Pennine Barrier 50 mile ultra

Saturday 22nd June 2019

Time: 9hrs 51min (first half in 4hrs 32min; second half in 5hrs 19min)

Position: 8th overall (7th male), out of about 200 starters

(N.B. 9hrs 51 would have brought me home in 14th place in 2018)

Running has been quite an up-and-down rollercoaster ride for me over the last few years, with plenty of illness and injury but also a few good results. The lead-up to this race was also incredibly mixed. 13 weeks before race day I had quite an ambitious training plan in place, but it all went out the window as I struggled with cold/hay fever/sinusitis for two weeks, and then soon after the same again for another two weeks. I felt like throwing up my hands and giving up on the whole thing. In the end I felt I'd done just enough training, and I didn't want to let Doncaster AC down for the team event. But I had no real idea where my fitness level was on race day. I'd only done one 20 mile run in training - ridiculous! I was fully expecting to have to drop back at some point. But I also thought it would be good to stick with Simon Jennings at least until Checkpoint 2 at 21 miles.

It's never been so easy to get up at 4am

I find that company really helps the miles to tick over. It's hard to make sense of, but somehow it is much easier to run 21 miles with company than it is on your own. I suppose it's something to do with the fact that running is more to do with the mind, and less to do with the body, than you might think. We reached Checkpoint 2 at a good pace, ten minutes quicker than 2018, and it felt pretty good.

We were in about 9th/10th position, which I felt very mixed about: it was great to be up there, and moving quicker than 2018, but given my training I was sure I was going to 'blow up' badly and drop right back. I just thought I'd hold on as long as I could.

21 miles in. Just left Checkpoint 2.

The next bit was a slog. I was really looking forward to the long walk up Whernside, but when it came it seemed like very hard work, even though it was just a walk. Simon was stronger, and I wanted to fall back a bit. But I kept walking and we got to the top.

I try to remind myself that however hard it feels going up, it can feel very different coming down. This was never truer than at the top of Whernside. I got a new lease of life, and felt strongly that I wanted to repeat what I did in 2018: a fast run down Whernside and all the way to Checkpoint 3. I also felt that this (tricky/technical downhills) was my strength, and I had to make the most of it. It was here that I left Simon behind the year before.

I found out later that I ran this downhill a full minute faster than 2018, but Simon wasn't going to be left behind this year! And to be honest I felt very tired even before Checkpoint 3 and did some walking, where Simon caught me. Then it was back to going up, with Ingleborough ahead of us, and Simon now had the advantage for sure. Once again I thought I would get left behind, and I thought that was just fine. But as with Whernside the gap never became large, and I was with Simon and another runner, Thomas Leaver, on the top. Then it was downhill time again, and once again I got a new lease of life. I love the downhill from the top of Ingleborough all the way into Horton in Ribblesdale. It's tricky, but with some concentration you can run it really quite fast. I pulled away from Simon and Thomas, but although I did a good descent – once again faster than 2018 – I felt very tired and did a bit of walking before reaching the village at the bottom. Simon had not let me get far in front (despite a fall!) and here he caught me. Reflecting later we agreed that he had stretched me on the uphills, and I'd stretched him on the downhills, to our mutual benefit. We were a good team.

On the way up Ingleborough, 29 miles in. Not crashed yet…

We came into Checkpoint 4 in something silly like 7th and 8th positions in the field, which seemed way too high to me, and like it surely couldn't last! I was really very tired. On the other hand, I'd found last year that my position had hardly changed in the last 15 miles in 2018, and I kinda expected that again in 2019. At this point in the race the field gets stretched out, and nearly everyone is going too slow for big changes to happen. So it now seemed as if we actually had a chance of coming in the top ten. We were also still ahead of my time last year by about nine minutes or so.

The section from Checkpoint 4 to 5 is largely like a rest. Everyone is just doing slow walking for most of it, back up to the shoulder of Pen-y-ghent. A friend of mine, Juha Saatsi, walked the uphill much faster than us, but other than that there were no changes here. So we left Checkpoint 5 in positions 8 and 9, walking up Fountains Fell.

The crash I had fully expected all the way around never seemed to be coming. It was odd. I felt strange. I'd taken on caffeine from the very beginning of the race in my tailwind, and I think I was just wired. In addition I think the ups and downs of this race really suit me – my legs do better with uphills and downhills than they do on the flat. At the Chester 50 three months earlier it was absolute torture for the last 15 miles or so. And the Pennine Barrier is harder, on paper, because it's 50 miles too but with much more height gain. But for me, it's easier: you don't feel at all guilty walking all the uphills (and there are plenty), and on the downhills you just let gravity do the work and can move with some speed even when the legs are super tired. Or that's how it seemed.

So we walked up Fountains Fell, then started running when it came to the downhill on the other side. Two things happened here to change the dynamic of the race for me. Simon was suddenly very tired. (I think all his brilliant racing over the past few months was catching up with him a bit.) And

another runner was catching us, who we thought was a 100mile runner, but I wasn't 100% sure and I didn't want him to catch us. We held him off for a while, but he was definitely catching. At Malham Tarn, with five miles to go, Simon was tiring and said I could go if I wanted, and this guy had nearly caught us. So on a downhill section I started running, and then it was just a case of deciding not to stop.

