

Pilgrims Ultra - A 100-mile self-navigated foot race following St Oswald's way, Holy Island to

Heaven Fields, Chollerford by Peter Harrison

Ultra - Any distance over marathon 26.2 miles.

The journey to running a 100-mile race starts a long time before you stand on the start line, before you pay your entry fee and click enter on the computer. In the last 12 months I've spent 270 hours running over 2500km and ascended more than 42000metres. The simplicity of running, putting one foot in front of the other is the easy bit. The balance of work, family and training is the difficult bit. Getting up at 3am to fit in a long run or incorporating a family day out or holiday into your training, whether you set off early and get picked up or run home, run to a cafe for breakfast as a bribe or just to have a change from running the same routes.

I've never run more than a marathon distance before and don't know anyone who has run a 100-mile race, the things learnt about pacing and nutrition I've picked up from listening to podcasts on ultra running. Firstly, I had to learn to slow down, move slower and get my heart rate down. This is difficult to start with and feels wrong, that you're not doing anything, with time your pace picks up again and your able to run long distances without fatiguing yourself. For my age (49) getting my heart rate below 130bpm was my target. Next was practicing nutrition on the move, what foods work, solids, liquids, electrolytes. The golden rule to distance racing is to not try anything new on the day. Practice everything. Next, its kit, is your hydration vest suitable? Does it rub? Bounce? Is it big enough? Too big? Trainers, t shirts, socks, shorts, anti-chaffing cream, foot cream, sun lotion, ChapStick, waterproofs, base layer, hat, gloves. Finger hovering over the enter button, bank card in hand it's time to jump into the world of ultra running. I enter the pilgrim's way ultra. Yes, I could have opted for a shorter distance but where's the challenge there? Besides, the finish line is just around the corner. I was in the army for more than 13 years I have an understanding of putting together training

programmes, diet and more importantly as I've got older listening to my body. Fortunately living in such a beautiful area finding routes to run hasn't been an issue. I've seen the length of the wall, crossed the Moor to Alston and Blanchland, had Stawards gorge and Allen Banks to myself and followed the Pennine Way to Bellingham for tea and cake and much more. Part of the preparation for the race was recceing the route. This was crucial on race day as navigating from Felton onwards would be in the dark. This meant days of getting up early to drive to a point on the course to run a section. Being on Simonside Hills before 5am is an incredible feeling, being the only person as far as the eye can see with the sun coming over the horizon.

Finally, after months of preparation race day arrives. I had booked a seat on the coach from the finish at the George Hotel to take us to the start and registration at Holy Island. Another early start with the coach departing at 5am. The forecast for the day set to see temperatures reaching the high 20s, the race directors had sent an email that mandatory kit was not required to be carried and to carry extra water.

Also, additional water stations were being added to the course. Registration out of the way, race numbers picked up, map in pocket and trackers fitted, I along with 150 athletes headed to the beach west of the priory and gathered for a race briefing. 8am race briefing done we were on our way, back up past the priory and past the car park to

head out along the causeway. As forecast the temperature was already around 20C. I'd applied sun block and for the first time in my life had bought a hat to run in to keep the sun off my head. My plan for the day was to just go and enjoy the experience, just get to the finish. I had worked on a 8Kph (5mph) pace which at 100 mile or 160km would be 20 hours adding in time in aid stations, climbing stiles, opening gates, etc. The race had a 30-hour cut off giving me 10 hours extra. I knew going over Simonside would be slow and navigating Harwood Forest and endless farmers' fields in the dark would all add time. To my knowledge in the past only 3 people have finished in under 24 hours. With the temperature set to rise and no shade on the course I slowed my pace right down, the risk of dehydration and sun stroke being a high possibility. As we made our way across the causeway from Holy Island, I was able to chat to other runners, find out where they were from, past races and the distances they were running. The race was broken down into 3 races, 50km, 100km, and 100 miles. Most entrants were doing the 50km race with roughly 100 entrants. Ten signed up for the 100km and 40 for the 100-mile race.

