "heavy, frequent and squally showers with hail on higher ground" would have most sensible people doing a spot of canoeing. That fell-runner was me and eight hours later my dreams were shattered as I came into Dunmail twenty minutes down on schedule and called it a day feeling acutely embarrassed at having wasted the time of those dedicated friends

who were stood there in the rain happy to run with me and support me if I was going on.

June 1994 sees a repeat run. The same burning enthusiasm has delivered me tense and nervous to the start line on a day of dubious weather and the inevitable follows... only this time it is in front of the cameras as a crew from Border TV are making a documentary about the Bob Graham. Bitter disappointment then, and the same feeling that I have let my mates down and failed very publicly. Time to re-think.

1995 sees me with a different goal, the Ramsay round of 24 Munros in Lochaber. By now, however, I am becoming known as "Rain Boy" and, sure enough, I pick a weekend when snow is forecast above 3000 feet for the attempt. With gritted teeth I steel myself for 24 hours of running in the wet and the clag, desperately needing a success to boost my confidence but everything ends very suddenly as I step of a patch of old snow descending Sgurr Eilde Mor. Seconds later I am out of control, sliding down the slope headfirst and on my back!!! Amazingly I got away with only a bashed knee to show for my 300 foot slide but once more I have to hobble down to the waiting support and mumble my excuses.

After all this, I knew I needed to prove something to myself. Everybody else seemed to think I was the hard luck guy but I wasn't sure any more. So, June 1996 saw me back in Scotland but this time on my own and under a cloudless sky I managed to complete those 24 Munros with a few minutes in hand. In the following weeks I exceeded my expectations, coming second on The Hard Rock, my first 100 mile run in the USA and had

a long but enjoyable day (and night) cycling across Ireland and running up the 3000 foot mountains on the way with Adrian Belton.

Unfinished business then...and by November, three people had even suggested that I should have another go. So it was that on June 13th (a Friday, no less !!) I came to be in Keswick, trying to get some sleep before my early start. This time felt different; despite tension in the weeks leading up to this day, I now felt calm. I knew that I was better organised and by now, I had experience of being on my feet for a full 24 hours and more. One problem remained, however, the "Rain Boy" tag was proving difficult to shift and the optimism of the forecasters was rudely dispelled by the reality of the drizzly clag outside the window.

And that's how I came to be trotting down the road from Braithwaite to the foot of Skiddaw with a feeling of resignation as I looked up to where the hills should have been basking in the early morning light. Once again, a small army of pacers were lined up and were being cheerful in the face of adversity. Once again my wife, Debbie, had put up with months of my repeated absence at weekends and once again, Fred Rogerson, the club chairman had got up at some unearthly hour to drive from Windermere to wish me well and see me off. How could I let these people down again? Two hours later, on the climb up to Little Calva and the pacers inform me I am five minutes downdeja vu. This time though, something is different and once we safely reach Coombe, the scene of my navigational blunder back in 1994 I snap into a different mood. I am frustrated and angry that all this preparation and commitment can be dashed by the fickle vagaries of the weather and so decide to throw caution to the wind. Rather than running at the pace which I know I am capable of sustaining I will run to the schedule 'till I can run no more. These are desperate measures indeed....all my experience to date has taught me the necessity of running "within" oneself but that approach won't work here. Some determined running UP Lonscale fell means that I am back on schedule but have to postpone the planned rice pudding feed as the pacers cannot be expected to carry the sac, run to keep up with me and sort out some food. The "second breakfast" - tinned peaches and rice is quickly dispatched on the way up Blencathra and then we negotiate the horribly greasy top of Halls fell ridge before blasting down to Threlkeld one minute down after four hours running.

