

## HARVESTING MERTHYR COMMON

I can think of no better way of spending Father's day than running after sheep on the Brecon Beacons at 2:00 in the morning, wearing tights with a large lamp on my head.

A number of Deesiders had the same thought and we pretty quickly assembled a pool of runners for this multi-leg night / day relay event. We were all too old, unfit or inexperienced to get a 7-person A team together, so we concentrated on two handicap B teams. Jon was just at the easy-peasy stage of trying to satisfy everybody's demands (e.g. *'I'm NOT running with so-and-so ... he's rubbish!' or 'I never run in the dark, I hate dawn legs ... and I don't much like the day legs either.'* to *'I've disqualified the team every time I've run the Harvester ... which leg do you think would be best for me?')* when the phone rang twice - and suddenly we were 3 people short! The details are a bit sketchy, but it seems like Martin Pickering and Iain Bell set about their loved ones with baseball bats and broke a couple of legs in order to get their Father's Day breakfasts in bed.

Fortunately, a couple of juniors were found hiding behind their Nintendos or under their duvets and were immediately press-ganged into service. As a result, we could field two B-teams; one a bunch of Handicap Hopefuls ('DEEranged'; Mike 'Smudger' Smithard, Jon Hateley, Ed Calow, Olly Williams and Steve Ingleby) ... the other a motley selection of Have a Go Heroes ('DEEcrepit'; Bob 'Dutch' Elmes, Matthew Vokes, Helen Elmes, Sian Calow and Paul Jones).

Steve Ingleby will only step out of his door in his O-kit on assurances the terrain is up to scratch. He couldn't have been disappointed. I can only describe Merthyr Common as Halkyn on steroids! A rounded lump of a mountain absolutely peppered with holes in the ground. These ranged from the 'small' bell pits (big enough to fit a family saloon), to larger shake holes (mid-terrace house) and enormous swallow holes (Anglican cathedrals). It was an effort finding enough flat ground to pitch our tents. There were few other obvious features and it was clear the team with the fewest bad errors would win it. So the inspiring team talk was limited to 'Stick to compass and pacing' and 'Do NOT mispunch!'

We all bedded down and awaited the dreaded call to action from finished runners.

### LEG 1 (6.4 km)

At 01:30 Mike and Bob plunged into the gloom. Mike's bearings were as straight as an arrow and he maintained contact with the lead pack, one of 7 teams running into the spectator control together. With just a 1 km loop remaining, Jon stripped for action whilst Matthew peered hopefully at the horizon. Mike blasted home in 54:59, 5<sup>th</sup> place and just 26 secs down on the leader! Meanwhile Bob's bearings were as straight as a supermarket shopping trolley, and he settled in for a long night. Cunningly, he used control 8 to find number 7 ... but then back-tracked badly and couldn't find number 8 again! 2 hours 2 mins later Bob (35<sup>th</sup>) triumphantly sprinted into the changeover pen ... only to find Matthew had departed a couple of minutes earlier in a mass start.

### LEG 2 (8.3 km)

For one or two glorious controls Jon was in the lead! ... shame about the other 19. Ignoring the bell pits, he navigated between the really big holes in the ground. Falling in a couple of them helped. One bearing was a shocker and he fell off the back of the bus ... watching the lights of the pack disappear over a hill. Unfortunately, that left Ed to tackle the short night leg all on his own - sorry Ed! (Jon: 76:43, 8<sup>th</sup>, DEEranged now 6<sup>th</sup>). Matthew did a bit of a headless chicken for the first two controls, but then steadied himself and produced a great result for a part-time night orienteer (Matthew: 79:49, 10<sup>th</sup>).

### LEG 3 (4.2 km)

Dawn was doing its best to break when two of our juniors took up the reins. This was supposed to be the TD 3 leg, but as there were hardly any line features, their course was no easier than the others. Ed had a bit of a nightmare at the 2<sup>nd</sup> control, missing the monster crater he was after and quickly being surrounded by Calow-eating pits - losing ~15 minutes. However, inspired by running in the Land of his mother's Fathers and with the eternal optimism of youth, Ed didn't lose any places and cruised home just as the sun was poking up above the Sugarloaf. (*Eds Note: This last sentence is just a load of old tosh, as the author was wrapped up in his sleeping bag and completely oblivious to anything after 04:00. Sorry.*) (Ed: 01:05:33, 28<sup>th</sup>, DEEranged still 6<sup>th</sup>). Meanwhile, Helen dragged had herself out of her bed, yawned a couple of times and then promptly blasted around the course in a phenomenal 50:30 (16<sup>th</sup>)! Helen is clearly a relay kind of person ... or maybe she just wanted a bit more kip?

### LEG 4 (6.9 km)

Olly, having physically set fire to the hillside with his barbeque a few hours earlier, now metaphorically scorched the terrain with the second fastest time for the leg (53:55, DEEranged 6<sup>th</sup> again)! We were just 20 minutes behind the leading Handicap team and had our ace up the sleeve for the final leg. Sian tackled the Common for the DEEcrepit team and terrified competitors and sheep alike with the most day-glo top ever seen in a National Park. Inspired, perhaps, by running in the Land of her son's Grandfathers, she came home in 1:34:52 (30<sup>th</sup>).

### LEG 5 (8.6 km)

Steve had muttered something about wanting a 30 minute lead to chase on the last leg ... and we had set him up perfectly ( ... or was that *needing* a 30 minute lead? I forget.). But his legs suffered in the heather covered scree on the south side and he lost 10 minutes at number 6. Although Steve refused to smile for the camera at the spectator control, the team happily settled for 2<sup>nd</sup> B Handicap, and 6<sup>th</sup> overall (Steve: 1:26:03, 20<sup>th</sup>). Paul Jones had also wobbled out on a pair of dodgy knees, but fresh from 2 hours uninterrupted sleep he pipped Steve in 1:21:30 (17<sup>th</sup>), bringing DEEcrepit home in a very creditable 22<sup>nd</sup> place overall, having hauled themselves up from 35<sup>th</sup>.

I think everybody agreed it had been a great event and most seemed to relish the chance of trying again next year ... or was that just Little Chef's Olympic Cooked Breakfast doing the talking?

*Jon Hateley*