

Pennine Barrier 50 mile ultra

Saturday 12th June 2021

Time: 10hrs 14min

Position: 15th (14th in the men's race)

It had been a tough year. "Living through a pandemic is exhausting" said one colleague the other day. I think that's right. That makes it super hard to keep up a good standard of fitness and training. So, standing on the start line, my fitness was significantly worse than 2018 or 2019. But at least I was here and ready to go. It was a real privilege, and I was very conscious of the fact that many other runners would have liked to have stood there with me that morning, but had lost too much fitness over the course of the pandemic, for one reason or another. I hope to see them next year.



Excitement brewing at the start line.

It was a staggered start (due to Covid), and my start time was 6.03am, but when it came to it I started just after the leaders. I was really well tapered, and the legs were flying, so I quickly caught up with 3rd and 4th place. Now I'm not sure I *had* a plan, and that was probably a big mistake. But in the back of my mind I was thinking that I could make a fast start, and then take it easy once I was walking up some hills a bit later on (e.g. Whernside). But I got really carried away, and was in 3rd place for a while. I was still in 4th place 12 miles in, at the first checkpoint.



Heading to Malham Cove, one mile in. Legs flying.

In hindsight it was obviously a big mistake. I was about 20 minutes ahead of my 2018 time, and whilst that felt amazing, I should have known that it was a recipe for disaster. At the time I figured that 20 minutes gave me lots of breathing space to go slow later on, but in fact 20 minutes (and more) would disappear very easily. By the time I reached the second checkpoint, 21 miles in, the legs were already feeling quite fatigued, and it wasn't obvious at all that the 'rest' walking up Whernside would revive them. Going past the Ribbleshead viaduct, just after the second checkpoint, my ability to run on anything except a downhill was disappearing fast.



Ribbleshead Viaduct. Only 22 miles in and legs already tired.

I linked up briefly with another runner at the bottom of Whernside: Paul Wilkinson from Darlington. It was nice to chat with someone. As well as being under-trained, and having gone out too fast, I was missing Simon Jennings this year (having run most of the race with him in 2018 and 2019). But Paul was too strong for me, and I had to let him go. His ascent of Whernside looked really strong, and I felt sure I wouldn't see him again. Another runner also passed me at this point.

I really like my descents, and I felt I needed to descend Whernside quickly in order to make up some time. I knew that back in 2018 I had run all the way to checkpoint 3 from the top of Whernside. But this time there was no chance of that: as soon as I was on the flat I had to start walking. Another runner (doing the 3 peaks, not the pennine barrier) asked "Are you done in?", which wasn't particularly helpful! It was true, though: I felt done in. I tried to run a bit, but I actually walked most of the next mile, through to checkpoint 3. I was losing my 20 minute cushion really fast now, and was only about 28 miles in.

I mostly walked up Ingleborough, but actually the pace was good compared with previous years. At this point, coming back from the out-and-back at the top of Ingleborough, I saw Mariusz (the only other Doncaster AC runner). He wasn't having a great race (he'd raced a 40miler in Scotland the weekend before), but he was still a fantastic runner, and I felt sure that he'd go ahead of me now. But on the other hand this was the best part of the race for me: the long descent to Horton-in-Ribblesdale. Even with really tired legs I could run this downhill quite fast, and I saw later that I pulled away from Mariusz quite a bit at this point. I also somehow managed to catch, and pass, Paul Wilkinson, which was a huge surprise. Not least because I also fell over twice on the descent!

Once the descent was over the extreme fatigue returned, and I was walking a lot again. I walked quite slowly all the way up the shoulder of Pen-y-ghent, and then wasn't too fast on the way to checkpoint 5. I was on my knees here, not at all enjoying myself anymore. In previous years I'd been super-tired at this point in the race, of course, but I'd never before felt this empty of all energy. The chap on checkpoint 4 was absolutely amazing with his help and enthusiasm, and that did help. I jogged away from the checkpoint, but it wasn't long before I was walking again. At this point Paul caught me up again, and we walked up the last hill together. I needed this company. We talked about running, and kids, and it took my mind off the pain.

