

Striders of Croydon

MARCH 2024 MAGAZINE



Striders' men's cross-country team celebrate winning their Surrey League Division Three match at Lloyd Park on 10 February and gaining promotion to Division Two

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Competitive Highlights: December 2023–February 2024

40 Years Ago – Local Athletics in January-May 1984

20 Years Ago – Local Athletics in Spring 2004

10 Years Ago – Local Athletics in Spring 2014

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Sunday 7 April – Sutton 10K – Nonsuch Park (Surrey Road League)

Sunday 21 April – London Marathon – London (Striders marshalling)

Wednesday 24 April – Striders Annual General Meeting – Sandilands

Saturday 11 May – Surrey Track & Field Championships – Kingsmeadow

Sunday 12 May – Ranelagh Half-Marathon – Petersham (Surrey Championships & Road League)

Monday 13 May – Southern Veterans League – Wimbledon

Wednesday 22 May – Rosenheim League – Tooting

Sunday 2 June – Dorking 10 Miles – Brockham (Surrey Championships & Road League)

Monday 3 June – Southern Veterans League – Ewell

Wednesday 12 June – Rosenheim League – Sutton Arena

Monday 17 June – Southern Veterans League – Kingsmeadow

Sunday 23 June – Ranelagh Richmond 10K – Petersham (Surrey Championships & Road League)

Saturday 6 July – Surrey Masters Track & Field Championships – venue tbc

Monday 8 July – Southern Veterans League – Sutton Arena

Saturday 13 July – Elmore 7 Miles – Chipstead (Surrey Road League)

Wednesday 17 July – Rosenheim League – Tooting

Sunday 21 July – Elmbridge 10K – Elmbridge (Surrey Road League)

Friday 26 July – Wedding Day 7K – Bushy Park (Surrey Road League)

Saturday 27 July – British Masters Track & Field Championships – Derby

Wednesday 14 August – Rosenheim Shield Final – Kingsmeadow

Sunday 1 December – British Masters 5K Championship – Battersea



Striders' team for our mob match against Croydon Harriers on 3 February

EDITORIAL: MARCH 2024

Welcome to the March issue of our club magazine. As most Striders will already know, December saw Ally Whitlock and Debra Bourne complete the Winter Downs 200-mile race, covering more miles in one race than many Striders do in a month. Both Ally and Debra give us their accounts of the race.

We have had quite a wet winter, but not a snowy one. Sarah Allport travelled to Norwegian Lapland in search of some snow to run in, and gives us her account of the Tromso Morketidsmila 10K.

We follow Sarah's article with a short article about interval training. We also include our usual 'competitive highlights' and history articles, including an article going back 40 years, to when some of Striders' original club members tackled the fourth London Marathon.

The Surrey Cross-Country League season ended in February, with contrasting fortunes for our men and women. Our men had an excellent turnout of 26 runners for their final match: they duly won the match and finished second in Division Three, gaining promotion back to Division Two where we have spent most of the last 20 years. By contrast, our women had a disappointing season and only managed to field four runners for their final Division Two match. They were relegated to Division Three for the first time.

The Surrey Road League season begins on 7 April with the Sutton 10K, which is being held a month earlier than usual. We welcome Stanka Petrova as our new Surrey Road League team manager, succeeding Graeme Drysdale who has stood down after several years in that role. We hope that many of our runners will support Stanka by competing in some of the Surrey Road League races.

The track and field season will be starting in May. Last year our men did very well to place third out of eight clubs in our division of the Southern Veterans League, and our women exceeded all expectations by placing fourth in the Eastern Division of the Rosenheim League. However, we do need to try to recruit more volunteers to help officiate at our track and field matches. We currently have three qualified officials, but they have an average age of just over 75, so if we are to continue to compete in our two track and field leagues, we do need some younger club members to come forward to help (and ultimately replace) our trio of OAPs. We realise that it is often difficult to combine competing and officiating at the same meeting, so ideally a volunteer should be someone who enjoys watching track and field athletics but is happy not to compete. Information about how to qualify as an official is on <https://www.englandathletics.org/coaches-and-officials/officiating-journey/>.

I hope that all Striders continue to enjoy their running.

Alon



THE WINTER DOWNS 200 (by Ally Whitlock)

THE FINISH

At the bottom of Box Hill, I pause and look up.

There is just one mile and one final 300-foot climb standing between me and the finish line.

This.

This is what I have trained for.

This is what reps of Box Hill in all weathers was for.

This is what running up and down my local hill at 5 am was for.

This is what climbing Botley Hill again, and again, and again, was for.

This.

I have visualised this moment so many times over the past few months. Placing my right foot on the bottom step I take a deep breath and let go.

Ignoring the 199+ miles already in my legs, I think only of the 400 metres ahead of me.

I fly.

With music pounding loudly in my ears, I storm up the 275 steps faster than I thought possible.

I. Do. Not. Stop. until I reach the top.

I pause, breathe deeply to calm my racing heart, and carry on.

Tip, tap, tip, tap. In the silence of the night, my poles rattle loudly across the gravel path.

In the pre-dawn gloom, something catches in the light of my head torch. I startle a small herd of cows gathered on the path. I am not hallucinating now. Their large eyes glint in the glare of my torch as they follow my movement along the path. I ignore them. Nothing is stopping me now.

The view from Salomon's Memorial is hiding under a thick blanket of misty darkness as the world around me sleeps. Ahead, I spot a pink ribbon fluttering in the breeze. My guiding light to lead me home.

One mile to go. One.

The trees sway in the wind. Moving backwards and forwards, side to side like dancers on a stage. Their branches cast shadowy shapes on the ground. Their leaves rustle in the breeze forming a soundtrack to the show whilst the early morning mist creeps silently around creating an eerie, otherworldly atmosphere.

A pink ribbon in amongst the mist. Flapping like a lonely and forlorn leaf on an otherwise naked branch. An arrow points me on my way but still, I glance at the map on my wrist, just to make sure.

My mind wanders back to when my feet ran excitedly along this same woodland path at the start of the journey. As Broadwood's Tower looms back into view, an avalanche of memories from the past three days cascade down on me.

I stop. I look.

Below my feet, Juniper Hall is ablaze in a golden glow. The lights are bright. Finish line flags wave their arms in the wind. I see people. Tiny silhouettes standing in front of the building. I feel my heart beat faster as the adrenaline pumps. The allure of the finish line grabs me and pulls me fast down the final steep descent. My feet struggle to keep up.

I wind my way along the woodland trail, the sounds of the finish drawing ever closer. I reflect that my time on the path is coming to an end.

It's been a constant rollercoaster of a ride with my fluctuating emotions mimicking the undulations of the path under my feet. From the highest of highs to the lowest of lows.

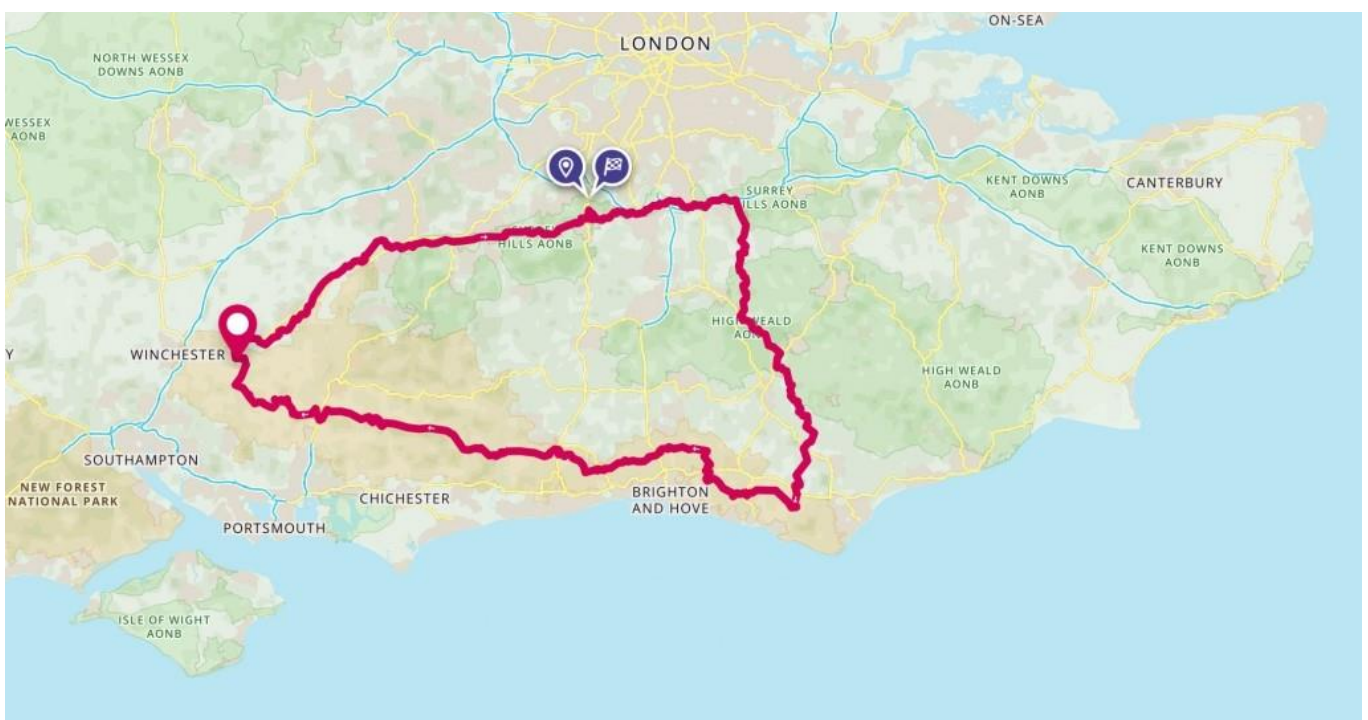
My feet hit the tarmac and after 200+ miles, I dig deeper than I've ever dug and run.

I run for that finish line.



The tiny dot of light on the horizon is my headtorch coming down the final hill. ©Rachel Lindley

SCENE SETTING



The Winter Downs 200 route

The Winter Downs 200 is a 200-mile continuous trail race forming a giant loop around the South of England.

Starting at Juniper Hall, sitting in the shadow of Box Hill in the Surrey Hills, it takes in the North Downs Way (NDW), Vanguard Way (VGW), South Downs Way (SDW), Wayfarer's Walk (WW) and St Swithun's Way (SSW) before rejoining the North Downs Way at the trailhead in Farnham and meandering back to Juniper Hall.

2023 was the race's inaugural year and simply put, this was a race made for me.

I HAD to be there.

An experienced ultra runner, I had never gone beyond 100 miles / 30 hours but having run the entire length of the NDW and SDW and being one of the few people who not only knew of the Vanguard Way but had run it in its entirety, this was MY race.

As soon as it opened, I put in my application.

This wasn't simply a case of hitting enter and paying some money. We had to apply with a running CV to prove our capabilities to cover not only the distance but to deal with the terrain, the weather and the conditions. From the onset, it was clear that this was not a race for the novice,

In May 2023, my application was accepted, the registration fee was paid, entry was confirmed and there was no turning back.

I had six months to prepare for the adventure of my lifetime.

Centurion Running, the race organisers, say:

“Runners have up to 96 hours to complete the course and are permitted to have a crew to support them. They also have access to a drop bag at the three major aid stations where hot food and sleeping facilities will be on hand. But the clock doesn't stop, this is a single-stage race. With 16 hours of darkness each day, long stretches between aid stations and the undulating terrain, the race is designed to be an incredible winter running adventure on a phenomenal course.”

THE START, THE BEGINNING, DAY ONE

7:50 Wednesday morning we gather in the shadow of Juniper Hall. The day has broken with little fanfare or ceremony, thick clouds fill the sky. The gloominess of the world around us does little to dampen our collective mood. Spirits are high.



Juniper Hall ©Pierre Papet

I take a moment. Breathe in and look around me. This race has been my sole focus and obsession for the past three months. Everything, absolutely everything has been geared towards this moment and finally, it is here. I was expecting to feel nervous but all I feel is a sense of calmness and belonging. This, surrounded by 93 other gallant souls, is **exactly** where I am meant to be.

The chatter subsides as James, the RD, gives a 30-second warning. Final good wishes are wished. And with 94 fingers poised over watch start buttons, a collective silence descends.

