

## **KIERAN'S REFLECTIONS ON THE LAKELAND 100**

It's a week since I finished the Lakeland 100, and it already feels like a rather distant and other-worldly memory. Did I really run, walk and stumble that 105 mile circular trail from Conistown on everything from stone tracks and lanes to peat bogs and scree and boulder-strewn hillsides with over 6,500m of ascent and descent, finishing back in Conistown again? In one go, through a night, and a day, and then a night again, finishing after just over 38 hours on my feet with no sleep? So this is a bit of a race report as well as a few reflections on staying out on your feet for an ultramarathon like this. It's a long way as the map below shows.



### **Before the race**

I was quite well prepared. I've done plenty of 100 mile+ ultras before, though nothing as hard as the Lakeland 100. I'd specifically been practising hill climbing, as I knew from past experience that was my weak spot. I'd done about 50 miles a week in the runup to the event, with some good long runs (like a 40 mile Warrington Way) and plenty of weekends with about 40 miles running split across Saturday and Sunday. I'd been up to recce the whole Lakeland 100 route in the daylight over three days, I'd planned carefully the kit I would need, had tested it all out in practice runs, and I had the whole route in my Garmin GPX watch. But as the event got closer, I was increasingly worried about

whether I could finish it. I'd deliberately told lots of people I was doing it, and got sponsorship to support the Afritwin charity, in part because it made it really difficult for me to fail to finish.

Even so, when I arrived in Coniston on Friday 24 July in the afternoon, I was apprehensive. The sheer distance and physical endurance needed could be beyond me. In the race briefing, they made the point that very few people would even stand on the start line of an event like this, and that even so they expected about a third or half of us to fail to finish. Before the start, a tenor sang the aria *Nessun Dorma* ("none shall sleep") and the crowd fell silent as if it was a prayer. And then at just on 6pm the race began. As 302 runners made their way up Lake Road from the school which is the race HQ, through crowds of onlookers onto the main street in Coniston and turned up the road and track that leads up to Coniston Old Man and into the hills, I jogged sedately near the back and told myself that there was no going back now.

### **Getting going overnight**

The race pack soon spread out, and after only a couple of miles the path ahead was pretty clear – I was in the back third, walking all the uphill sections, and jogging or running on the level and downhill. It was a lovely evening as we made our way down to Seathwaite (the first of 14 checkpoints, at 7 miles), then climbed again past Harter Fell and down to the second checkpoint at Boot (14 miles). The sun was setting and by the time I reached the third checkpoint (Wasdale Head, 19.4 miles) it was past 11pm and completely dark. But I was feeling fine, and spent no time hanging around but was straight out for the tough 712m climb up over Black Sail Pass and down to Buttermere (26.3 miles) and then the further 573m climb up over Sail Pass and around Barrow at sunrise to descend into Braithwaite (32.8 miles) – getting there just before 5am in the morning for breakfast.

### **Night into day**

The next stages were just great. After eating and drinking well at Braithwaite I felt remarkably fit and hit a good pace for the level paths past Keswick and then up to Blencathra (41.3 miles). There are no brutal climbs on these sections, just lots of up and down. It was turning out to be a sunny, warm day but my pace and rhythm was good – mostly walking now but managing a run when it was downhill! I went through the seventh checkpoint at Dockray (49 miles) before 10am, and was confident of getting to Dalemmain – just over halfway, and the start point for the Lakeland 50 runners – by around lunchtime. It's a long stage of 10.1 miles, but sure enough I made it to Dalemmain (59.1 miles) at 1.20pm (the Lakeland 50 had started from here about 2 hours earlier so I didn't really expect to catch them up). Here I took a bit of a break to eat properly, to change socks and retape my feet, and to sort out a few other problems. I'd realised my clever rechargeable headtorch was flat and wasn't charging properly



– a problem with another night ahead of me. But one of the volunteers immediately lent me her headtorch, and with that I was ready to press on. I'd done well over half the distance now and at just under 20 hours (the race limit is 40 hours) I was now feeling confident I could finish this thing.

### **Day into night again**

The next 7.1 mile stage to Howtown on Ullswater was fine, but I knew what was then coming – the 765m climb up Fusedale and over High Kop then down to Haweswater and Mardale Head. This is a really tough 9.4 mile section, with steep and rocky climbs to the top and then a long crossing of the peaty bogs at the summit before dropping down to a lakeside rocky route along Haweswater. It was very hot too in the afternoon sun. I was starting to pass some L50 runners – good for my morale if not for theirs. At Mardale Head I drank my first strong coffee – it was now just before 8pm and the sun was setting. I had another hard climb ahead through the Gatescarth Pass to Kentmere and though it is a road of sorts I found myself halting for a breather more and more on the ascent. At the Kentmere checkpoint (82.1 miles) I forced myself to eat, drank more coffee and then set off again towards Ambleside. It was pitch dark now, and I was tired. This 7.3 mile stage seemed to take ages, and at one point I missed the way and had to retrace my steps. It was a relief as the track descended through woods to Ambleside, but that had been a very slow stage. At the checkpoint in the town (89.4 miles) I linked up with a few other L100 and L50 runners – some in better shape than others, and we started out on the next stage to Langdale. We were slow but it helped to be together, and as we got into Chapel Stiles checkpoint (95 miles) the sky was starting to lighten a little – it was 3.50am. I ate two bowls of stew, drank more strong coffee, and felt renewed energy. We set off again – this time I'd paired up with another runner and we set a faster pace, leaving the rest of the group. Running the downhills and climbing much more assertively with the end now (almost) in sight and the sun well up, we made it to the penultimate checkpoint at Tilberthwaite (101.5 miles) by 6.30am.

