

Race Report - Ennerdale Horseshoe Fell Race 2012

2nd June 2012

Three members of EVFC had signed up for the gruelling Lakeland Classic Fell Race that tours the 23 mile long ridge around Ennerdale; Phil Conner, Richard Clark, and Mick Quinn. Having completed the race once before I knew what I was letting myself in for..... We travelled across together with a quick breakfast stop in Keswick, arriving at the Race start (west end of Ennerdale Water) at 10am. The weather forecast looked good, and so it proved to be with a very light wind, sun shining, and temperature around 14 degC in the valley. A few midges were making themselves felt as we stripped off to racing kit.

I was feeling good, and quite confident with a "target time" of 5 hrs in mind (30 mins off my PB and a new EVFC record.....). Mick was trying the "beetroot juice" endurance approach for the first time.

After registering and collecting race numbers and electronic dibbers, we assembled at the start line and set-off at a steady pace at 11am. Mick in the lead, and Richard somewhere behind. The first 1.5 miles are easy going and a great warm up for the first big climb (600m) of the day to Great Borne, the start of the North ridge along Ennerdale. The climb starts easily enough but is steep through the middle section. Legs felt good, and I was making a few places as we headed higher. A couple of false summits finally leads to Great Borne. Ran alongside with Nigel #### (DFR) and started to worry I had gone off too fast (he's usually miles in front of me in local races) ! Reached the summit of Great Borne (CP1, 44.01, 2.30 ahead vs 2010) well inside the 50 minute cut-off. Fantastic view along the ridge to Red Pike and the distant Great Gable, with the whole ridge clear and in the sun. A fast descent and steady contour on sheep trod around Starling Dodd leads to the steady pull up to Red Pike Summit (CP2, 1:14.11, 1.30 ahead vs 2010). Chatted with Ian Hodgson (NYMAC) but lost contact with him and Nigel near the summit of Red Pike. Caught up with Mick Quinn leaving Red Pike, and ran together the long traverse around High Stile and High Crag more or less following the ridge line. This proved quicker than the contouring route I had used last time I raced the route. A sub-optimal line off the steep end of High Crag put Ian Hodgson and his group out of sight.

Mick was struggling with a "dodgy tummy", perhaps the beetroot juice...? and basically feeling crap. The soles of both of my feet were starting to feel painful (blisters?) and on the steep descent into Scarth Gap sharp pain and a "squelchy feeling" confirmed my worst fear of blisters less than half way around the course. My legs felt strong but the blisters started to sap my confidence. On reaching Black Beck Tarn (CP3, 2:01.16, 4.08 ahead vs 2010). Mick told me to go on ahead as he needed to take a rest. I took a higher line (wider arc keeping further left) than previously upto Green Gable, and this proved quicker and less strenuous, and took a few more places. I reached Green Gable Summit (CP4, 2:32.59, 4.26 ahead vs 2010) 40 mins ahead of the cut-off time and was told by the Marshall that I was in 50th place. A quick slurp of water, and I headed off Green Gable down a grassy strip and onto loose scree, to take the lower traverse (Moses Trod) under Great Gable and across to Beckhead Tarn. Feet feeling very sore, and shoes full of small stones from the scree run.

The ridge ahead is awesome with Kirk Fell followed by Piller and in the distance Haycock. It's a steep and stiff climb upto Kirk Fell, but runnable after the first steep rocky step. Reach the summit of Kirk Fell (CP5, 3:00.25, 4.07 ahead vs 2010) and enjoy a drink and the 3rd slab of my home-made flapjack - good energy food but needs water to wash it down. Lose some time by following the old fence posts off the summit and take a bit too wide an arc on rough ground (no-one in sight in front), but recognise the grassy entry into the severe gully that marks the route down to Black Sail Pass. Have to keep to the right of the gully due to a family with 4 children coming up - not a good place to start knocking down stones, so lose a little more time. Offered and gratefully accept a full bottle of water by a passing walker at the col, and then start the long climb to Piller. Keep below the main track and find an excellent trod. Doesn't seem as bad as last time I did this part of the route, and even manage to keep running upto the final rocky climb onto the Summit plateau of Piller (CP6, 3:44.19, 2.21 ahead vs

2010). Stop for flapjack No.4 and another good drink from the Marshal supply (turns out to be my last drink of the day). A sub-5hr finish looks out of reach. The veteran Wendy Dodds (LV60) arrives just as I set-off - one of my race targets was to keep in front of her! A very painful (blisters) descent off Pillar, with virtually no soft ground, just rocks and scree - much worse than I remember. Feel like I'm slowing, although legs still ok. Reach wind gap and climb on rocks steeply towards Little Scoat Fell. Look back and no sign of Wendy Dodds and a small group with her..... and remember contouring on south side at this stage last race. Realise I'm too high then spot the Dodds some 500m ahead and 50m lower. Scramble back over big boulders and reach the easier ground and race line. Lost several minutes. Now the route becomes very runnable, and I pick up speed but just maintain my distance from the group in front. My camelback water supply gives up the ghost at Haycock summit (CP7, 4:19.38, 0.44 ahead vs 2010), and Marshal supply is also empty.

Keep expecting Rich Clark to come past me - amazed I've held him off this far. Easy running now over undulating grass along the long southern ridge of Ennerdale. Catch a couple of runners in a group in front at Iron Crag (CP8, 4:44.37, 0.33 ahead vs 2010). Realise the EVFC record is out of reach. Dying for some water, and getting twinges of cramp in my calves. Suck the salt off my arms and this seems to take care of the cramp. Racing with two other runners on the long run-in, and keep ahead of them all the way Crag Fell (CP9, 5:11.35, 0.51 *behind* vs 2010). The final climb up out of the woods below Crag Fell is a struggle, but everyone else appears to find it equally tough, and I manage to keep going without a stop or anyone passing me. Plunge down from Crag Fell on steep grass and small diagonal path down through the lower woods. Legs tired but not cramping. Have to walk the final short 100m climb on the track, before the final downhill run-in across fields to the finish at the foot of Ennerdale Water. Cross the finish line in 61st position in 5:31.30 (2.46 outside my 2010 time). Slump into some welcome chairs and devour 4 cups of juice and 3 cups of tea in quick succession. Knackered but ecstatic that I'm first club member home. The relaxed group to my left includes the race winner Rhys Findlay-Robinson who had finished the race almost 2 hrs earlier (3:50.40)! How do they do it ?!

Rich Clark crosses the line about 20 mins later (5:49.25), having run with Mick Quinn the second half of the race, but dropped him on the final descent from Crag Fell. Mick crosses the line a further 15 mins later (6:02.17), having cramped on the final descent.

Ennerdale certainly lived up to its reputation as a classic, and one of the toughest races in the fell running calendar.

Phil Conner

EVFC, June 2012.