Ten. I can't believe this is happening. Nine. Breathe in. Eight. Breathe out. Seven, six, a quick look around. Five, focus. Four, three, two. Deep breathe. One, and go...



©Pierre Papet

We surge as one across the start line to the shouts and cheers of the watching crowd; Centurion staff, volunteers, crew, family and friends. I can't help but smile. Off the tarmac and onto the winding woodland path. Pink Centurion ribbons flutter in the morning breeze guiding us out of Juniper Hall grounds and onto the main path. The first and last miles are the only marked section of the whole race.

No word other than excited can aptly describe how I am feeling. I wonder at this. I wonder at my calm confidence and lack of nerves.

Doing something **this** big, shouldn't I be scared, nervous and fearful? I'm not. I know that I have trained hard, trained smart and trained well. I have done everything I can to prepare for this race and I could not be any more ready for the challenge ahead of me.

HOW DID I PREPARE TO RUN 200 MILES?

I am self-coached. I don't have someone I can turn to for guidance, someone I can be accountable to or someone who plans my training for me. I do it myself. **(As a caveat, I am an England Athletics qualified coach (CiRF) so I have the coaching background and knowledge, however, it is very different coaching yourself from coaching someone else).**

Over the years I have grown to learn what works and what doesn't work for me. But 200 miles was completely new and different, and in all honesty, I didn't know where to start.

I ran the Summer Spine Sprint in June and Wendover Woods 100 in July and then had a month or two of jogging 'fun' with no structured training.

I think downtime is important (and often overlooked) as it is impossible to maintain peak training all the time. But it does mean that sometimes it feels like I am starting at the beginning again. This is what it felt like in mid-August—the beginning.

The first four weeks of training were all about consistency, easy effort and low heart-rate running to (re)build a solid foundation. I then started to bring in training specificity and speed work.

I focused on long, slow runs. When possible, on the WD route. I ran these wearing the kit I planned to race in and carrying the kit I would need to carry. I covered all 200 miles in training and going into the race was confident that I knew the route. I knew where I was going and more importantly, I knew what to expect.

I did some speed work, rarely faster than threshold effort. Threshold, also known as “comfortably hard”, is great for improving endurance. I built this up over time. In August, I started with ten two-minute reps at threshold effort. By November I was running for over an hour at threshold effort.

In preparation for the 20,000ft of elevation, I did endless hill reps. Sometimes I ran them hard. Sometimes easy. Sometimes I hiked them carrying the full mandatory kit. I ran them on my local hill. I did them up and down Box Hill, on Colley Hill, Botley Hill and any hill I could find. With poles, without poles. I worked hard to build my hill strength (notice I say strength and not speed).

I ran at night. I ran at night in the wind and rain. I ran at night on the Winter Downs route. I ran at night, by myself, on the Winter Downs route.

And I ran many, many slow and easy miles with the only focus being on keeping my effort easy and my heart rate super low; and I always, always, made sure I had one complete rest day every week.

I also focused on consistent strength training, lifting heavier than I have ever lifted. Standing on that start line, my body was the strongest it had ever been.

David Goggins claims that **when you are done, you are only 40% there**. I teased my body by doing marathon-paced sessions the day after back-to-back long runs. Trying to mimic that 190-mile feeling. I didn't think I could do it, but every single time, my body amazed me.

I am asked why I did speed sessions for a 200 miler when I won't be running fast on race day. The faster I am, the stronger I am. The stronger I am, the faster I am. I knew I needed to be at my strongest if I wanted to perform at Winter Downs.

I worked HARD. Everything that I could prepare for and control, I controlled. There were two uncontrollable that I couldn't prepare for—the weather and sleep deprivation.

I had no control over what the weather would do. I had to be prepared for all eventualities. And I didn't know how I would cope with running through two, three or more nights. As dedicated as I am to my training, I wasn't going to deprive myself of sleep unnecessarily just to see what happened.

I had no nerves because I knew that I was ready.

I had no nerves because I knew that I was in good shape.

I had no nerves because I knew that I had put everything I had into preparing for this race.

I had no nerves because I knew that I was in control.

To some, that might sound cocky, arrogant even. To me, that was confidence. I went into this race 100% confident that I was going to finish.

And that is a bloody good feeling.

MY PLAYGROUND, AKA THE NORTH DOWNS WAY, PART II

Anyway, back to the race...

The North Downs Way from Dorking to Botley Hill is my playground.

My stomping ground.

I know the path like the back of my hand with memories marking every mile. Every twist, every turn. Every hill and every descent. Every low-hanging branch and every fallen log. I know when to run, when to walk and when to simply let gravity take control. I do not need to look at the watch on my wrist to guide me, I just run. My watch is set to show only the route map, nothing else. No data, no time, no pace, no distance. Just navigation. As with previous races, I choose to run Winter Downs blind to data.



The first climb (and subsequently the final descent) of the race! ©Pierre Papet

The early miles fly by. I run with Sophie. Our paths first crossed at Wendover Woods 100 last summer and then again volunteering at Autumn 100 in October. A solitary runner at heart, I revel in the company knowing that as the race progresses the miles will become longer and lonelier.

With fresh legs and boundless energy, these early miles are joyful. My smile is wide, my mood is as high as the Colley Hill climb six miles in. The winter weather is mild and conditions on the NDW are excellent for December. With an unseasonable amount of rain in November, the trails a month ago were a muddy quagmire. A few weeks of warmer weather has dried all but the worst of it. I repeatedly find myself uttering the words "I have seen this path in much worse condition". It probably becomes tiresome to those around me, but knowing how bad the NDW can get, I am thankful for every dry and mud-less step.

Juniper through to Reigate is possibly the toughest section of the whole race. I am glad it is at the start. Undulating and often uneven single track with a couple of lung-busting climbs. I run the flats and the downs and walk the hills, conserving energy for the latter miles.



Sophie and I on Reigate Hill ©Jamie Rutherford

Through Reigate Hill, the first crew location. At only 8 miles in, I'd opted not to have my crew meet me this early in the race. I'd reasoned that I could easily carry all I needed for 20+ miles and seeing them now would simply slow my rhythm. My goal is to make the most of the daylight hours, without exerting too much effort and to cover as much ground as I can during this fresh-faced first day.

Through the second crew location at Merstham and a slight diversion around a newly installed electric fence that cut across the path on the climb up from Rockshaw Road. I berate the farmer as it adds an unnecessary couple of hundred metres.

Looking back, these early miles are some of my favourite of the race. Not simply for the ease of freshness but for the company and conversation. Sophie and I do not stop talking. In the shared experience of those miles, I have made a friend for life.

Just past Caterham, we run through Hanging Wood and as I'm telling Sophie all about the splendour of the wild garlic in the spring, it starts to rain. Proper wet rain. More than the mizzle and drizzle that had accompanied us for the last couple of miles. Off comes the pack and out comes the waterproof. In the mild temperature we are running in, I wouldn't usually bother with the waterproof, however, there are many miles to come and I don't want to get wet, as wet usually ends up being cold and cold would not be good.

Control the controllable.

19 miles in and we celebrate leaving the NDW and joining the VGW. Section one is done!



Coming down the steps just past Gangers Hill on the NDW ©Jamie Rutherford

AM I THE ONLY PERSON WHO LIKES THE VANGUARD WAY?

The Vanguard Way is a path that holds a special place in my heart and is one of the reasons that I had to run the WD200. Starting in Croydon, my hometown, it is the place where I discovered trail running. Before the Vanguard, I was a road runner pounding the streets of Croydon day after day.

One evening in the summer of 2016, the Wednesday night club run took us off the roads and onto the trails around Croydon. I stumbled on a magical new world. I found a part of Croydon – and a kind of running – that I never knew existed: woods, forests, fields, tracks and trails.

One week, we followed the little blue VGW signs dotted around the woods—the Vanguard Way. Interest piqued, I asked the run leader what this was and a few weeks later, wearing an old pair of road shoes and armed with a map printed off the internet (I knew nothing of gpx files, apps or watches that told you where to go), I set off on my first solo trail adventure.

Unsurprisingly I got horrendously lost, ran 23 miles rather than the planned 18 and ended up 10-odd miles from where I wanted to be, soaking wet after being caught in a torrential rainstorm (no taped seams...!) and covered in mud because, well road shoes were not suitable footwear for muddy trails!

But something happened during those 20+ miles.

I fell in love with the trails.

Undeterred. it took me another two attempts to make it to Edenbridge, my intended destination. I felt an enormous sense of pride. It had taken me over a year to get there but I had done it. I had navigated myself to somewhere I didn't know. In the interim period, I also ran my first ultra, the North Downs Way 50.

Then, in the summer of 2021, five years after I first stumbled upon it, I ran the entire length of the Vanguard Way in one go, and in doing so claimed the women's Fastest Known time (FKT).

Whilst for many of the Winter Downs runners, the VGW was a new-to-them trail, in a weird and almost possessive way, I think of the Vanguard Way as MY trail, filled with memories and good times. I will defend it to the hilt, no matter what it throws at me during the Winter Downs.....

And with that, back to the VGW...

We turn off of the North Downs Way and down the steep and rutted Pitchfont Lane. Sophie and I are still chattering away as we cross the first of many fields. It's slightly damp and saturated. Running is suddenly hard work as our feet catch in the wet and claggy mud.

A sign of things to come.

Up and over the M25 and before long we are heading into Limpsfield Chart, 22 miles and the third crew stop. A friend – Laura – who is crewing another runner kindly offered to 'crew' me here as childcare meant that my crew were not available during the lunchtime period.

She has my bag of snacks and drinks waiting for me. I stop for a couple of minutes whilst filling my flasks. In the simplest of languages, when she asks how I am doing I tell her good. I feel good. I'm keen to keep moving and within a minute or so, I am on my way again. Sophie a few steps behind me.

Through woodland and across more fields, the mud is getting deeper. Choice words are said as feet slip one way and then another, arms flailing to try to balance. The edge of Kent and Surrey golf course is like a swamp, the saturated ground churned up by many passing feet. Running is impossible. Simply staying upright is hard enough.

Passing the airstrip at Haxted and looking across over the Kent countryside, I make a throwaway comment about there not usually being water "down there"...

Ten minutes later I am reminded of those words as I am wading knee-deep in icy cold water. The River Eden has burst its banks and flooded the surrounding farmland.

As I approach the "lake", I pull out my poles, unfold them and with a deep breath, cautiously step into the water. Lapping just below my knees, it is cold and surprisingly fast-flowing. I place my poles ahead of me, one at a time, firstly for stability and secondly to check how deep the water is before I step into it.

It's slow going as I err on the side of caution. The child within me wants to splash straight through with reckless abandonment. The sensible adult in me knows that this would not be a wise move.

Emerging from the water, I see a couple of guys ahead of me sitting on a fallen tree, shoes and socks off attempting to dry their feet. I say a quiet word of thanks for the waterproof socks and whilst they feel cold, I marvel at how dry they have kept my feet. As a new convert to waterproof socks, they truly were a game changer during this race.





I am just going to pause for a moment to give a quick shout-out for the socks I wore. A fairly new brand that I stumbled on called Geckowear. They popped up on my Facebook feed and with everyone's favourite brand – Dexshell – out of stock in the UK, I took a gamble. I bought two knee-high pairs which I changed mid-race and they both performed superbly. With the amount of mud and water I waded through, I could not believe how good a condition my feet were in, both when I changed socks mid-race and at the finish. I am used to peeling off a pair of socks to find half the trail stuck to my feet, mud ingrained between my toes and under my toenails (those that I have). My feet were as clean and dry at the finish as they were at the start. I cannot recommend these socks highly enough. An absolute game-changer and I am now most definitely a waterproof sock convert! (This is not a sponsored paragraph but credit, where credit is due!).

Anyway, back to the trail...

Or should I say tarmac?

After paddling across farmland, the tarmac country lanes leading towards Forest Row are a welcome respite. Knowing that this is a temporary hiatus from the energy-sapping mud, it feels good to be able to move with some consistency again.

Pleased at how good I feel, I keep reminding myself how early in the race it is. This is the simplest word that needs no embellishment.

Good.

