

Snowdon 50 mile ultra

Saturday 12th October 2019

Time: 14hrs 15min

Position: 15th

This was a step up for me. I'd never run for more than 10 hours before. And I knew this race had taken Simon Jennings 19 hours in 2018(!) and me and Simon are very similar ability. So... this was going to be really tough! There's a reason it's worth four UTMB points, and Pennine Barrier 50 is only worth 3 UTMB points. I was hoping for around 16 hours, which seemed very hopeful compared with 19 hours for Simon the previous year. But I was hoping the weather would be much better than 2018, and that would make a big difference. I was also running it with Simon, and could benefit from his experience and knowledge of the route. 16 hours seemed do-able, even if a bit ambitious.

We got to the start line fine, and it was the most beautiful morning. The best stars I've seen for years! The Plough, Orion, the Pleiades. There's not much light pollution in Betws-y-Coed.

6.15am came around fast and we got started. Simon wanted to avoid some bottle-necks in the first few miles, so we set off at pace. We had also decided to get to checkpoint 1 (8 miles in) as quickly as possible. After that we'd be walking a lot up the first hill. It seems a good strategy on a hilly ultra – you can go off fast for quite a while, trusting that you'll recover from the run when you're walking up the hills.



Going up the first hill.

We were up and down the first hill in no time. The terrain was a bit technical, and there was a danger of slipping. You had to really concentrate. It was here that Simon had an awkward fall, but he was OK to continue. It was much later I'd realise just how much he'd hurt his hand.

We carried on to Checkpoint 2 at the bottom of the hill. The sun had come out between the clouds, and we'd had some beautiful views. We were extraordinarily lucky to be out in Snowdonia in October with weather like this. In addition we'd run a lot of it with Amy, who would end up being 1st female. She was great to chat with, and that also helped the miles tick by. Chatting really does make running easier – 20 miles can tick by in no time.

Snowdon was next, and seemed to go up forever. It was a tough ascent, much bigger than the Pennine Barrier ascents I was more familiar with. I don't love ascents! But the weather was still great, and clear for most of Snowdon, with only the peak in cloud.

Soon we were down, and heading back to Checkpoint 2. We went a little wrong here, and lost 5 or more minutes. That was enough for Amy to catch us up. This should have been a warning – Amy knew the route better than we did. If we'd stuck with her the whole way, we wouldn't have gone badly wrong (much) later on, at mile 43.



Not loving the third hill.

Hill number 3 was next, and that again seemed to go on forever – not much flat in this race! It also started raining, and I felt quite cold suddenly. I ended up wearing all my clothing (both base layers!) which wasn't ideal. If I'd got really wet, I wouldn't have had any emergency clothing. In addition my gloves weren't good enough for my Raynaud's problem. Thankfully the rain was only temporary, and things warmed up. And I was able to dry and warm my gloves, and hands, using a hand-dryer at Checkpoint 5 toilet block! Before this, we had to descend Devil's Kitchen. This was absolutely crazy – such a challenging descent. In general, the descents on this event were technical and slow-going. You couldn't really run them at all, like you can with the Pennine Barrier descents.



The last climb. We'd run that ridge in the background.

Behind Checkpoint 5 the final major ascent was looming – it looked huge and very steep! And it was. This was quite a low point for me, as we'd completed 30 miles and the legs were so tired, but now we had to climb and climb and climb. But somehow we kept going without stopping.

Near the top we were told that a shortcut had been put in place – they were worried about bad weather coming in. This was a shame, as instead of enjoying a runnable descent we hit another steep and technical descent. In fact, one section was incredibly steep, like mountain climbing downhill!

We'd now had a couple of shortcuts, and this meant we'd saved at least an hour, perhaps even 90 minutes. I was happy with this. We'd finish at a more reasonable hour, and it would still be by far my toughest event. The total distance would still be something like 47 miles, so still quite respectable!



On the way to Checkpoint 7.

Checkpoint 6 passed quickly, and we were able to run at a decent pace towards the final checkpoint, hoping to get there before it turned dark at about 6.30pm. We managed this fine, and there was even some light left in the sky as we set off from Checkpoint 7, heading to the finish line 8 miles away. I still had running in my legs. This event had been so much about climbing and descending, with lots of walking, that the legs weren't too fatigued when it came to running on the flat. We'd also just found out that we were definitely in the top 20, which was a surprise for me. I was hoping to keep up my top-20 streak for 50 milers, but I really thought I wouldn't manage it this time. There seemed to be a lot of very good runners here. But 50 miles can do a lot, especially a technical one like this – there were quite a few DNFs, even from top runners. DNFs definitely do not hit only the slower, less experienced runners. Top-ten runners tend to push hard on descents, which can be dodgy. And top-ten runners tend to push the limit in training, too, tempting injuries.

At about 43 miles we trusted the GPX file (which was guiding us on our watches) a bit too much. It took us off the path, and soon we were in ferns. We kept thinking we'd hit a path, but we didn't. In the end, we messed around for about 20 minutes. It was such a shame! Only a couple of runners went past (including Amy – who we should have stuck with!), so it wasn't too bad in terms of losing places, but just a bit frustrating. It turned out later that we weren't the only ones who made exactly this mistake, messing in thick ferns for 20 minutes.

After that the route was clear enough, despite the fact that it had turned dark. However, I had to cope with the psychology of approaching the finish line! In the last five miles my body seems to know the end is coming, and the cumulative fatigue suddenly is no longer suppressed. It is up-front and centre. In other words, in the past five miles I felt really, really tired, like I'd definitely had enough. It took a lot of gritted teeth and effort to stick with Simon, who clearly still had something left.

Overall, a cracking event. Lots of very enthusiastic marshals and checkpoint volunteers. Really well organized. An unforgettable experience. I'd recommend this if you've done 50s before and want a really challenging 50 (with plenty of technical bits!). In fact, quite a few people had injuries/mini-injuries somewhere on this race (including Simon, who it turned out had broken a bone in his hand). A race to take very seriously!

Sustenance: A large bowl of porridge two hours before the start, then some Clif Bloks, and two caffeinated tailwinds during the race, and bits and bobs from the checkpoints. All good.

Training

Elevation gain per week in the 11 weeks leading up to the race:

1860ft

922ft

10787ft (Did Kinder Dozen with Simon – way tougher than expected!)

203ft (rest week after Kinder Dozen)

1969ft

2520ft

3435ft

823ft (included a good 22 miler with Simon)

2093ft (not feeling great, didn't manage 3000ft)

2018ft (again, couldn't manage more, for some reason. Picked up a mini-bug.)

840ft (tapering)

RACE WEEK

Things to do differently next time

Not much! The race went great. Much better than expected. The only three things are: (i) I could have got really cold if it had rained hard for a long time (but it didn't!), (ii) I need better gloves, and (iii) we got a bit lost for a while – next time I'll take pictures of the route on my phone, for quick access. Especially the most challenging bits to navigate (e.g. navigating in the dark!).