My watch flipped over to a 12min/mile average at the *bottom* of the last hill, so now I knew I was getting quite behind my 2018 and 2019 pace. I'd lost that spare 20 minutes, and probably another 10, too. When we reached the top of the last hill it said my average pace was 12.17min/mile, and it now didn't seem possible to complete the race in under 10 hours. But as before I was able to run well on the downhill from the top, even on jelly legs. So well, in fact, that by the time I reached Malham Tarn a few miles later I'd got the average right back to 12.05. It was clear that if I *could* just keep jogging, at 11min/mile, say, then even now I *could* still finish in under 10 hours, with a time not so different from my 2018 and 2019 times. But when I reached Malham Tarn I had another massive crash, and couldn't do anything but walk. And when I say walk, I mean walk *very slowly*. There were only 5 miles or so left, but that now seemed a really, really long way.

With four miles left Paul caught me again (I'd left him behind on the descent to Malham Tarn). He tried to encourage me, but I was in quite a dark place, feeling like I could hardly walk. On the other hand I couldn't help being surprised that I was here with Paul *at mile 46*. I would never have believed that back at mile 23, when Paul pulled off from me so quickly on the ascent of Whernside. By some miracle I had managed to match Paul's pace all the way from mile 23 to mile 46, and only now would

he definitely pull away from me. Those second 23 miles had been utterly punishing, and quite unpleasant, but my overall performance actually hadn't been too bad.



Passing Janet's Foss at the 48 mile mark. Every step was agony.

Whilst I walked most of the final four miles, I did manage some running on any downhills, and that meant I didn't drop any further places. Mariusz didn't catch me, although he was only about one mile behind. My fast descent from the top of the last hill to Malham Tarn had once again helped me to pull away. I walked past Janet's Foss and was struck by the bizarre contrast between my day, and the day of all those tourists relaxing, bathing, and eating ice-cream. Mind you, I would soon be eating my own ice-cream! After a nice talk with a lady who was amazed to hear of the Pennine Barrier I sensed the finish line on the horizon, and started jogging. The knowledge that I was in the final mile transferred directly to an ability to run, and I was able to put on quite a spurt in the final quarter-mile. My spirits lifted hugely as people clapped me home, and I did *not* collapse when I crossed the line. I felt fine, and happy.



Feeling surprisingly good at the end.

Overall thoughts: GB Ultras did a fantastic job putting this event on during the pandemic, and everything ran really smoothly. They are to be applauded. This year it was more important than ever to have this life-affirming experience. As for my race, it wasn't great – my least favourite of the three times I've run it. But on the other hand there were *numerous* occasions in the weeks and months leading up to the race that I wondered if I should drop out. I got a chest infection back in January, and my chest felt weird for weeks. I also knew that my training hadn't been good at all. In the months leading up to the event, running just seemed much harder than it used to be (back in 2018 and 2019, say). So the fact that I did the event, and came 15th with a time only 22mins slower than 2018, is a real confidence booster. Looking forward to some weeks of downtime now. But also looking forward to more events like this in the coming years.

Mariusz came in 11 minutes after me, and 5 minutes after on chip time, in 18th place. An amazing result on legs tired from a previous race. It was a real shame that several other Doncaster AC runners couldn't join this year, but hopefully there'll be lots of us next year. My thanks to various folk at Doncaster AC for dot-watching and general support before and during the race. It's a wonderful club to be a part of.

Sustenance: A large bowl of porridge two hours before the start, two caffeinated tailwinds during the race, and bits and bobs from the checkpoints. Had some coke at checkpoint 5 – absolute heaven!

Training

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

997ft

1227ft

899ft

2028ft

2028ft

2044ft

722ft

2034ft

1988ft

2621ft

351ft (tapering)

RACE WEEK

Things to do differently next time

Needed to do those long training runs. Perhaps also need to build muscles in my legs in the gym.

Start slower! Much slower. Even if you end up with the same time, it'll be a nicer day out.

Don't camp. I got less than 4 hours sleep. Not a great way to start the day.

Don't fall on the descents! Go a bit slower, and concentrate like mad.