The good-ness is boosted by a hug from my friend Hannah in Forest Row and continues through the town, across the soggy golf course and into Ashdown Forest. Sophie and I have drifted away from each other, engrossed in our own races and I am now running with a small group of guys. In comparison, there's very little chat. The group stays in close proximity for several miles and whilst it's quiet, I appreciate having others nearby.

The daylight is beginning to fade as we approach Newbridge Mill on the outskirts of the Forest. I take the opportunity of having some firm ground beneath my feet to take my pack off, get my head torch out and set myself up for nighttime running. (I say night, it's almost the shortest day so darkness is descending on us in the middle of the afternoon...)

Whilst doing this, I pick up a message from Brian, my first crew, saying he is stuck in traffic on the M25 and as I am ahead of target (am I...?) he may not make it to our first rendezvous at Gills Lap, a mile or two away.

Whilst I'd not looked at the time, I'd guessed I was slightly ahead of my schedule as I was expecting it to be dark before I reached Forest Row, some three or four miles back.

I am so calm at this point that his message doesn't faze me. I message back asking him to meet me at the next crew location in High Hurstwood instead, five miles further on. As my fuelling is based on time not distance, I know I have enough food and water to see me through, and whilst I am still feeling good I am quite happy to keep the momentum going, keep moving and push on a little further.

Climbing up towards Gills Lap, I draw out every last lumen of daylight before darkness descends concealing the surrounding countryside from view (the views across the High Weald from Gills Lap in daylight are stunning). I reluctantly turn my head torch on.

Darkness.

With tonight being a new moon, this will be my only light for the next 16 hours.



Somewhere on the VGW! ©Pierre Papet

CREW LIFE

I see Brian at High Hurstwood. He's parked up alongside Stu, Spencer's crew. I stop only for a few moments, topping up my bottles, refilling my pockets with snacks and snaffling a couple of cold roast potatoes. I don't need much as I will see Brian again in ten miles and the first official checkpoint (CP) is only a few miles away.

My crew are a huge part of this story. I bow down to the 30 runners who started this race without one, reliant only on the four checkpoints for sustenance. I wonder if I could have done it. I know it would have been a very different race experience and result had I not had Brian, Nikki and Rel looking after my every whim.

They are here to look after me. They can meet me at up to 32 pre-designated locations throughout the race to supply me with food, drink, a change of clothes, extra kit, a place to sleep and perhaps most importantly support and encouragement.

The gaps between the checkpoints are big (at 49 miles, 92 miles, 137 miles and 184 miles). With a 96-hour final cut-off, this could easily translate into close to 24 hours between stops. For some, running crew-less is seen as adding to the challenge of the race, or even running it in its purity. For me, I want the security of support.

I guess it also means that the playing field is not level. Having someone cater to your every need every three to four hours does undeniably give you an advantage over someone who has to carry enough food, water and kit to last them for up to 24 hours between checkpoints.

Going into the race, my goal was to be competitive and I knew that to do so, crew was essential. I couldn't compete with the front runners if I wasn't running on the same playing field as them.

Brian was my first crew. He met me at High Hurstwood, somewhere late afternoon/early evening on day one and then crewed overnight and into Thursday morning when he handed over to Nikki. Nikki flew solo during day two before being joined on Thursday evening by Rel. The two of them saw me through to the finish. As an aside, Brian went on to crew another runner and mutual friend, Helen, on day three!

My crew are the unsung heroes of the race and I cannot thank the three of them enough for what they did for me.

Without them, the story would have had an entirely different ending.

After seeing Brian, the next ten miles pass by without event. I stop briefly at Check Point one at Blackboys, primarily to use the toilet and wash my hands, but as I am heading back out I am tempted by the smell of the vegetable soup on offer and eat two bowls of it whilst wandering around the village hall. I am too hyped to sit down for more than a few seconds!

There are perhaps eight to ten other runners in the CP. Some just briefly popping in like me and others look like they are camped out for a while. Kit bags spread out and full meals in front of them. We all have different race strategies.

When I leave, I am to all intents and purposes running alone. I cross paths with another runner every now and again but it's an all too brief flirtation. I quickly start to miss the friendly chatter of the early miles.

It must be early evening and I am starting to feel tired. With tiredness, comes the first flicker of uncertainty. I quietly celebrated reaching 50 miles as I left CP1, but in the same vein, I am *only* a quarter of the way through. When flipped on its head the task in front of me begins to feel unsurmountable.

I see Brian briefly at the Church in Chiddingley. More for support than supplies. The uncertainty in my mind flickers brighter because I know the path that is to come. I just want someone to tell me that I will be okay.

As I cross the churchyard I remember sheltering with Rel in the Church porch during a wet and windy nighttime run a few weeks back. I look up at the Church and say a quiet prayer of thanks that, although the ground is wet, it's not raining tonight like it was then. That night was cold, wet and at times, utterly miserable.

I traipse across the first of many fields between Chiddingley and Berwick, the next crew stop. It leads into a little copse of trees surrounding one of the small streams that crisscross the land. As it was six weeks ago, the stream has burst its banks and flooded almost the whole coppice. The path is submerged underwater and I need to paddle again. TF for waterproof socks!

(As an aside, when I ran the VGW FKT in the summer of 2021, this section was a boggy quagmire then, so I am not sure if it is ever dry!).

The swamp opens up into a large field, still overgrown with the remnants of the summer crop. The path, thick with mud, runs straight through the middle of the field. My poles, used for stability wading through the water, are now used to beat my way through the jungle. It's nearly as tall as I am. Coming from a farming family, I should probably know what the crop is (was). I don't. I just curse it as it tangles with my feet and slows me down.

I lose count of the number of fields I cross, stiles I climb over and puddles I splash through. It is a long slog to Berwick. I run any piece of ground that is firm enough and flat enough to do so, but these runnable patches feel few and far between.

When I hear the distant sound of a train I know I am close to Berwick Station. I smile for the first time in several miles. I am already so, so tired and now I can rest.

Brian has a bowl of tomato pasta ready for me. I tell him I need to sleep. I wasn't planning on sleeping for another 16 miles. I also wasn't expecting to feel quite this tired.

I can't keep my eyes open.

Brian tells me I can have ten minutes as I wrap myself in my coat, pull my sleeping bag over my head and snuggle down in the back of his van. I don't even take my shoes off as an all-too-brief sleep quickly descends.

THE WRONG WAY ALONG THE SOUTH DOWNS WAY



©Pierre Papet

Three miles further on, in an unusually silent Alfriston, I leave the VGW behind and turn right onto the South Downs Way.

Running eastwards, I know the second half of the SDW as well as I know the NDW. Running westward, it feels like a completely different trail. Downhills become uphill and uphill become downhill. Landmarks change their order and trees that are usually on my left are on my right.

The usual joyful scamper down into Alfriston becomes a leisurely climb out of town. My poles, now ever-present in my hands, tip-tap their way up the rocky hill. Despite running in this direction several times over the past few months, it still feels so very, very wrong!

Along the ridge at the top, I pause and look around me. I am high up and I can see for miles. Gazing upward, the sky is dark and the night is clear. Hundreds and thousands of stars sparkle above my head. I turn around in a circle taking it all in whilst marvelling at the peaceful tranquillity. There is not another soul in sight.

At this moment in time, it really is just me, myself and I in this big, wide world. I find this strangely alluring. I know it's not for everyone, but I quite enjoy the solitude of being by myself out on the trails at night.

Bo-Peep wasn't originally on my crew list, but Brian said he would park up there in case I need anything as I pass. As I approach, he hands me a strong, black and perfectly timed coffee. I didn't know I needed a caffeine hit until I started drinking!

I see him a few miles later at Firl Beacon for another caffeine fix. Neither stop is long, just brief interludes, as I am keen to push on to Housedean Farm in ten miles for a proper rest and hopefully some sleep.

The coffee has given me a boost and I feel quite spritely! I run past the iconic radio masts standing high on the hilltop, on my left and not my right, before starting the descent into Southease. It's much easier running down into Southease than the usual easterly climb out!

The next seven or so miles pass by quietly and in the dead of night, I remember very little bar the starry beauty of the nighttime sky.

Navigation is simple (even if it is backward!) with few opportunities for error. I don't have to think about where I am going, I don't even look at my watch. I know the path well, I just keep moving forward, occasionally glancing at the signs for affirmation that I am on the right path.

The wind picks up some speed as I run along the ridge between Southease and Housedean. The trees growing on the hillside lean to the east after years of fighting with easterly winds. I am heading west and straight into the strong gusts.

It's hard work. I have been running the flats and downs (those that aren't submerged under water or covered in mud that is...) whilst walking the hills. Battling against the full force of the wind I am now walking far more often. I reason that my walk is not much slower than my run but uses a lot less energy for a similar gain.

As my progress falters, my mind dips in correlation with my slowing pace. After the high of reaching the South Downs Way and the anticipation of a good stretch of uninterrupted running, struggling against the wind leaves me feeling frustrated because I can't move as quickly as I want to. We're on the SDW for 80-odd miles. I seriously hope that we're not grappling with wind the whole way.

With the wind and the slowing pace also comes a drop in temperature. I had the foresight to put on a pair of leggings over my shorts at Berwick, then added a lightweight fleece between my base layer and waterproof at Firl Beacon. Despite this, I'm now cold.

By the time I arrive at the Housedean Farm crew point, it's the early hours of the morning and I am weatherbeaten, frozen and practically asleep on my feet. I barely say a word to Brian as he helps me take my shoes and socks off and clamber into my sleeping bag. He sets an alarm for 30 minutes and settles into the front seat as I sprawl out across the bed in the back of the van and fall into a restless slumber.

3, 2, 1... Beeeeeeeep..... The sleep is all too short.

It takes me a long time to come to. I wake up in a daze. I have no idea where I am or what I am doing. I feel light-headed and slightly faint. I sit back down to try and calm the dizziness spinning around inside my head. I do not feel good. I lie down for another ten minutes.

Brian hands me some orange juice, coffee, a bowl of porridge and a banana. I have no idea of the time, other than it is still dark outside, but I asked for “breakfast” after sleeps!

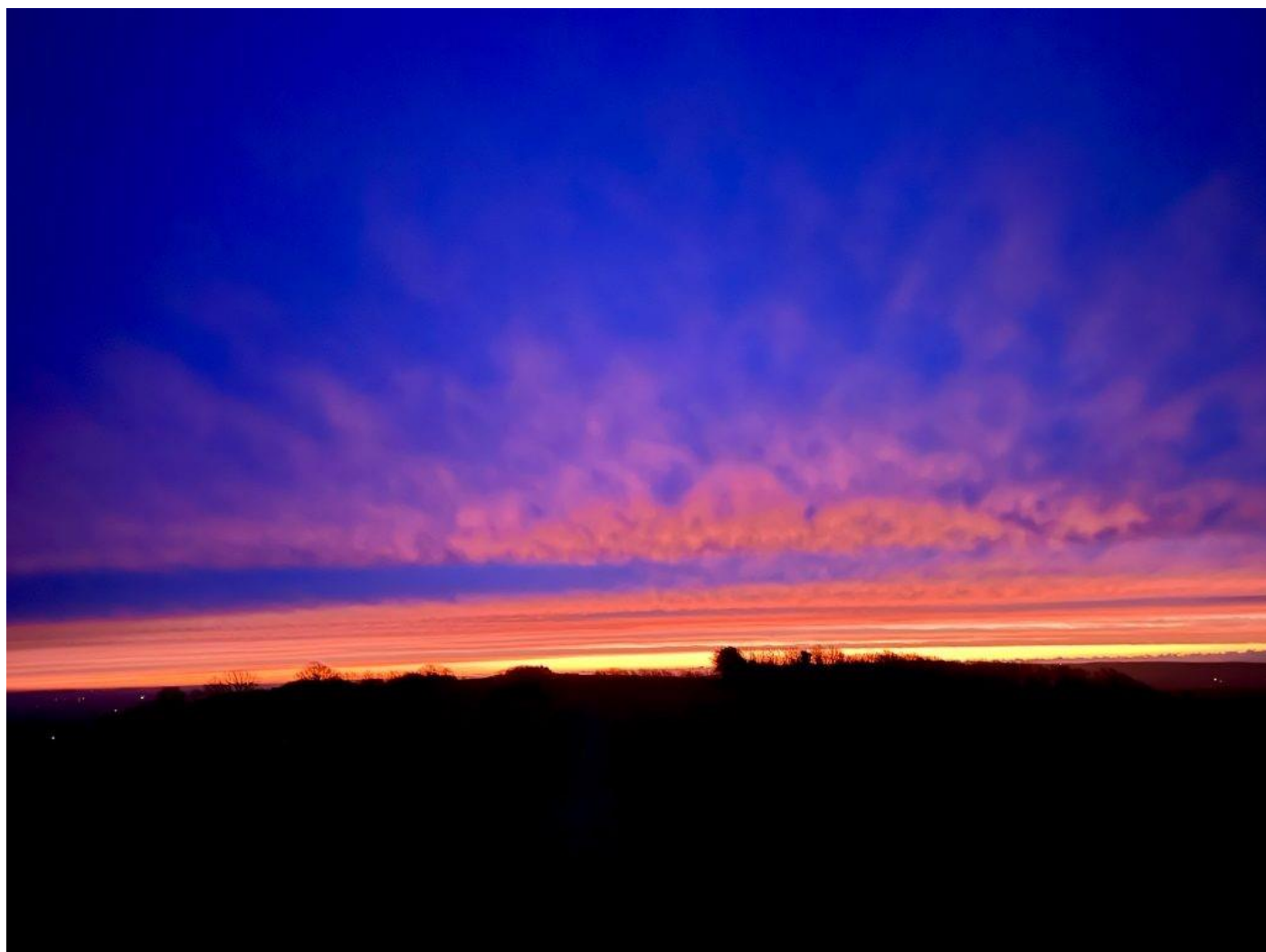
Eating is the last thing I want to do but I know I must. Bite by tiny bite I make my way through the porridge. However, the sweet orange juice goes down well and I wonder if the dizziness is down to low blood sugar.

