

Trans-Atlantic Fellrunning from Dick Byers

Spending 18 months working in Boston, USA, the thing I look forward to most is getting "The Fellrunner" in the post! After a few minutes reading I'm transported back to the hills and dales, battles great and small, epic struggles with navigation and waist hugging mud. Ah, bliss. So I felt I just had to make a small contribution to this august journal and pen a few words on my racing this year.

As a Brit abroad and ever keen to keep our national reputation up, I searched high and low for races worthy of a FRA member but all I found were a few trail races with the kind of ascent and terrain that one expects at an easy weekend cross-country league race. So there was nothing else for it than but to head back home. I only did six races last year but three were in England and though my performances weren't great they'll stand out as special forever. Here they are:- I had to make a trip back in July so carefully timed it to include Skiddaw at the start of the week and Wasdale at the end. The logistics of wanting to spend the 4th of July in Boston and race in Keswick the morning of the 6th were considerable but due to the efforts of my team-mates I got there. An overnight flight from New York got me into Manchester Airport at 8.30am where Dave Keeling was waiting with a fast car. We made a brief stop for breakfast and we zoomed up to Keswick with just enough time to register and get ready. I was fifth runner for Trafford so the pressure to finish was on. I was too tired to warm up but reasoned that I'd have plenty of time to do so during the race. Groggy from no sleep and jet lag I wondered how I'd manage it. All I had to do was walk uphill and the descent is gravity assisted is what I told myself. Lining up, the nerves and energy laid by years of racing finally came back and suddenly we were off, through the park, over the road and up the hill. I don't remember much of it except the exhilaration of the sun, the climb and Keswick fading beautifully to a small speck in an ocean of water and hills - ah, hills. I did manage to run half way up the steep bit but from there it was a bit slow and, as always, I forgot that there is a final little climb after the flat path near the top.

Turning at the top the tiredness began to take hold and I realised that the gravity assistance might be more than I'd bargained for. Trying to hold back so as not to fall badly, down I went on feet not used to descending after five months on the roads of Boston and beginning to feel very hot! Running the final few hundred yards through the park was wonderful and the tea and cakes on the cricket field afterwards was great: they just don't do that over here. I finished about a third of the way down the field and within twelve hours of being in New York. I was chuffed though, looking at my feet, which now both sported massive heat blisters, I wondered how I'd manage Wasdale in six days time.

A hectic round of work gave time for my feet to recover and so, five days later, I found myself with my Dad in the Bridge Inn, in Santon Bridge, looking forward to Wasdale, probably my favourite race. Waking the next morning still exhausted by jet lag I questioned the wisdom of it but felt it had to be done. The day was a fine one and we set off with all customary casualness up for the Screes. I felt good to the start of the first real climb, began to falter over the top and by the descent off Whin Rigg my feet had begun to complain and I was feeling tired. I'd never felt tired so early in a race before and thought about giving up at the first checkpoint but the sight of Joss Naylor and his cries of, "Keep it up lad" roused me and I set off up Seatallan with hope in my heart. The climb went on forever and the trog across to Pillar took on the proportions of a transcontinental epic but I'd come all this way and was determined not to give up. Coming off Pillar my spirit was at its lowest ebb and once more I nearly ditched but I've never had a DNF before and kind words from another runner that I'd make it and was doing ok (which dictionary was he using?) kept me going. By this time I'd decided that as long as I wasn't timed out I'd finish, no matter how long it took. On Gable, after an interminable grind up the scree at the bottom and over the rocks at the top, I hopefully asked if I'd been timed out. No such luck, I was doing fine I was told, but could retire if I wanted to. I wanted to so much but of course couldn't so it was onwards. Fortunately the descent to Sty Head is stepped so it felt like being at home, gently going down to breakfast, or somewhere, anywhere, other than where I was. As

you can see delirium had begun to set in. However, when has cognitive impairment hampered athletic endeavour. Indeed, many great journeys of exploration may have been said to have benefited from it, for who in their right mind would set out on them, or on Wasdale for that matter.

Passing the Mountain Rescue box at Sty Head was a delight. This was one of the first places I went walking as a boy and the magic of the place, with its history and lonesomeness, never fades. Happily I was walking by this stage and able to savour it, together with conversation with two other back markers. Scafell Pike came round surprisingly quickly it seemed, though in reality it had taken about an hour from Sty Head! It was then that I remembered that whatever goes up must come down, and boy was Lingmell a long way down. A look at my watch (I'm ever the optimist) showed me that if I got a move on I'd break six hours, over an hour slower than my best. The rocks, gravity and the precarious state of my feet, legs, head and just about everything else except my heart told me that pushing it at this stage would not be a good idea so I ambled down and collapsed at the finish. I'd finished, nearly last and a few minutes over six hours, but I'd finished and what joy when the certificate, signed by Joss Naylor as always, came through in the post a few months later. After the race, a hurried return to Manchester and flight out to Boston the next morning completed a memorable week.

The third race I did was the Grisedale Horseshoe as I was over again in September. This was at the end of a week in the UK and no super logistics were required to get to it but once again jet lag turned it into a super epic. Joined by three other Trafford lads (Vinny Booth, Dave Keeling and Bill Fairmaner) we were determined to have a good time and they assured me that though I felt terrible I'd be fine once I started. I felt ok until the climb up Catstycam but thereafter gradually deteriorated and was reduced to a slow jog for the rest of the race. However, the view of the hills to the southwest, over the Langdales, with tarns, woods, farms, bracken and open fell side, all clothed in dappled cloud shadow and sunburst, was achingly beautiful and will be with me for a long time. How often do we run past such beauty hardly seeming to see it, though conversely it seems more poignant in the midst of the pain of a race. Fortunately on that day I'd managed to combine the states! The last climb over the hill to the finish is a cunning, devious, wicked and downright evil sting in the tail but I got over it with cries of, "You can't stop here" from my fellow runners, though I was very surprised at this stage to find out that I still had fellow runners as I thought that I'd faded to last long since. I made it down the path to the finish just before the heavens opened and once more was cocooned in the ecstasy of tea, soup and fresh sandwiched and cakes in the inimitable WI atmosphere that seems to pervade all after race do's. It's just so homely, grounded, solid and English - I could have cried. At least I did when I saw my position and thankfully my mind has erased it from my consciousness, though no doubt it'll be raised in any future therapy, last judgement, or future reincarnation which will probably be as a snail.

And so my tale is told; it is now 7a.m. in Boston and I dream of noon in the English hills. I'll be back in July and plan to do many more races. I hope I'll place better than in these last three but as long as I'm running the hills again I won't really care and essentially nothing will top the special sense of adventure that they gave me "*upon England's mountains green*" (Jerusalem - William Blake).