Once across the causeway we turned left along the shoreline and across the fields and over the A1. At around 10km there was the first pop up water point, from here the course started uphill. I had set out with 2 litres of water in a bladder and 1 litre of recovery drink with carbohydrates, protein, electrolytes and everything else my body needed to keep moving for 100 miles in soft flasks attached to the front of my vests. I has worked out my nutrition, a gel on the half hour and a cereal bar or flapjack on the hour. I'd had a pint of electrolytes drink the night before and another with my breakfast. With the food and drink going in well and a steady pace I headed down the hill and back across the A1 to Belford and another water station where I took the opportunity to top up my

soft flasks. On leaving Belford it was time to head back to the coast and onto Bamburgh and the first feed station at around 30kms. You get your first sighting of Bamburgh castle as you cross the fields just after Warren mill caravan park, the course then takes you away from Bamburgh up the hill and skirts around the golf course and along the cliff tops. A very warm and flat coke at the aid station and I was on my way again heading south past Bamburgh Castle and onto Seahouses. Dodging cars and ice cream laden tourists, past the fish and chip shops and down to the harbour you join the coastal path to take us onto Beadnell Bay across the dunes along the golf course to Dunstanbrugh Castle and onto to the 50km finish at Craster. At the caravan park leaving Beadnell I again took the opportunity to fill my bottles from a stand pipe, the next section along the dunes is along one with no other water source. Once into the aid station which happened to be the beer garden of the Jolly Fisherman filled with people enjoying the sun and some of the runners for the 50km having a well earned pint. I grabbed my drop bag and moved into the shade. On the top of my drop bag, I'd put a list of things I had to do: Change socks and apply foot

cream, change T-shirt, apply sun cream, anti-chafe cream. Fill drinks bottles and bladder. Refill all food and gels Pack head torch. I spent about 30 minutes here sorting myself out, making the most of the shade, cooling down and taking on fluids, lots of flat coke and tea.

It was now time to head back into the heat of the day and the unknown. I'd never ran more than 50km. Out of the beer garden and back onto the coastal path I set off running south along the stunning Northumberland coastline, with the sun high in the sky and the sea to my left on good pathways. I was running well, the training was paying off. I was carrying salt tablets with me as a back up. As I was coming towards Boulmer I felt a slight twinge in my right hamstring, I quickly took two salt tablets and carried on running. Next it was onto Alnmouth Bay and onto the beach to the golf course, through Alnmouth Town over the bridge and back onto the coast and sand dunes and yet another golf course to Warkworth and the next aid station at around 75km (about half way). Shortly after leaving Alnmouth I stopped for my first toilet break, I had been drinking loads and felt okay but my pee was like coke, I needed to get more fluids in. Just before Warkworth I caught up with Dave another runner and we ran into Warkworth together.

Here I stopped for two cups of tea and a bit of a rest and get out of the heat. Dave went on to meet his wife who was acting as his support crew further up the course. Back on my own again I set off for Felton. From here on it was farm tracks and fields. Again, I was running well and caught the other runner at Felton. Up to now nutrition had been going well but just before Felton I couldn't eat my flapjack, I ran with it for about 15 minutes taking small bites but i was struggling to get it down, with half of it consumed I left the rest to the birds. With Felton behind me and some encouraging words from the other runner it was now time to get the head torch on and push on into the night. Bag of dried mango in hand and head torch on high beam I headed in to the woods for the next few kms. This is where the time I'd spent on the course paid off. Heading out across farmers' fields with no obvious path, finding the next gate or style can prove difficult. Now onto Walden Bridge and another water station where I was met by my dad and a much needed cup of tea. Now following the Coquet river it's onto Rothbury and the finish of the 100km race, but not before some difficult navigation where I couldn't find the bridge crossing of a small stream. Not wanting to waste time stumbling around in the dark I set off through the stream and up the bank to locate the farm house I knew I needed to pass. Another hour later, several fields and a stretch along the old rail line I finally reached Rothbury.