After hours of battling the wind high up on the ridge, there is now a battle deep in my mind as I am aware that I am sitting for a lot longer than I had planned. Every minute I sit in the van is a minute I am not on the trail and I start getting anxious about wasted time. Brian reasons with me that I need to make sure that my body is okay before I head back out and I’ll admit, the dizzy spell scared me a little.

Along with “breakfast” I wash my face, clean my teeth and put in a fresh pair of contact lenses. Just like I would when I get up in the morning! I also put on a clean pair of socks, banishing the stink of the Vanguard Way mud to a plastic bag.

In the end, I didn’t take much longer than the two-hour break I had scheduled for Housedean Farm. It’s still dark as I leave, but as I climb the first hill, I see the smallest sliver of deep orange on the horizon behind me.

Daytime is imminent.



DAYBREAK, A NEW BEGINNING, AKA DAY TWO

The anticipation of seeing the sunrise from the top of the next hill is all the incentive I need to get moving.

As I chase daylight up the hill I feel my mood rising in tandem with the sun. Every few steps I glance over my shoulder at the riot of colours in the sky behind me. Oranges into pinks into purples. There is something quite magical about seeing colour come back into the world after so many hours of darkness.

I stop for a rare couple of photos, only the third time I've pulled my phone out of my pocket. As a photographer, I get overly excited by beautiful light and this morning's sunrise is perfection. I see a picture with every step I take and have to be very restrained. I could quite easily get distracted, lose several hours and end up way off course by chasing the perfect photo...



©Me

With a fortunate stroke of luck, as I approach the crew point at Ditchling Beacon, I spot Pierre, one of the official photographers in the distance. Looking around, I know the shot he is looking for – a runner coming up the hill, silhouetted by the sunrise.

I oblige, pose, he shoots, he scores!



©Pierre Papet

After my lightheadedness at Housedean, Brian has thrown in an extra crew stop in at Ditchling Beacon to make sure I am okay. When he sees me, I think he agrees that am a different person from the one he waved goodbye to an hour or so ago.

It's now light enough to turn the head torch off. It is such a joy to see more than a few metres of the path in front of me again. My mood is lighter, my movement is lighter. I'm moving better than I have done for many hours. The magic of daylight!

A little further on is the iconic pond at Ditchling. I get my shot!



Ditchling Beacon at Sunrise on day two ©Me!

It's a new day and I am moving well. Ditchling along to Clayton Windmills is pretty flat before descending through the golf club at Pyecombe. The ground is dry and firm. I run most of the way. It's rush hour on the A road at the bottom and annoyingly I have to wait several minutes for a gap in the traffic to cross!

As I start the next climb I strip off several layers, stuffing them into my pack as I go. After the coolness of the slow-moving night, the increased movement of the morning raises my temperature. And alongside it my mood.

Although an experienced nighttime runner, I still marvel at how much of a difference daylight and simply being able to see where I am going makes to my frame of mind. I also have the upcoming incentive of seeing Nikki for her first crew stop at Summer Down by Devil's Dyke. Whilst I have been running, all sorts of behind-the-scenes crew action and manoeuvring has been taking place to transfer my kit from Brian at Ditchling to Nikki at Devil's Dyke.

Summer Down wasn't originally on my crew point list. In the light of day, I planned to get my head down and run from Housedean to Boltophs without stopping. But as he did at Ditchling, Brian asked Nikki to drop in one stop early to check I was okay after my Housedean dizziness. This is one of the many, many reasons why having a crew is invaluable, their ability to change and flex plans around YOU the runner.

As I start the climb up to Devil's Dyke from Saddlescombe, I see Nikki in her bright red coat standing to the side of the path (An excellent clothing choice as it made her very easy to spot!). She hands me my flask of coffee. I have so much to tell her... But now is not the time for idle chat.

From the quietness of the nighttime miles, the Downs are now alive with people. Mostly dog walkers, with a few cyclists and a couple of runners. Smiling, I say a cheery good morning to everyone I pass as I run towards Truleigh Hill, aka checkpoint two.

Having had a couple of bonus crew stops over the past few miles, I decide not to stop. I am wide awake, feeling pretty good, and want to make the most of the daylight hours. And Nikki is only a mile further along the trail at Boltophs' Layby. Stopping at Truleigh feels superfluous.

Running DOWN Beeding Hill is joyful in comparison to the up of SDW50 and 100. As I run, I look out over the countryside in front of me, my eyes follow the path ahead to Chanctonbury Ring. I glance down and spot Nikki's distinctive red coat by the side of the road at the bottom of the hill. A small red dot and my target at every crew stop.



The glamour of a roadside crew stop at Boltophs. You can see the tiredness in my eyes.
©Nikki Javan

Whilst I am with Nikki, Sophie runs past me. I haven't seen her since sometime before Forest Row. We share a few quick words but she is keen to keep moving and I still have half a cup of coffee to drink.

I haven't been paying any attention to time, place or position but I now know that she is in front of me which means I have dropped down a place in the ladies' race. It plays on my mind. Although I don't actually know where any of the other ladies in the race are or where I am compared to them so I question what relevance this has. And would it make a difference if I knew?

I wave goodbye to Nikki and trot on. The next time I see her will be at mile 101 in Washington. I run over the River Adur crossing paths with the Downlink and round into Boltophs, the tiniest of tiny villages. If you can call it that; really it's just a small cluster of houses meandering deceptively upwards along a road.

I smell the iconic South Downs pigs before I see them, their unique stomach-churning whiff tumbles down the hill to greet me. On either side of the path, pigs are snuffling around in the dirt, mama pigs to the left, baby pigs to the right, all digging for scraps of food. With the piggy stench ingrained in the air, the climb drags on.

It's gentle enough to feel as if I should be running, but steep enough to make running feel hard. I *want* to run. I just can't run. Every time I try, my legs say no and grind to a halt. I grumble silently into the air in annoyance, frustrated that my body is not doing what I want it to.

My frustration grows as I watch the silhouettes of two tiny people run with grace and ease along the ridge at the top. Spencer and Sophie, I think. I am desperate to catch up with one or both of them, for the company as much as anything. But I just can't. No matter what I do, I just can't move fast enough. Doubt flickers across my mind, if I can't keep up with them now, how am I going to do this?

Comparison is the thief of joy.

I lose sight of the tiny people who were unknowingly pulling me along and although my feet are slowly climbing towards the top of Chanctonbury, my mood is spiralling in a ring downwards.

Chanctonbury Ring, an icon of the South Downs, is a ring of trees planted on the remains of a prehistoric hill fort. Legend has it that if you run around the clump of trees seven times anti-clockwise, you can summon up the devil.

I am pretty sure that one of the front runners did this.

As if my mood wasn't already low enough, it starts to rain. The easterly wind picks the raindrops up, whips them around and blows them straight into my face. It's bitter. It's cold. It stings. It isn't very nice. Gone are the glorious far-reaching views across the countryside and with them, gone is my earlier good mood.

As the hellish* (*I exaggerate...) conditions deteriorate, I start the slow descent down the hill towards Washington. The path is steep, rocky and uneven. The kind of slightly technical terrain I love and usually fly down with reckless abandonment.

But I don't dare to run as I can't get any grip on the slippery, wet rock. I couldn't run the uphill, I couldn't run the flat and now I can't run the downhill.

Fuming.

Washington. I see Nikki and burst into tears. The tears mingle with the raindrops. I sniffle, wallowing in my misery as Nikki sits me in the chair and hands me food I don't want to eat and drinks I don't want to drink.

I am halfway. I should be celebrating but I am deep in a little pity party for one and barely even acknowledge what I have already achieved, let alone celebrate. The enormity of what still lies ahead came crashing down that hill alongside me, hitting me at full force. All I can focus on is how far I have to go and how utterly miserable I feel right now.

I might be tired and miserable. I might be crying, but at no point do I think of doing anything other than getting up out of that chair and carrying on.

There is *no* other option.

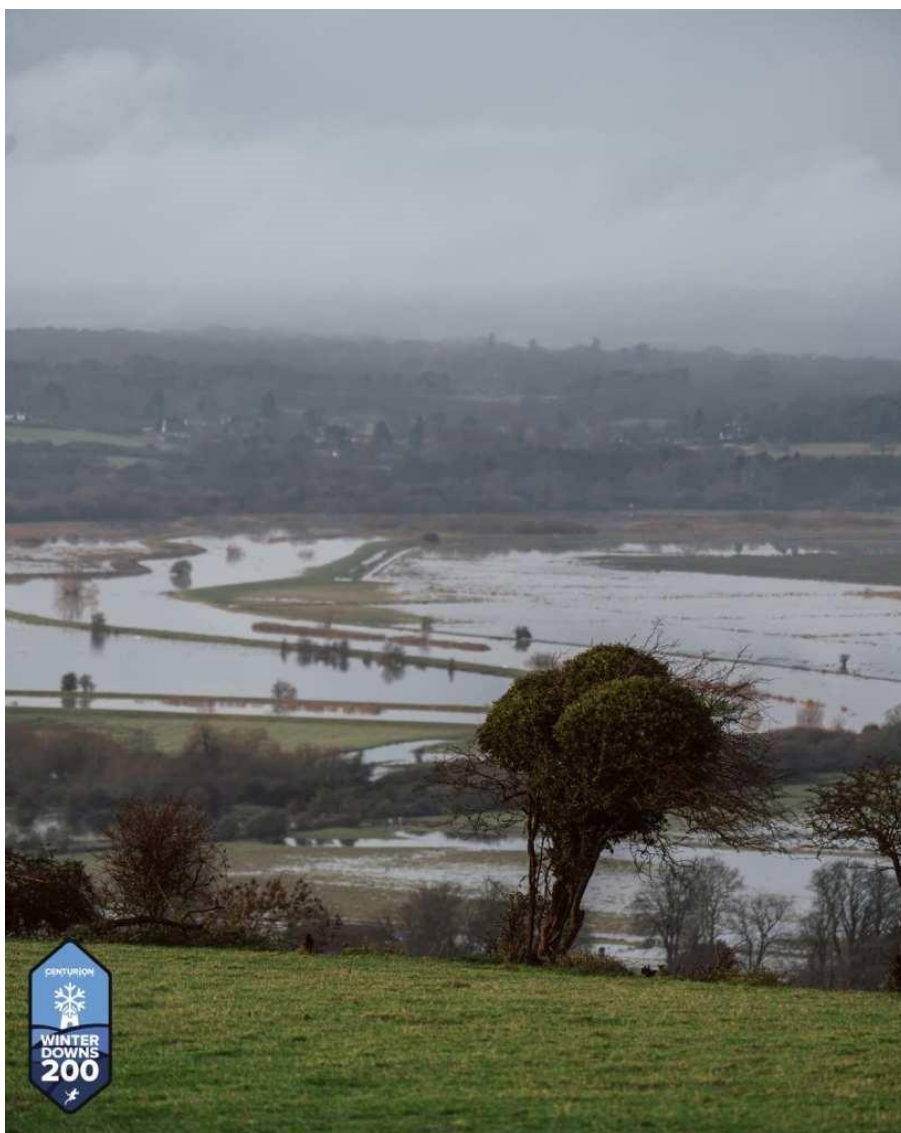
Ten, fifteen, twenty – I have no concept of time – minutes later Nikki bundles me back up and sends me on my way with words of encouragement from my Mum.

