

CRAG FELL



WORDS MATTHEW POULTON

Crag Fell is a short, fast handicap race near Ennerdale in the Lake District, which packs almost 1,400ft into an out-and-back 2.5-mile route. When registering your wish to attend, you are asked to submit past race entries (Strava logs can be used if you have not raced), and from there, a start time is given to you. The start times are at intervals, with the slower runners setting off first and the fastest setting off last, with the intention that everyone finishes together. It was to be my first of the type, an old school friend convincing me to come along for a race that, in his words, would be a delicious mix of low-key and low fee.

The weather was especially revolting as I drove towards Ennerdale. Windscreen wipers at full tilt, my 21-year-old Nissan Micra got hammered by the wind and rain. A partially flooded road had to be slowly navigated, much to the chagrin of the large 4x4 that appeared behind me, and I began to wonder if the journey was going to be more testing than the race itself. I was warm and dry in the car but filled with the grim knowledge known by every haddock in chip shops across the world; soon, it would be me getting battered.

I signed up by a marshal's car, sheltering my registration form from the rain, looking up at Crag Fell, which I would soon be ascending. As I began to fill out my form I wondered if the race organiser had chosen this hill for the humorous confusion caused (to me at least) by having two CFR acronyms in one day (Cumberland Fell Runners and Crag Fell Race).

There is a "bring a prize to win a prize" after the race, where everyone who contributes to the prize table receives a prize in return. The order of race completion (not the fastest time taken) is the order in which prizes are chosen, giving people who may not necessarily win races a chance to battle it out for the best prizes.

LEFT: The author on the descent at Crag fell © Peter Trainor

ALREADY, RUNNERS WERE BEING SET OFF IN PAIRS AT 30-SECOND INTERVALS, A LINE OF BRIGHTLY COLOURED JACKETS A STARK CONTRAST AGAINST THE GREYNESS

Registration complete, I dropped off my prize – a foam roller that I didn't use anymore – amongst the expected selection of chocolates and bottles of alcohol. These were alongside some more eclectic items, including a large stuffed dog, a snorkel (which may be ideal for the journey home) and a hedge trimmer.

Arriving at the starting point after a quick warm-up jog along the track, there was little sign of the fell I was due to run up. A curiously dense slab of cloud lingered in its place, acting like the metaphorical understudy in a play called *Let's Make Matt Unhappy*. Already, runners were being set off in pairs at 30-second intervals, a line of brightly coloured jackets a stark contrast against the greyness of the day. Soon, my name was called and it was my turn to head off up the fell, and into the cloud.

I worried how accurate my handicap was going to be as I set off. I was well aware that this was a narrow route, and while I was happy just getting up and down in one piece, I knew that people setting off behind me would be battling it out for places. I had not done a great deal of running or racing in the months prior, coming back to running slowly after a rather nasty ACL injury, so worried at the accuracy of a handicap based on such sparse data. A worry that was exacerbated when the person who set off at the same time as me, promptly dropped me as we began to ascend. I hoped I would not be holding up the people behind me.

100 feet... 200 feet... 300 feet... 400 feet*. I rose swiftly, the terrain seeming to get steeper and steeper. I found myself glancing at my watch, growing slightly concerned with how achy my legs felt in relation to the amount of climbing I had done when finally, it happened. A small voice in my head pointed out that the first lyric in *Carol of the Bells*, which had been going around in my head since I heard it the previous day, was unknown to me. I knew the tune, and the vague sound the lyric made, but not the actual words themselves. I pondered a moment, humming the sound over, trying to fit words into

it. "Hard cannonballs" was entertained for a time until I remembered that the next lyric mentions sweet in relation to the unknown lyric, and while cannonballs are certainly hard, I would doubt even the most die-hard buccaneer would call them sweet. The conundrum raged in my head as I grew oddly fixated on it, ignorant of all that was around me, consumed by trying to fill in this blank. I added likely words into the tune, eventually settling with "Hot caramel", which sounded correct and certainly ticked the box for sweet. Satisfied, I looked at my watch: 1,100ft. I had managed to dither away 700ft of ascent. Such mid-run pointless conundrums are not unusual for me. I feel it is the only thing that keeps me running. My brain drags me away from what I am doing (being battered with wind and rain while running up a steep hill) and instead distracts me with a simple problem that I must solve, akin to a babysitter distracting a crying child with a set of jangly keys.