I dug in and the guy was far enough behind that I thought I could hold him off. I reached Malham Cove, then down to Janet's Foss, with very little walking, and running the downhills fairly fast. To my surprise I caught another runner, but he was a 100miler, so I didn't gain a place. (I couldn't believe how fast he was running the first 50!) There was now only about two miles to go, so I dug in some more, and kept running. I'd really, really had enough now, but was looking forward to a boost of adrenaline in the final mile, or at least half a mile … but it never came! It was torturous right to the end, and I wasn't smiling much when I crossed the finish line either! I'd held off this guy, and felt good about that, but it turned out he *was* a 100mile runner, and it didn't matter. I couldn't believe how much it felt like he was chasing me, when in fact he was presumably taking it very steady since he had another 50 miles to run. Mind blown.

I crossed the finish line four minutes faster than 2018, and in my best ever placing – 7th male, and 8th overall. But this was the worst I'd ever felt at the end of a race! I think I was psychologically just in a really strange place, and I can only assume that had something to do with the ridiculous caffeine intake. But it wasn't so bad. I drank some water, and felt a lot better 45 minutes later. Simon came in six minutes after me, 8th male and 9th overall. It was a dream result: three Doncaster AC runners in the top ten, since Mariusz Felczerek had run an unbelievable race and finished 3rd overall (moving from 5th in the final mile). And just had confirmation: DAC got the team prize! Two years in a row for this event! A fantastic result for the club, and proud to be part of it.

Same again next year? Absolutely. This is my favourite race.

Recovered enough to stand and smile.

Sustenance: A large bowl of porridge two hours before the start, then three caffeinated tailwinds during the race (but couldn't finish the last one and was craving plain water), and bits and bobs from the checkpoints (e.g. flapjack, salty potatoes).

Kit

Saucony road shoes were miles better than the Merrells I tried last year. That was a big mistake last year. Good to stick with the Sauconys that I know so well and have been using for years.

Another difference was that I didn't carry thermal bottoms: I was told at kit check that these weren't required. But I *did* carry 500cal emergency rations right through to the end, without touching it. This was required (though it wasn't checked). We also needed a proper base plate compass this year, as well as a full hard copy of the OS map, and a backup light source (not a phone).

Training

Elevation gain per week in the 13 weeks leading up to the race:

1280ft (building up gradually, following Chester 50)

3294ft

5036ft (ambitious at this point, wanting to do more training than ever before)

1211ft (did one 20.6 mile run, and felt ill the next day)

1224ft (sinusitis this week – did one run)

66ft (feeling rubbish, did one run)

2041ft (feeling better)

3117ft

3081ft (cut it down from the intended 4000ft, as feeling crappy again)

410ft (sinusitis again)

52ft (feeling rubbish – wanting to give up entirely)

3074ft (back in action – a 37 mile week including a comfortable 17.6 mile run)

958ft (tapering)

RACE WEEK

Race organisation

Absolutely spot on. Nothing to fault at all. Great communication beforehand, great kit check, great checkpoints, etc. Being able to see what's happening with other runners during the race is great with the tracker. One possible improvement would be to be able to see the 'live' team standings during the

race, i.e. which teams are in 1st, 2nd, 3rd place after 5 hours (say). This should be relatively easy to put in place, since we already know via the tracker where all the individual runners are.

Things to do differently next time

Not sure really. I needed to do a lot more training, but I did *try* to do a lot more. Not sure if I just got unlucky with viruses, perhaps combined with especially bad hay fever. Hard to know. Perhaps in that 5000ft week I did too much hill work, and I need to take more seriously the philosophy of mixing all different types of training into each week (speed work, fartlek, long and slow, hill work).

Suncream: I put factor 50 on at about 4.30am, but my shoulders ended up a bit burnt. Could reapply, but I'd rather not take suncream with me, if I can help it. One option is to take a dollop of suncream wrapped in some kitchen foil, which would weigh next to nothing.

I still feel there is no need for poles for this event. We'll see how a 'bigger' event like Snowdon 50 goes though.

Recovery after the race

No illness at all after this race. I suppose that should go without saying, but during my training I felt like I was getting ill all the time (sinusitis). I did one 20 mile run in training, and felt ill the next day, and then took two weeks to recover. Anyway, I had no such trouble after the actual race.

Cramp on the night was bad. I couldn't lay down in bed to sleep, and had to stay up late doing stretches etc. But that was fine, I got to bed eventually, and felt fine the next morning.

Legs have recovered pretty well actually. It's now nine days after the race, and I feel like I could definitely go out for a short run. I might try something tomorrow. I feel some bruising in my right quad, which is odd, but it's nothing really. I already did some running round playing cricket on Sunday (one week after) and it felt good.