“Keep positive Ally. You CAN do it. Around halfway, now, and through your happy place. Listen to your crew (and your heart!) Xxx”

Perfectly timed words.

SUNSET

Several hours later and heading towards Amberley, the rain eases and the thick misty cloud begins to dissipate. The landscape so long hidden from view, comes back into focus.



Amberley ©Pierre Papet (he was there at the same time as I was)

It's like the stage light has been turned on and the stage curtain is being pulled up ahead of a performance. The sun's rays peep through the thinning cloud as it rises, lighting the surrounding countryside. The river, snaking its way along the valley floor, shimmers in the light and, like on the Vanguard Way, there are vast swaths of water on the valley floor where there is usually no water.

As I gaze around at the stage in front of me, the cloud above my head starts to melt away, rising upwards to meet with the disappearing rain clouds. I feel lighter and fresher. I take a few deep breaths and run down the hill into Amberley.

I cross the River Arun and skirt around the edge of flooded fields. By some miracle and with some ingenious groundwork by the farmers, the path itself is not flooded.



Looking back towards a flooded Amberley and the remnants of sunset at the end of day two ©Me

My legs have a second (third, fourth, fifth...?) wind. I don't know what's happened or what's changed, but I climb the hill on the other side of Amberley with renewed vigour. I feel GREAT!

Is it simply the ebb and flow of the race?

After the lowest of lows comes the highest of highs. Mirroring the hills I am running over.

The grey clouds lifted just in time for sunset. As with the sunrise this morning, I chase the sun's rays up the hill. This time I am not quite quick enough and the golden orb slips silently below the horizon just before I reach the top.

In comparison to the vivid hues of this morning's sky, this evening the colours are subdued and muted. A wash of pale pink and soft shades of purple lingers in the sky long after the sun has kissed the day goodbye.

Sunset moves into the blue of twilight and onto dusk. With rapidly fading light, I *just* make it to the Bignor Hill crew point before night falls and darkness smothers the South Downs. Nikki greets a different person to the one she waved off from Chantry Post several hours ago.

Bignor Hill to Cocking, my next crew stop, passes by without significant event. I'm cool, calm, collected and moving well. Running when I can, walking when I can't. The path winds around fields, through enclosed woods and forests. It's a sharp contrast to the wide-open spaces on the earlier sections around Firle Beacon, Ditchling Beacon and up to Chanctonbury Ring.

I see Nikki again at Cocking. I close my eyes for ten minutes in the car. Whether I sleep or not is debatable, but I hope the simple art of rest will be enough to refresh me ahead of a big, unsupported stretch. I won't be seeing Nikki again until Queen Elizabeth Country Park, around 11 miles away. No distance at all in the light of the day, but in the dark of night two...?

A HERD OF HORSES AND A PACK OF DOGS... AKA NIGHT TWO ON THE SDW

As nighttime deepens, times, distances and locations roll into one messy indistinguishable tangle. I have no recollection of what is where or in which order places come. The path that is usually so familiar to my feet starts to feel like a stranger beneath my toes.

As I move along the path (am I running or walking? I don't remember) I see the shadowy shape of a man standing to the side of the trail, partially hidden by a tree and wonder what anyone is doing out at this time of night. I'm by myself but it doesn't cross my mind to worry as I carry on, poles tip-tapping on the ground. As I get closer, he disappears, his shape melting into the darkness of the surrounding trees. I realise it was simply the flickering shadows cast by my head torch playing tricks on me.

I shake my head and carry on. Up ahead there is a herd of horses. I marvel at this not even questioning why there are horses on the South Downs Way in the middle of the night. There are hundreds of them all standing in an organised group to the side of the path. Big horses at the back, small horses at the front. They're nodding their heads in symmetry. I get closer and realise that it's just the leaves on the trees fluttering in the wind.

I shake my head again.

I see a building looming up ahead and try to work out where I might be. I don't remember any buildings on this section of the trail. It's huge with walls towering high up into the sky far beyond my line of sight. It looks derelict, abandoned. I'm always weirdly fascinated by old and abandoned buildings so as I pass, I swing my head torch to the left to get a better look.

There's nothing there, just trees swaying in the wind.

Before long the woods are teeming with animals. Herds of horses, packs of dogs. Cats, some so small they could sit in the palm of my hand. An elephant swings its trunk across the path in front of me as a mouse narrowly misses my feet.

My eyes are heavy. I stare widely ahead struggling to keep them open. Tip, tap, tip, tap. My poles are on autopilot, left, right, left, right, their tips scraping across the gravel path as they go.

I realise that none of this is real, my mind playing tricks on me. After 125 miles and however many hours, I'm hallucinating. My mind knows this but my eyes keep on seeing. Nothing stops the hallucinations. Every tree, every branch, every leaf, every stone comes to life in front of my eyes. I feel like I am running through a parallel universe.

Beneath my feet, the rocky path becomes a canvas of exquisitely intricate artwork. Fine pencil drawings of beautifully expressive faces. Hundreds of them swirling and merging into one. I marvel at their beauty and wish I could capture them for prosperity. I close my eyes now, several weeks later, and I still see these pictures.

On the map and in my mind, it is no distance at all between when I saw Nikki last at Cocking and when I see her next at Queen Elizabeth Country Park. In reality, it is hours. I keep moving. Right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10... We go again, but I cannot stop the hallucinations.

I'm tired, so tired.

My eyes droop, my eyelids flutter. I lean heavier and heavier on my poles. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7... I lose count.

Tip,

Tap,

Tip...

Tip....

Tip.....

Tippppp...

I stumble and my eyes fly open. I'd fallen asleep on my feet and momentarily lost concentration. A micro, not even a second in length, sleep. I feel a tiny whisper of fear creeping in. My mind, previously so strong, starts to waiver. I am walking along a secluded dirt track on the approach to QECP, completely alone, in the middle of the night (IRL it's only around 8pm). I am so tired I am falling asleep on my feet and seeing things that are not there.

I'm scared.

But I have no choice. I have to keep going. If I stop, I will sleep. With every step, the fear grabs hold of me a little tighter its arms encircling me and squeezing me like an unwanted hug. I am falling into a deeper and darker place and I am not sure I have ever been this scared. I am willing myself to the upcoming crew point. Knowing that Nikki and Rel are waiting for me is the only thing that keeps me moving.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10...

The path through QECP is far longer than I remember it to be. Made up of 1,400 acres of open-access woodland and downland, QECP forms part of the East Hampshire Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. And it is beautiful. Tall beach and coniferous trees interspersed with an enticing network of woodland trails reach high into the sky. On a different day, I would pause to take it all in.

Up ahead I see the twinkle of coloured fairy lights. This time, I am not hallucinating. Rel wears a garland of fairy lights around her neck. Worn, she tells me, so that I will always be able to find her. I have never been so glad to see a fairy. Real or otherwise.

I made it.

I barely say a word as I am wrapped in my coat and sleeping bag and ushered into the back seat of Nikki's car. Finally, I can sleep.

My eyes have only just closed when I am woken up and told I've had my 30 minutes sleep. I grumble and emerge from my cocoon, not unlike a grumpy teenager being told it's time to get up for school.

As I clamber out of the warm car and into the cold nighttime air, I feel light-headed and dizzy. Again. Just like at Housedean Farm, however many hours/days/weeks ago that was. I slump back against the car to try and calm my spinning head. It takes me several attempts and many minutes to stand up properly.

I have fallen well and truly into the deepest and darkest of holes and I remember very little about my time here. Whilst Nikki has been with me since Devils Dyke this morning, QECP is Rel's first crew point and I dread to think how I come across.

I am *not* at my best.

As well as light-headed, my stomach isn't happy and I am cold and can't stop shivering. Already in four layers, I swap my lightweight fleece for the heavier-weight one in my mandatory kit (and thus lightening the weight of my pack a little) and add my windproof jacket between the Primaloft and waterproof. All three hoods go up.

I am wearing more clothes than I have ever run in before.

I am handed a strong, sugary coffee and some oatmeal and encouraged to eat whilst Rel goes to battle with my socks. After however many miles, I want a fresh pair. Waterproof socks, whilst great at keeping feet dry, are an absolute pain to get off!

I know I have taken far longer at this crew point than I planned to, a bit like at Housedean. But, like back then, I needed the extra rest time. With the world spinning before my eyes, I could not have safely gone back out into the darkness of the night any sooner.

Eventually, my pack is put back on my back, I am handed my poles and ushered back onto the South Downs Way. I slowly walk 20 metres or so. Again, think of that teenager who doesn't want to go to school, before spotting Spencer emerging from Stu's van after a little sleep. We leave the crew point together and immediately my mood is lifted.

I'm not alone!

Spencer may not have known this at the time, but his company leaving QECP pulled me out of my deep hole. By the time we reach the top of Butter Hill – the highest point on the South Downs, I am a different person in a different race.

After nearly 100 miles solo, just the simple act of conversation with someone who understands helps change my head space. Spencer, I am sorry I then left you at the top of Butser Hill, but by the time we reached its summit, my god, I felt GOOD!



Spencer and I leaving QECP. © I have no idea where this photo came from!

BACK IN THE GAME!

I leave Spencer just past the summit of Butter Hill and push on with a smile. I'm feeling strong and am moving purposely and with intent again.

I ran this part of the trail only a few short weeks ago and so the route is fresh in my mind. I visualise the path ahead, mentally ticking off the key points as I pass them.

Sustainability Centre, aka CP3. I stop briefly, eat a small bowl of vegan lasagna, drink a cup of hot squash and lie on a bunk for 30 minutes trying to sleep. I promised Nikki as I left QECP that I would sleep at the CP. After the state I was in when I arrived at QE, I think she was more than a little worried about me. But she didn't see the new me ascend Butser Hill and in reality, I am now far too hyper to sleep. I spend 20 minutes lying – fully dressed – in silence, drifting in that nether region between wakefulness and sleep. I am sure that the simple act of rest, even without sleep, is beneficial, but I am eager to get going again. I rise before my alarm call, pop in a fresh pair of contact lenses and ready myself for venturing out into the dark of the night again.

This brief stop was my only real experience of the CPs. This wasn't necessarily intentional, but with the way my race panned out, the CPs didn't come at the times I needed or wanted them. And having a crew, in all honesty, I didn't need them.

However, the volunteers were on point. From the moment I walked in, anything I needed, they did. They helped me take my shoes off (no muddy shoes in CPs), brought me food, drink and anything I asked for. When it came to my non-nap, my bag was carried into a room for me and I was asked when I wanted a wake-up call. When I left, they helped me put my shoes back on (no easy task) and guided me back to the trail (it's surprising how disorientated an hour inside can make you).

We ran for hours, the volunteers volunteered for hours, and it is them who made our races possible. Thank you.



Snapped by Pierre whilst I was in CP3 ©Pierre Papet

Buoyed by food, rest and the brief company of like-minded souls, I'm happy. I think about that list of upcoming places again. Each becomes a goal, a target, something to aim for. I get there, I tick it off. Another mile, two, three. Another place, another landmark, another step closer to the finish.

Meon Springs with its artisan coffee van, sadly not open in the middle of the night.

Old Winchester Hill. One of the bigger climbs of this section. I'm not fazed. Poles out. 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10... I feel as if I am flying upwards. I always regret that the SDW doesn't go over quite the crest of the hill to take in the full 360 views of the surrounding countryside.

Across the **Meon Valley** where a tiny stream leading into the main river has burst its banks. In September, I ran along the dry riverbed as it was less obstructed than the path by its side. By November, the river and path had become one.

It is still one.