I reached the summit cairn. A few of the fast runners had passed me by this point, but no sign of my friend who had started around eight minutes behind me. While I would not disgrace myself against him on a steep ascent, I knew I stood no chance on the descent. I began to run down and soon met him toiling up the fell, about five minutes behind me (which will be the first and last time that ever happens). I ran on, his cry of "don't let me catch you" ringing sinisterly in my ears. In an embarrassingly short time, I denied this simple request (to be fair, he could have tried a lot harder to not catch me), as he came screaming past. I had never seen him descend like this before, only ever having seen him when he was limited to my pace. Instead, I watched, for a brief time, as my friend hurtled down, legs flying everywhere as he dropped like an apple that has just spotted Isaac Newton's exposed head. I continued down in a far more sedate manner, overtaking a few people and letting some of the fast runners pass. As I moved from the grass to the single-track path, I was relatively pleased with just how grippy the incredibly wet path was. I trundled down in a series of half-controlled galloping leaps until I finally reached the flat track.

I could see a runner ahead. My legs hurt and I did not want to try to overtake them, but I imagined the disappointment I would feel if they were to take the large bag of Quality Street as a prize, and I would have to drive home knowing that, be it for a bit more effort, I could be eating those delicious chocolates. I sped up, overtaking the runner ahead, before crossing the finish line and collapsing into the waiting arms of my friend. He was chatting with a group of his fellow Cumberland Fell Runners, none of whom were looking in the least bit distressed from the ordeal. One of them asked me if I enjoyed myself. I burred damply that I was not quite sure, before starting a slow waddle back to the car and getting changed behind a comically small towel.

Back in dry(ish) clothes and no longer feeling like I had full-body trench foot, it was time for the prize-giving. I had no real idea in what position I had come, merely hoping that there was some delicious chocolate waiting for me. Each multiple of five got a spot prize on top of their selected one – either a mysterious envelope or a Christmas pudding, which the race organiser insisted was still in date. I was delighted to be number 30, and, unable to resist, took the tantalising envelope. I was disappointed to see the Quality Street had been taken (obviously the key to a good running performance is eating plenty of them) but satisfied myself with a packet of After Eights. Opening my envelope, I found a £10 voucher for Kong Running in Keswick. Having just won money (sort of) in a race, I briefly considered whether or not to refer to myself as a pro athlete, but decided, on balance, possibly not the wisest of ideas. All the names having been called, everyone went back to their cars and, in ones and twos, began to head off home.

As I drove home, I pulled into a layby that I knew had mobile signal. I had to know. I Googled Carol of the Bells while opening the (what I now knew to be previously opened, slightly out of date and hastily taped back together) box of After Eights. I reached inside the packet, confident that the high sugar content would make them practically immortal. I looked at my phone screen. The lyrics came up on my phone as I popped the chocolate into my mouth: "Hark how the bells, Sweet silver bells". Nothing about caramel. They say errors come in pairs. Not moments after realising my lyrical error, I was disavowed of my perception of After Eight immortality as I found what appeared to be a mint chocolate-flavoured square of leather, masquerading as a delectable evening treat. I started the car and drove home, singing the correct lyrics to the song, and pondering whether to put the After Eights in the office kitchen.

Overall, an excellently organised race in some rather challenging weather. I could not have been more impressed by the diligence of the marshals standing at the top of the fell, as well as the dedication of the event organiser in choosing our handicaps and chasing up our times after the timing machine malfunctioned in the rain. The handicap system was a lot of fun and added a new dimension of competition not seen in a standard race. The worries I had about an inaccurate handicap did not come to pass, with only a one-place difference between my actual position and my handicap position. Overall, a great short race with a fun atmosphere, and well organised. Well done Cumberland Fell Runners, and all who were involved.

TOP RIGHT: Fastest woman on the day, Jodie Gray (Keswick AC) © Peter Trainor



Andrew Bradley, Race Organiser, shares:

The Crag Fell Handicap Race was originally rooted in the Cumberland Fell Runners Annual General Meeting.

In a bid to improve attendance, there was an informal arrangement for a race up and down Crag Fell. At some stage in 2014, someone must have said the words "We don't have a race organiser this year for the Crag Fell Race" and I might have been the first to weaken. Consequently, I have never run it since...

It is a handicap format so that we can control the finish times and get to the pub in time for the pre-AGM chips. In theory, everyone should finish at 12:00, with start times calculated to generate a mass finish. Start times are based on previous local race times. This is a bit of a dark art and is subject to so many variables. Different runners perform differently on different fell races.

Of the 48 starters, 37 finished within 3 minutes of 12:00. Rumour has it that this year's winner has spent the last two years jogging round race routes in order to get the sort of handicap that allowed him his moment of glory.

*Feet of ascent – not how many pairs of feet overtook me.