Mark Seddon - Leg 1 -> Threlkeld

Out of my tent at 4:30 am in time for Mark's 5-am start. My body was still feeling asleep but I was determined to give Mark all the help I could. The first 2 miles was straight down the A66 to Keswick it felt very fast to me up to



*Support in the dark at Honister
Photo: Rex Stickland*

Latrigg car park where Hugh Symonds joined us. I quickly changed from trainers to Walshes and lost 100m. The pace was so fast that I took half the climb of Lonscale Fell to catch up. We climbed into the cloud and a strong northerly wind was blowing. By Skiddaw Mark was a few minutes down on schedule and I was still struggling to keep up every rummage in the rucksack for food or drink meant 50m or so to catch up. By Great Scafell we had lost around 6 minutes on schedule but mainly because of the wind. From here the wind was behind or to the side. Coombe being such a small hill, had caused navigational problems on previous attempts but now Mark and Hugh's extra familiarity with this area and a careful bearing meant no problems this time despite the 50m visibility. Mark flew down the next descent and managed to jog some of the long marshy drag up to Bowscale Fell, pulling back around 4 minutes in the process. By Blencathra, I was very tired and not being very good on steep, wet, rocky descents I gave the support rucksack to Hugh and watched them disappear down Hall's Fell. They arrived at Threlkeld on schedule which was a magnificent start in difficult conditions.

M. H.

There seems to be some surprise and a buzz of excitement as I go through the support point but I have no time to stop or look around and am off up Clough Head and back into the mist and drizzle. This section is where I have planned an extra peak. Catsycam is scheduled for 15 minutes out and 13 back but with the wet rock I expect it might take a little longer. When I check my watch and realised that I have done out and back in 26 minutes, I realise that I must be running fairly quickly. Coming down from Dollywaggon Pike we emerge from the mist and suddenly I can see that the cloud base is rising and it is drying-up. This fuels my determination and I find myself arriving at Dunmail Raise 10 minutes ahead of schedule. Well, this is it....GAME ON !!!

Andrew Davies Leg 2 -> Dunmail Raise

The shout went up that Mark would be with us shortly. Although we were only pacers, we were still nervous to not let him down. I didn't really know Mark, being a last minute addition to the team. Waiting there, seeing the clag on the tops and wind in the trees and feeling drizzle on my face I thought it likely he would quit. But as he arrived there was not a single negative word cheery greetings to one and all. He grabbed some food and was gone before the event sack, due to be worn that day on many different backs, had been made ready. A few things stand out about the next few hours. The weather far from good. At least the wind was a tail-wind, but it really needed to clear and dry up if he was to have a fair chance. All the way south to Helvellyn we kept imagining that the clag was clearing and weather improving, but of course it wasn't. With the extra peak, Catstye Cam, in the bag we dropped off Dollywaggon to Angle Tarn and it was definitely looking better to the west. Returning a little later from Greatrigg Man, Mark had gained minutes on the schedule and conditions had improved enough to give him a fighting chance.

We were a team of 3 pacers and such was the pace that a pause to record times, extract a jacket, food or drink instantly left one lagging behind and required an immense effort to make up the ground. By the ascent of Fairfield, Mark was stronger than any of us and two of us dropped a little behind, meeting up again on the return from Hart Crag. We were meant to be pacers, know the route, keep spirits high and be strong enough to provide encouragement. Yet, he could quote bearings from memory, foresee and warn of possible navigation errors, was never breathless but chatty and good humoured, relentlessly clawing minutes back from the schedule. By Dunmail we were all weary, glad to have done our job on such a historic day, happy to see Mark step over the stile on his way up another steep climb. Another 16 hours of this with no respite and we could only look on in awe.

Mark Elsegood Leg 3 -> Langdale

We arrived at Dunmail to find that Mark was believed to be just ahead of schedule despite the less than perfect weather. Encouragingly though the lower tops were beginning to clear and the forecast for a brighter afternoon seemed correct. The party gathered in anticipation of Mark's arrival included the then holder of the record Mark McDermott, still jetlagged from the previous days flight from the Middle East. A roll call of the others included Martin Stone, Craig Harwood, Debbie Hartell and Isla the dog, also Rex Stickland, Andrew Addis, Karen and Dan Parker, Emma Moody and Debbie Thompson and of course the pacers for the next section, John Kewley and myself.

After a swift distribution of kit, John and I were ready for Mark's arrival, just. Mark