More knee-deep paddling. By now I am a pro at this and shining my head torch down, I simply wade straight into the fast-flowing water. Thank you waterproof socks.

Through the small village of **Exton** as dawn is breaking before crossing several fields to climb **Beacon Hill**. Just like yesterday at Ditchling Beacon, I chase sunrise up a hill. Unlike yesterday, it is not a spectacular riot of colour lighting up the morning sky. I still turn to watch and smile at the joy of seeing a new day begin.



Sunrise from Beaconhill on day three ©Me

8 am. I have now been running* (*hiking/walking/crawling) for 48 hours.

And finally, **Beaconhill Beeches**, Nikki, Rel (and Stu who's waiting for Spence) and breakfast! I think Nikki and Rel are somewhat surprised at i) how quickly I have arrived at the crew point; and ii) the change in me since they waved me off at QECP a few hours ago. I run towards them smiling and bouncing with energy (well, as much as it is possible to bounce after 48 hours and 145 miles...). I turn down the heated car seat, instead opting to sit in the camping chair outside the car. I tell them I am on a roll and I want to be quick!

I inhale a pot of porridge, drink some coffee, eat some chocolate, put in my lunch order for the next crew stop and am quickly off running down the road and towards the end of the SDW and the start of the Wayfarers Walk.

I run all the way.



Breakfast at Beaconhill Beaches on Friday, day three, morning

WAYFARERING TO ST SWITHUN, AKA DAY THREE

The next 32 miles to Farnham and the start of the NDW is the section I know least well. It is the only part that I didn't know before entering the race. However, I've run both the Wayfarers Walk (WW) and St Swithuns Way (SSW) twice over the last few months in preparation, most recently in November. Deliberately close to race day to keep them fresh in my mind.

The Wayfarers Walk in its entirety is a 70-mile long-distance walking path that winds through Berkshire and Hampshire. We are running just 15 or so of its middle miles. Although a minor trail compared to the NDW and SDW, it's well-marked and super easy to navigate. I barely need to glance at the map on my wrist.

The path crosses several fields, following a small trodden groove in the mud. A messy muddle of footprints showing me the way. I think about those runners ahead of me who've left their imprint on the ground and wonder how many pairs of feet have traversed this field in the past 12 hours.

I'd love to describe the next few hours in detail, but in all honesty, I remember very little of it. I cannot tell if many of my memories are from the race, or when I ran it in September or November. I suspect the latter. All my energy is going on keeping moving and staying awake.

In the light of the day, I am generally happy, content and moving well. Whilst submerged in a menagerie of animals in the dead of last night, I genuinely thought I was done with running and mentally prepared myself for a long, slow walk to the finish. My body surprises me with its strength and capabilities as I run most of this section. And I feel comfortable doing so. Don't get me wrong, I am not running fast, but I am running!

My one frustration is my constant need to pee. Every 20-30 minutes without fail. The stop-start nature of this disrupts the flow and rhythm of my run. Am I that hydrated? Have I drunk too much? Or is this some weird reaction my body is having after being awake and moving for 48+ hours? **(*as a side note, I wasn't the only person who complained about constantly needing to pee on day three so maybe it was some sort of bodily reaction?)**

I run through the National Trust property at Hinton Ampner, passing several dog walkers and young families. One gentleman stops me to curiously ask me what I am doing. I don't dare tell him the full story so simply say I'm running a race... He wishes me well as he turns to chase after his errant dog. After the loneliness of the nighttime miles, it's lovely to see and interact with other people.

Leaving the National Trust grounds I strip off several layers. The morning is warm. I realise we have been very lucky with the weather. Bitter cold rain coming into Washington aside, the mild conditions have been excellent for December. It's winter, it could have been so very different. Layers stowed in my pack, I then need to stop for another pee...

Through the small village of Cheriton and along the River Itchen. It's full, fast, and raging, but thankfully still fully contained within its banks! Up and around several more bare and barren winter fields and through a tiny woodland before I find myself standing in the middle of a golf course.

The path on the ground seemingly does not match the path on my watch. I turn in a circle, going backwards and forwards over the same 20 metres again and again. I'm tired and I struggle to orientate myself. I'm not sure where I came from and for a brief few moments I certainly have no idea where I am going. A dog walker seeing me staring aimlessly into thin air points me to a signpost and says "there".

Somewhere around the outskirts of New Alresford, the WW becomes the St Swithun's Way.

St Swithun's Way is a 34-mile long-distance walk from Winchester to Farnham named after Swithun, a 9th-century Bishop of Winchester. Made up of a combination of field paths and bridleways it roughly follows the Winchester to Farnham stretch of the Pilgrims' Way (although most of the original Pilgrim's Way route now lies under the adjacent A31).

The early road section of SSW is a welcome respite from the mud of the WW fields. I know I am close to the next crew stop. I am tired and I am ready for a break.

I run into the village hall car park at Bishop's Sutton. My huge puffa jacket (aka duvet coat) and chair are ready and waiting for me. My pack is taken off my back and my coat is draped over my shoulders as I slide gratefully into the chair.

Nikki hands me a McDonald's hash brown and my god, I have never tasted anything so good! Potato is one of my top jogging foods. Correction. Potato is one of my top foods, full stop. The greasy, salty potato-y goodness is absolutely delicious.

I follow the hash browns with a noodle chaser. As I left Beaconhill Beeches I'd requested instant noodles for lunch and have been thinking about them for the past ten miles. The noodles are topped off with coffee and some dark chocolate whilst my pack is refilled with a range of snacks for the next part of the journey.

I regularly struggle to eat in races. I get nauseous followed by an upset stomach. And once my stomach has 'gone', psychologically, I just don't want to eat.

This was the cause of my DNF at WW100 in 2021, and coming into the Winter Downs, food and fuelling had been one of my biggest concerns. I can just about blag the second half of a hundred on gels and coke, but I knew from the onset that I would need more than that for this race.

Whether it was the cooler temps (most of my issues have been during warm summer races) or the lower intensity, I had ZERO stomach issues.

And I ate SO much!

200 MILES OF SNACKS

I ate:

- Eight peanut butter and jam wraps. These were all eaten in the first 40 miles or so.
- Three Hot Cross Buns.
- Many (many) bananas.
- 5-6 Graze blueberry and peanut butter flapjacks.
- 4-5 Nakd Berry Bars
- 2-3 Soreen malt loafs
- 8 fruit and oat biscuits
- Several sachets of banana baby food (this is my fallback when I struggle to eat solids).
- A handful of gels (used only in emergencies and the very lowest of moments).
- Several mini dark chocolate bars.
- A handful of vegan jelly sweets.
- 6 pimped-up porridge pots... The further into the race it went, the more Nikki pimped them up... We had jam; jam with sugar; peanut butter; and the ultimate; peanut butter, jam AND sugar...!
- Two tomato cup-a-soups with bread.
- Three instant pasta (the kind you add boiling water to in a mug).
- Two packets of sun-dried tomato-flavoured couscous.
- Two packets of instant noodles (these took me back to my teenage years and were a BIG hit!)
- Two (three?) vegan sausage rolls.
- Many Hash browns and roast potatoes (Brian had precooked a load, stored them in his van's mini-fridge and reheated them when I wanted! Nikki, with no fridge, frequented McDonald's in the morning...!).
- Two bowls of soup at Blackboys CP1.
- Half a portion of vegan lasagna and a banana at Sustainability Centre CP3.
- A baked potato and beans at Farnham.
- Initially, I drank water and squash. I wanted to stay off of caffeine as long as possible. I succumbed to a coffee in the middle of night one and from then on I was on a caffeine drip...

- I carried one flask of water and one flask of squash. My squash flask switched to Coke during the second night. I found slowly sipping Coke helped a little with keeping me awake.
- Nikki didn't tell me until a few weeks later that as the race progressed they increased the amount of sugar in my coffees. I'm not sure if she was serious when she said it got up to seven sugars in each cup towards the end... She also owned up to putting extra sugars in my Coke when I was struggling with sleep demons. My poor teeth!
- I also drank several small cartons of orange juice, chocolate soy milk and a couple of hot chocolates.

Everything I ate and drank was vegan. I ate proper food at the crew points and then snacked every 40 minutes or so while running. Thanks to Garmin alerts I didn't have to remember to eat, my watch reminded me!

Anyway, all this talk of food is making me hungry! Back to the trail...

Bishops Sutton to Alton.

Eleven uneventful miles.

Run. Walk. Tip-Tap. Pee. Music. Mud. Eat. Repeat.



St Swithun's Way just outside Alton ©Pierre Papet

Fields, woods, tracks and trails. I bump into Pierre, the photographer, as I am wading through a foot of mud on the outskirts of Chawton. It's nice to chat for a while, it distracts me from the pain.

My feet are hurting. The pain radiates up into my lower shins. First the right, then the left, then both. Every step hurts. I worry that I've done something bad but with an unexpected rationale, I reason that injuries usually happen to one leg, not both at the same time.

Looking back, I blame the mud on the Vanguard Way. We had to work so hard to stay upright, engaging every little muscle around the foot and ankle to stay stable, and now, two days later they are letting me know that they are not happy about it. I wasn't the only runner to suffer from lower leg pain.

As the pain increases, my rollercoaster mood lowers. The crew point at Alton cannot come soon enough. I need a rest. And a painkiller.

Nikki and Rel are parked in a small car park outside the job centre. The glamorous life of an ultrarunner's crew! Rel has her camping stove out cooking me my requested noodles. It's mid-afternoon and the main road is busy. We giggle about what a sight the three of us must be to passing commuters!

I leave Alton with a new playlist playing in my ears and a smile on my face.

Fast forward several hours...

THE F*CKING HORSES CAN GET IN THE F*CKING BIN. AKA ST SWITHUN'S WAY

I tip-tap my way through the arts university in the foulest of moods unable to even notice, let alone appreciate, the sculptures lining the path. I turn away from the uni and onto the road towards Farnham town centre. In the Waitrose car park (because we're classy), I see Stu's van and Rel's colourful fairy lights.

I tip-tap towards the crew point spewing a torrent of explicit at anyone within earshot about how the f**king horse riders can get in the f**king bin.

The last 5 miles (felt like 50) have been horrendous. As the sky darkened mid-way between Alton and Farnham, the trail conditions deteriorated and so did my mood. And it had all started so brightly. I left Alton with Kisstory Classics in my ears, feeling refreshed, revitalised and ready to go.

The first few miles pass without incident. I watch the sun setting behind me and leave it as long as possible before turning on my head torch, enjoying the lingering light of dusk. I remember the path well. It's only a few weeks since I was last here. Then, in a blaze of autumn colours, it was a joy to run along.

Down country lanes and past village churches. Through farms, across and around fields. With names like Upper Froyle, there's a quintessentially British countryside feel in the air.

The further along the trail I traipse, the deeper the mud becomes and the deeper I sink back into my hole. Those quintessentially British farmers have had some fun churning up the fields, leaving small lakes* in the imprints of their tyres (*big puddles). The mud is draining, energy-sapping and never-ending.

The path merges with a shared bridle way and this is where I leave my patience behind. Horses have had a galloping party on the St Swithun's Way. Dancing along the path, leaving a cacophony of deep shoe imprints in the already treacherously deep mud. It makes the claggy ground even more rutted, rough, uneven and impossible to run on.

Partly impossible because of the foot, ankle and lower leg pain I'd first been aware of heading into Alton. Both sides, left and right. Pain radiates from the top of my foot up into my lower shins. Putting my feet up for ten minutes in Alton and taking a couple of paracetamol had masked the pain for a couple of hours. But as I get closer to Farnham and the ground becomes more perilous, the mask slips alongside my mood.

Every. Single. Step. Hurts.

Every lump, bump and uneven patch of ground exasperates the pain. I curse the horses that had churned up the path. I curse the riders of the horses for riding them along the path. I curse the path. For me, this is far worse than anything the Vanguard Way threw at us.

A sign telling me I am four miles from Farnham brings me to tears. How am I only eight miles from Alton? I've been on this path for HOURS. Alton's joyous daylight feels like another world away from these dark nighttime miles. Four miles. Four more miles of THIS.

Fuming. Absolutely fuming.

Already in a stupor, a sharp pain shoots through my right foot. I'm pretty sure it's a blister. In the dark and mud, there is little I can do about it. It fuels my anger further.