Another long stop now to sort out all my kit, fresh socks, T-shirt, foot cream, pick up waterproofs and warm tops for the next 60km. More tea, coke and a bowl of chilli con carne and rice. Once fed and watered it was time to head back out into the dark and the most challenging section of the race. Leaving Rothbury you immediately go up hill over the fields before taking a dirt track leading to the foot of the first big climb over Simonside hills. From the base of the first hill I could see a couple of head torches up ahead and by the top of the second hill I'd caught up with David and Tom. Tom wasn't taking part in the race but had joined David at Rothbury to keep him company over the next section, we ran together chatting and eating up the miles crossing the peat bogs and moors, navigating through dense pine forest and onto

Harwood forest. Here we picked up another runner Charley who by now was having stomach issues. He stayed with us for the long runnable sections of fire track but once back into the fields he soon fell behind. Getting onto the final feed station of the course at Kirkwhelping we were met by a friendly volunteer ready to make us tea and feed us snacks, pot noodles or any other nibbles that were available. I had planned to change socks again and dry my feet at this point but knowing we were heading straight back out onto wet grass there wasn't much point. Once we'd had our fill of tea Myself, David and Charley set out together again. Charley had come in shortly behind us at the feed station. Another Section of crossing fields, climbing stiles and figuring out the krypton factor that is the combination of gate closures our next target was Great Whittington. Shortly after leaving Kirkwhelpington it soon became apparent that Charley was still having stomach issues and he soon dropped off and settled into a slower pace. We had been informed that one of the land owners had asked us not to go through his fields at night for fear of the livestock being spooked by the head torches and possibly injuring themselves. This meant a detour along tarmac roads from Great Bavington to Little Bavington adding to

an already long section of tarmac I'd not been looking forward to. After about a mile David started having problems with his feet, the hard pounding of the tarmac was taking its toll. I could have ran on at this point and left David to his own race but I decided to stay with him and help him to the finish. A couple of paracetamol and a bit of walking and slow jogging we had the 5 miles of tarmac behind us. The sun was now starting to come up again, but instead of a glorious sunrise we were greeted to a foggy start to the day. A bit of cattle rustling as some curious young bulls surrounded us we made it to Great Whittington where again my Dad was waiting with cups of tea for us. Three more fields and we finally make it to Halton Shield and Hadrian's wall. Onto the home straight and with the sun burning off the mist we were met with stunning views over the Tyne valley. As we came out of the woods and approached the junction for Acomb we were met by my friend Gary playing "Eye of the tiger" by Survivor on his car stereo, a reel moral boost and a lovely surprise. We were soon onto Haven fields and the end of St Oswald's way, just the steep descent to Chollerford and the finish line at the George hotel to deal with. With just short of 100 miles and over 24 hours of running in the legs the thought of a quad busting, foot shredding 14% decent to the finish wasn't really top of my things to do on a Sunday morning. Here Davids feet really weren't up for the challenge and as he eased his way down the hill I took off for Chollerford bridge where my wife, 6 Year old daughter still in pyjamas, parents and Gary were waiting for me. Having spent the best part of 50km together I thought it only right that David and I cross the bridge together, waiting a couple of minutes for David to catch up. We made our way over the bridge to the finish line, David letting me go a couple of metres ahead to take first male over the line in a time of 24 hours and 50 minutes.

On reflection and a month on from finishing the race, would I change anything? No. Yes I could of left David behind and finished in under 24 hours but that was never my goal. I'd set out to see if I could run 100 miles, to enjoy and make the most of the experience. Of the 40 people who stood on the start line 15 completed the course giving testament to the challenge, dealing with the heat, managing hydration and

nutrition, managing your feet and getting your pacing right. The last runner in crossed the line in 34 hours and 34 minutes. Will I run another hundred mile race? Definitely, it's been an amazing adventure. What's next? It's easy to get carried away with it all and start signing up for all the amazing races that are out there, but for now I'm putting my feet up and taking time relax a bit, yes I'm still running 3 or 4 times a week but with no structure to it, just being out and enjoying where we live.