### **The finish**

More coffee and then straight on for the last 3.5 miles – with a stiff climb of 387m up over the old quarries and through the pass to the wonderful point where you see Coniston Old Man straight ahead, and the path starts to descend steeply to the left, down the valley towards the town. Now we ran – passing lots of L50 and L100 runners who were trudging along, but somehow we were both jumping from rock to rock on the descent with no apparent fatigue. The track became the road again, and we jogged briskly through the town and back down Lake Road to the school arriving at just past 8am. Medal, T-shirt, bowl of pasta, and then bed.



## So what did I learn?

It is amazing what you can do if you try. Completing an ultra like the Lakeland 100 is I think really about experience, planning and psychology. Physical fitness and endurance clearly matter, but I know I passed better runners than me especially in the second half of the race, and there were plenty of very fit people who for one reason or another didn't finish.

Experience and planning involve things like knowing what it is like to be out overnight, and to be on your feet for such a length of time. Understanding how your body will react to the demands of continuous but relatively low impact exercise. Pacing yourself so that you can make the distance

steadily – I was 224<sup>th</sup> at Dalemain but 167<sup>th</sup> at the finish, not because I'd sped up hugely (except in that final stage) but because others slowed down or dropped out in the second half. Learning to eat and drink en route so that you are always properly nourished – I ate something at every checkpoint, and can vouch for the effects of stew, soup, rice pudding, pasta, fruit and of course jelly babies. Looking after your feet – I was so pleased to finish with no blisters at all. I was footsore and bruised, but taping my feet with Mefix, using loads of

| Checkpoint                  | Time of Day Elapsed   | Leg      | Position    |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|----------|-------------|
| Pre-Start Coniston          | Fri 17:50:36          | ----     | ----        |
| Start                       | Fri 18:01:23          | ----     | ----        |
| CP1 Seathwaite Village Hall | Fri 19:40:09 01:38:46 | 01:38:46 | 190th (302) |
| CP2 Eskdale Corn Mill       | Fri 21:33:50 03:32:27 | 01:53:41 | 235th (302) |
| CP3 Wasdale Head            | Fri 23:16:12 05:14:49 | 01:42:22 | 234th (302) |
| CP4 Buttermere Village Hall | Sat 02:19:25 08:18:02 | 03:03:13 | 230th (296) |
| CP5 Braithwaite Church Hall | Sat 04:48:19 10:46:56 | 02:28:54 | 229th (292) |
| CP6 Blencathra Centre       | Sat 07:30:27 13:29:04 | 02:42:08 | 224th (284) |
| CP7 Dockray                 | Sat 09:56:49 15:55:26 | 02:26:22 | 225th (277) |
| CP8 Dalemain                | Sat 13:23:41 19:22:18 | 03:26:52 | 224th (272) |
| CP9 Howtown Bobbin Mill     | Sat 15:57:30 21:56:07 | 02:33:49 | 210th (256) |
| CP10 Mardale Head           | Sat 19:46:01 25:44:38 | 03:48:31 | 210th (252) |
| CP11 Kentmere Village Hall  | Sat 22:16:38 28:15:15 | 02:30:37 | 204th (237) |
| CP12 Ambleside              | Sun 01:28:04 31:26:41 | 03:11:26 | 191st (223) |
| CP13 Langdale               | Sun 03:50:12 33:48:49 | 02:22:08 | 182nd (210) |
| CP14 Tilberthwaite          | Sun 06:37:39 36:36:16 | 02:47:27 | 181st (209) |
| Coniston Finish             | Sun 08:04:54 38:03:31 | 01:27:15 | 167th (209) |

Sudocrem, and checking and changing my socks worked really well. I did make some mistakes – the dud headtorch (I should have had a spare); my GPX watch played up several times; and I should have recced the stages into and out of Ambleside in the dark beforehand as I found them really hard.

But keeping going to the end is as much about what goes on inside your head. I know I often have an inner voice telling me how things could do wrong or have gone wrong, dwelling on the aches and pains, and finding incredibly plausible reasons to stop or give up. Different people find different ways through – for me it seems to work to forget the distance and the challenge involved and to live in the moment, to set out to enjoy the incredible scenery and views whatever the weather, to talk to other runners, help where you can, and embrace the sense of shared purpose, and to be relentlessly positive about everything that happens along the way. Ultrarunning is definitely more than anything a state of mind.