But it's that anger that keeps me moving. I'm stubborn. I refuse to be defeated. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10...

We go again.

And again.

And again.

Tip, slip, tap, slap...

And then I'm in Farnham, walking towards Fairy Rel's twinkling lights.

I want a sit-down.

I want a sleep.

I want to cry.

I just want to be done.

The explicit words fall out of my mouth like a waterfall. I don't care who hears. Those f**king horse riders can get in the f**king bin.

As I'm ranting, Nikki tells me they have a surprise for me...

Helen!

Now I cry.

Helen is one of my best friends, her parents live in Farnham. She's left her son with a babysitter, finished work and jumped on a train to come and see me. I don't think at the time I was able to express how much this meant to me.

Not only that, she's brought me a homegrown (by her Dad) baked potato, a pot of hot baked beans and vegan butter. My own personal Deliveroo! Baked potato and beans is one of my favourite meals and, oh my god, it tastes SO good!

Pretty quickly I forget about the horse riders and the bin.

I'm bundled into the warmth of the car. I eat potato and chat with Helen. James Warren (met at WW100 in 2021 and a Farnham local) sticks his head in the car door and tells me that I've done the worst bit. I cry about the mud. He tells me that the North Downs Way that I am heading towards is in a much better condition.

Nikki strips off my socks, cleans my feet and tapes my toes. The blisters have already burst.

I ask for ten minutes of quiet. I sit in the front seat, close my eyes and let my mind rest. I know that I need to pull myself out of this funk if I am to have any chance of finishing. Anger can only drive me so far. I'm in Farnham for an hour or so. Again, a lot longer than I'd planned. But sometimes, an unplanned break is what your body and mind needs.

Heading into my third night, I am deep in the unknown, pushing my body further than it has ever been pushed before. With all my careful pre-race planning, I could not plan for this.

Still somewhat disorientated and a little reluctant to leave the crew party, I'm ushered away. I wave goodbye and with a tip tap of my poles head off towards the NDW. Having sat down for a prolonged period, it takes me a few minutes to get all my limbs working again. Nothing seems coordinated. My legs don't want to work with my arms and my head is somewhere else altogether.

Somehow though, I'm composed enough to remember the left-right-left of the winding alleyway leading from Waitrose onto Castle Street. I emerge into the bustle of Farnham town centre. It's a Friday night two weeks before Christmas. It's busy.

I wonder what I look like tip-tapping my way along the road in three-day-old clothes, mud-splattered legs, three hoods, a buff pulled up over my face and a newly added beanie hat. I peep somewhat longingly through the windows of the fancy bars and restaurants gazing at the smiling people inside.

I draw my eyes away and back to the road. A few minutes later, I'm standing at the trailhead. The start of the NDW.

Next stop, Juniper Hall.



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IT'S NOT AN AXE MURDERER... AKA NORTH DOWNS WAY, PART II, NIGHT THREE

If only it was that easy.

James W (too many James') was right. This early section of the NDW is a joy. It's like another world. Gone is the mud. Gone is the rutted path and with the help of some paracetamol, gone is the pain.

And gone is my mood.

The NDW with all its memories is pulling me out of my hole. I feel lighter and more buoyed than I have done for many hours.

If the VGW is where I discovered trail running, the NDW is where I came of age. My ultra-running journey started here at the NDW50. I think back to that May day in 2017, as I innocently stood on the start line with no idea about how profoundly those 50 miles would impact my life.

With music in my ears, I'm now moving along at speed. When I say speed, it's all relative. I'm walking, but walking with intent and purpose. I trained to walk knowing that I wouldn't be able to run all 200 miles. I can walk fast and at this point in the race, I am walking as fast as I can run.

These first few miles of the NDW are easy going. Looking back, perhaps I should have run them but at the time I was quite content to still be moving. And more importantly, to be moving happy.

I'm trundling through the woods in my own little world, poles tip-tapping on the leafy carpet. Suddenly I am aware of a barking dog ahead of me. Loud and angry. Woof, woof WOOF! A bright light sweeps across me momentarily blinding me and I hear someone shout "Who are you, what are you doing".

"Running, I'm running..."

The person holding the light shines it on themselves illuminating their police uniform, the large, and slightly fierce-looking dog, still barking, strains at its lead in front of him.

Why am I running in the woods?

I'm in a race. There are lots of us.

Have I seen anything? They are on the trail of a burglar. They found the stolen goods discarded nearby and the dog is on his scent. He's not gone far...

No, nothing.

I ask if am I safe to carry on. The police officer replies it's a burglar they're chasing, not an axe murderer.

Not helpful Mr Policeman, not helpful. And no, definitely not a hallucination...

I continue, with my music off and all senses on high alert. If anything, the potential of an axe murderer in the woods makes me move even faster. Soon I am on the road leading to Farnham Golf Club.

The tip-tap of my poles on the tarmac is now the only sound in an otherwise quiet night. I round a corner to see two shadowy figures and another dog walking towards me. I hold my breath as one of the shapes speaks... It's James and Annabel (and Bailey the dog) from Striders of Croydon, my running club!

They'd been tracking the race online and decided to spend their Friday night hunting down me and Debra (another Strider running) to cheer us on! I am dazed, somewhat confused, on the lookout for an axe murderer and probably don't make a lot of sense but this small gesture and brief conversation gives me such a boost.

I'm blown away by the support I receive during the race, not just from my crew but from other people who either popped out to cheer me on or sent messages via Brian, Nikki and Rel. Almost every time I see them, they send me on my way with words of encouragement from friends and family. Knowing people had my back was one of the motivations for keeping me going.

Still smiling, I turn off the road and back onto the trail.

And here we go again.

I've become somewhat blasé about flooded paths and this time, despite my tiredness I just splash straight through. This is by far the worst of the lot. It's deep, only just below my knee line. It's also filthy. At Exton, the water was clear and fast-flowing. I could see where I was going. Here it is murky, muddy, full of debris and stagnant.

TF, once again, for waterproof socks!

In my mind, Puttenham isn't far from Farnham. An hour maximum. And yes, on fresh legs when starting a run in Farnham, Puttenham may only be an hour or so away. My legs are not fresh. I did not start my run in Farnham. It is dark and I am tired. It starts to feel like I will never make it to Puttenham. Every time I think the trail is about to pop out onto The Street (fantastic road name!) it disappoints me and turns instead onto another woodland path I had forgotten about.

When I **finally** make it, Nikki is curled up in the driver's seat trying to get some sleep. I feel guilty. She and Rel are crewing me throughout another night. I'm not sleeping because I am running. They are not sleeping because they are looking after me.

Rel ushers me into the passenger seat with a coffee and as she makes me a pasta pot, she reminds me to do my Spanish Duolingo lesson. I have a 690-day learning streak and I am determined not to lose it. My crew are under strict instructions to remind me every day to do my Spanish lesson. It is 23:50, just in time... Somehow, even with impaired cognitive ability I manage to complete the five-minute lesson!

I stop briefly at the Puttenham checkpoint. I don't need anything but the draw of a proper toilet rather than a bush and the opportunity to wash my hands is strong. I'm there for less than five minutes. Just enough time to freshen up and have a quick chat with the volunteers before I head back onto the trail.

WE WENT TO THE BAR FOR A SAMBUCA

My eyes, heavy with fatigue, flicker and my vision narrows. Tiredness engulfs me wrapping me in a comforting blanket. I'm getting dragged into a deeper and deeper stupor.

I shake my head trying to rouse myself from the slumber. In a half-awake, half-asleep state I stumble haphazardly along the path. It keeps narrowing and disappearing into a mesmerising kaleidoscopic tunnel of patterns and shapes. I can't work out where I am or where I am going.

I turn the volume of my music up in an attempt to drown out the noise of the hallucinations and start singing at the top of my voice to try and force myself awake. Apologies to anyone who may have heard my out-of-tune tones somewhere between Puttenham and Guildford.

(As an aside, I am listening to Kiss Garage Classics. Sambuca is now forever ingrained in my mind. Hearing it recently, I was transported back to this moment in the race... **"When I saw you girl from**

across the room, You had your eyes on me, I had my eyes on you, We went to the bar for a sambuca, You gave me your number and you took my number”)

The menagerie of animals, last seen in QECP, swarm in to join the NDW dance party. They close in on me. Shaking and nodding their leaf-shaped heads in time to the music. Cats, dogs, horses and animals I don't recognise.

I look back now with humour, but in reality, I don't have adequate words to describe the fear that I felt during those miles. I remember so little of the path that I have absolutely no idea how I made it to Newlands Corner.

But somehow I did.

And there are Nikki and Rel. Ready and waiting.

Nikki peels off my pack to replenish drinks and snacks whilst bundling me into the car with a bowl of couscous and the now standard hot sugary coffee.

I am so tired the hole has once again ensnared me.

I fall deeper down when I am told that the fourth lady has been gaining on me. From a few hours advantage earlier in the day, Nikki estimates that the gap is now down to 40 minutes. She tells me in her sternest mother voice that I have to get up, get back out there and keep moving.

I cry.

Again.

There have been more tears in this one race than I think I have shed all year.

I need sleep. It's all I can think of.

I know that there are less than 15 miles to go. I know that fourth lady is gaining on me. But tired doesn't come close to how exhausted I am. I worry that without sleep, I won't make it back to Juniper Hall.

I plead.

Nikki and Rel relent and I'm told I can have a few minutes. The car door is shut on me. I lay my head back on the warmth of the heated seat, pull my coat around me and close my eyes.

Two minutes, five minutes, ten minutes, an hour... I have no concept of time and no idea how long I have been asleep when the car door opens and I am told it's time to move.

But something happened during those fleeting minutes of sleep.

Something changed.

I feel refreshed.

I got into the car feeling despondent. I climb back out with hope.

My one big unknown going into the race was sleep. How would I manage sleep and could I cope with limited rest?

Right at the end of the race, a learning. I felt better after this spontaneous and brief, sitting-up, nap than I did after either of my planned and proper lying-down sleeps (at Housedean and QECP). A 10-minute power nap refreshed me as much as a 30-minute sleep. And more importantly, it didn't leave me feeling faint and dizzy.

I get up and with a renewed vigour, the pack goes straight back on. Gloves on, hoods (plural) up. I'm handed my poles. I switch up my playlist and the earbuds go back in.

Volume up.

Let's go!

I tip-tap my way across the road. Razor focus. Keep moving. Do not get caught. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12... ...95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100. We go again. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12...

And again.

And again.

I glance down at the map on my wrist. I never realised quite how straight this section of the NDW is. I don't even need to think, just move. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12...

My feet and ankles are in agony with every step sending pain shooting up my legs. Despite this, I move with a determination that I didn't know I processed. I block the pain out. It hurts if I move fast, it hurts if I move slow, so I might as well move fast. I'm singing to my music again, but this time with joy.

Mist rolls down the slope towards me, silently creeping between the trees. It swirls around, encircling me in its haze. In the glare of my head torch visibility is reduced to mere metres. Shadowy trees looming large in the distance suddenly come into focus as I move towards them.

The surreal atmosphere is heightened by the mess of ongoing forestry work around Ranmore Common. Trees have been felled, logs piled up and branches left scattered on the ground. The removal of so many of the native beech and oak trees is changing the topography and landscape of the area.

In the dark, the path is hard to find in amongst the disarray. Signs are few and far between. It's almost as if they have been cut down alongside the trees. I question every twist and every turn. Despite running this section only a few weeks ago, I recognise none of it. Nothing.

I see the flicker of light between the trees 20, 30 metres to my left. A head torch. I crossed paths with two other runners just after Newlands Corner. I thought they were in front of me, why is there a light over there?

Have I gone wrong?

Have they gone wrong?

Where is the path? I peer at the map on my watch, it looks right... but what if it isn't...?

I turn around and retrace my footsteps 200m back to the last sign I saw.

It points down the path I was on.

I retrace my steps, again, climbing over a fallen tree blocking the path for the third time. I need to trust my instinct, it has not let me down yet.

I power on knowing I am not far from the last crew stop. Emerging onto misty Denbies Hillside I can hardly see the path in front of me, let alone the view over Dorking to my right or my crew to my left.

But there they are. One final time, ready and waiting.

THE FINAL FIVE

I am handed a coffee and am told I don't need to worry. Fourth lady stopped for several hours at St Martha's, the crew stop I skipped just before Newlands Corner, and is now a couple of hours behind me.

I take a deep breath in and slowly let it out, calming my mind. There are five miles to go. All I need to do now is keep moving.

A crew who understands you and knows what to say and when is invaluable. My crew knew that I didn't want race information whilst I was running.

I race blind. I hide the data screens on my watch. Anything to do with time, distance or pace is gone. The only information I look at is the map for navigation and my heart rate. My only indication of time during the race came from sunrise, sunset and the occasional glance at a Church clock as I ran past.

I wanted to be competitive, but I find that it is all too easy to become a slave to numbers; pace, distance and position or to obsess over how fast or slow I am going, and this isn't always a positive thing. It often becomes the opposite and can negatively impact my race.

I also don't want to be told how I am doing, what position I am in or what anyone around me is doing. I can only control my race. I can't control what anyone else is doing.

The caveat is, that I want to be told "race-changing" information. How do you define race changing? Chasing a cut-off is race-changing. Fourth lady gaining on me with 15 miles to go is race-changing!

Brian could have told me at Housedean Farm that Sophie overtook me whilst I was sleeping (I then overtook her whilst she was sleeping before she overtook me again!). He didn't (for which I am thankful), because at that point in the race, not even halfway, it had little to no relevance.

Whereas this did and I could do something about it.

To be told that I was at risk of losing a podium finish put a fire in my belly and got me moving quicker than I thought I was capable of 190+ miles into the race. Even with a minor detour in the woods, I made it six miles to Denbies Hillside in less than two hours, faster than I had moved for many hours! I literally flew through those woods.

In what must be my quickest crew stop since the Vanguard Way I gulp down a coffee laced with sugar whilst standing outside Nikki's car. I have no time for sitting, I have a race to finish!

Within minutes I am back out on the trail. I no longer need to glance at the map on my wrist, I know exactly where I am going.

Adrenaline pumping, I feel my heart beat faster as I tip-tap my way through Denbies' Vineyard. Whilst the surrounding woodland is no longer alive with a host of braying animals, my mind plays other games with me as the path feels far longer than I remember. Along the superfluous and never-ending A24, over the River Mole and then, there I am, standing at the foot of Box Hill.

I pause and look up.

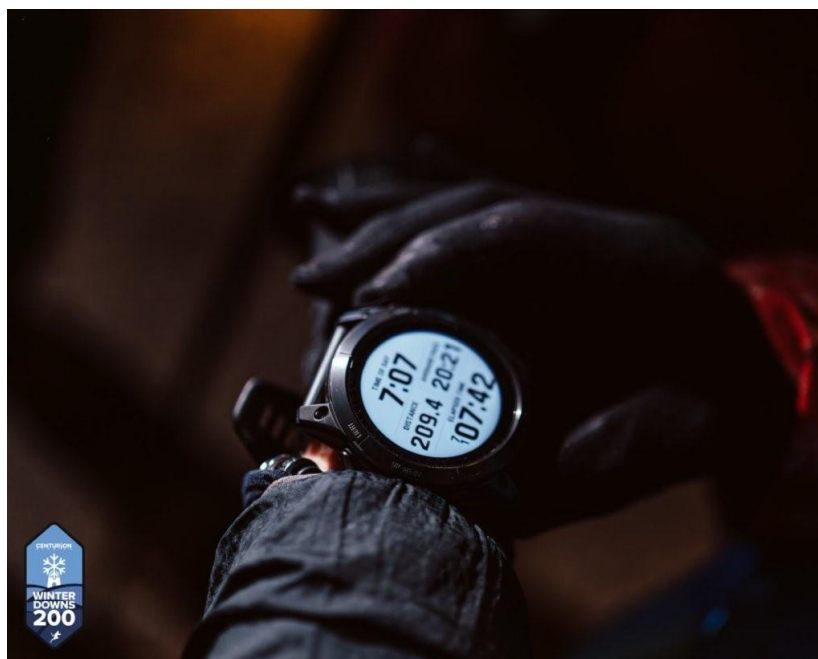
There is just one 300-foot climb between me and the finish line.



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A RAMBLE OF POST-RACE THOUGHTS...

- 204 miles
- 71 hours, 7 minutes, 43 seconds
- 3rd female
- 16th overall
- 48 hours of darkness
- 60 hours of running alone
- 3X c.30-minute sleeps
- 4X 5-10 minute power naps
- Several micro trail naps...
- And approximately 20,000 coffees...



@Pierre Papet (my watch froze trying to save the run, Pierre snapped it as a record for me, thankfully it came back to life and can be seen in its entirety on Strava!)

It's now more than two months since I crossed the finish line and this has taken me far longer to write than I expected. In some ways, it feels like it's ended up a slightly chaotic and disorganised avalanche of words. I mean, how do you condense something like running 200 miles into a tangible read?

200 freaking miles!

My buckle sits on the shelf by my desk where I can see it every day. I still sometimes have to look at it to remind myself that I did that. I look back in awe at how strong my body was to carry me such a distance, and perhaps more importantly, how strong my mind was too.



©Pierre Papet

I said at the beginning of my story that I went into the race 100% confident that I was going to finish. Even through the lowest of moments, that confidence never wavered.

There were some incredibly low moments, but a bit like the hills, after the lowest of the lows came the highest of highs. I **always** came out the other side.

After crashing at Housedean, I saw the most amazing of sunrises on the South Downs. This was my favourite moment of the whole race.

After the tears at Washington, I saw the mist lift (physically and metaphorically) and the sunset at Amberley.

After night two's hallucinations leading into QECP, I shared a few miles on the other side with Spencer.

After the horses and the bin on the St Swithun's Way, came Helen and the North Downs Way.

After arriving at Newlands Corner feeling defeated, I left with a fire in my belly.

For me, this race was as much a test of mental strength as physical. I knew that my body could cope with the distance. I didn't know if my mind could. As someone who likes to be tucked up in bed by 9 pm, how

would I cope with the lack of sleep? How would I deal with the hour upon hour of darkness? Loneliness, solitude, the cold...?

It was tough being out there for so long. 72 hours. 48 of them in darkness. 60+ of them alone. In the dead of night, there is no escaping your thoughts. And when you're ambitious and have goals for the race, those thoughts – both the good and the bad – can become all-consuming.

As always, pre-race I kept my cards close to my chest. Very few people knew my goal.

Firstly, as always, I wanted to run my best and to finish. That goes without saying. But I also wanted to be competitive, I knew I could be. I wanted to podium, I knew I was capable. I wanted to finish on Friday night in 60-64 hours. I'm disappointed I didn't. (I still think that this is within my capabilities, but no, I am not trying again!).

These 'wants' were not frivolous 'wants'. These 'wants' are what I trained for.

When I realised that I was going to have to run through a third night and miss my time goal, I cried. After the sleep demons of night two, I was very, very scared about what might happen during night three.

I cried more tears over those 200 miles than I had done for the previous 200 days. As someone who struggles to express their emotions, put me on a trail and suddenly they all come flooding out. I put everything, and I mean EVERYTHING into this race. The tears show just how much completing it meant to me.

In the cool light of day, some of my disappointment with my finish time dissipated. Right from the first finishers through the field, times were slower than expected. The conditions on the Vanguard Way did it. The mud was draining and energy zapping and I don't think anyone ever quite recovered from it.

Can I just blame the Vanguard Way though? I wonder if things may have turned out differently if I hadn't run blind. If I had looked at the time during the race?

I had three times as much elapsed time as Laura and Sophie, the first and second ladies (ie I spent three times as long *not* running as they did).

Would I have had less elapsed time had I been checking my watch?

Or, if was obsessing over time, would I have rushed my rests to a detrimental effect?

Maybe.

Whilst I know that at a couple of crew stops I took slightly longer than I needed, overall I chose a more holistic approach. I listened to my body. When it needed a rest, I gave it a rest. When it was feeling good – at Beaconhill Beaches for example – I rested less.

I planned to stop for an hour at QECP. After feeling dizzy and faint, I stopped for over two. Had I realised this at the time, would I have pushed myself to get moving when my body wasn't ready?

Would this have impacted the next section though to Beaconhill Beaches when I felt strong and moved well?

Could less rest have made my overall race time longer?

Sleep was the big unknown and I had to learn what worked and didn't work for me in real-time during the race. Big sleeps didn't work. They left me feeling faint and dizzy. However, 10-minute power naps in the front of the car did work. Another time, maybe more frequent shorter naps might keep me feeling refreshed for longer.

Whilst a small part of me is slightly disappointed that I didn't hit my own arbitrary time goal, I in all honesty cannot be disappointed with my overall race.

My training and hard work paid off. I ran/hiked strongly throughout and was still moving well at the end. Except for swollen feet and ankles (I'm blaming the VGW again...), I had very little muscle soreness. Glutes, quads, hamstrings, all fine. Surely a testament to my increased focus on strength training. My body was the strongest it had ever been, and it showed.

200 miles. OMG. What else can I say?

There is still so much I still haven't written about. I close my eyes and I see things, remember things, hear things and am transported back to that trail. I wish I could capture every essence of the race so that I never forget any of it. I mainly write for my own memories. If anyone reading made it this far, then thank you.

I freaking ran 200 miles. Even my mind is blown at the absolute absurdity of it!



Look at that tiredness in my face! ©Pierre Papet

THANK YOU

To Centurion for dreaming the dream and turning it into reality. You made this race for me and, as always, it was superb. Forever grateful that I had the opportunity to run the inaugural event.

To the volunteers who gave up their time so that we could do this crazy thing and jog 200 miles around the South East of England in the middle of December... forever indebted to your kindness and willingness to support.

To Brian, Nikki and Rel. Simply put, I could not have done this without you and a simple thank you is not a strong enough gratitude. Ultra running really is a team sport.



Just missing Brian! With Nikki and Rel at the finish line ©Pierre Papet

AN ADDENDUM (BECAUSE I DIDN'T KNOW WHERE ELSE TO PUT IT...!): WHAT KIT I USED and WORE

The WD200 mandatory kit list was extensive, as it needed to be for a winter race of this magnitude. My fully loaded pack weighed in at around 5kg, just under 10% of my body weight.

I'm always fascinated by what people wear and use in races and many of my purchases have been influenced by the recommendations of others.

I have been running for many years but in all honestly, I have never given much thought to winter kit. Living in the South East, conditions are rarely bad – even on the trails. I throw on an extra layer, wear two pairs of gloves and deal with it.

But after a couple of horrible runs during Surrey's pathetic excuse of a snowstorm last winter, my hands and feet got so cold I could barely move them, I knew I needed to carefully consider my kit for Winter Downs. I worried that if conditions were bad, my current kit could scupper my race.

Control the controllable.

After years of making do with low-cost alternatives (I'm a jogger on a budget), this was the time to invest in quality gear that would i) see me through the Winter Downs and ii) last me. I admit it, as a result, I have become a bit of a Montane w*nker. I like their kit. It does the job, it fits, it looks good and it is super comfortable.

So, my standout pieces of kit that I used during the race...

FEET | HOKA SPEEDGOAT 5

With mixed terrain, this was one of those races where there was no one perfect shoe for all 200 miles. With the Hoka Speedgoat, I opted for comfort and sacrificed a little on the grip. They performed way above my expectations in the mud and were comfortable throughout. 100% happy with my shoe choice.

FEET | GECKOWEAR KNEE-HIGH WATERPROOF SOCKS

I've already sung their praises!

PACK | MONTANE GECKO 20 LITRE

I love, love, LOVE this pack. It's been my pack of choice for the past 12 months or so. It just works. It fits perfectly, is super comfortable and carries everything I need for day-long adventures. I love the easily accessible pockets (which means my snacks are always on hand!).

I opted to use the 20-litre bag for WD200 when I thought I might need to be carrying more spare clothing, in hindsight, as much as I love this bag, I wish I'd used a smaller size. With having crew, I did not need 20 litres. 15, or even 12, would have been plenty.

BODY | MONTANE SPINE WATERPROOF JACKET

I upgraded from the lite version and this jacket is superb. Although it only rained for a short while during the race, I have used it in hours and hours of torrential rain and have stayed bone dry. After putting it on 14 or so miles in, I didn't take it off again. I kept it on as a warm layer.

I also had Montane waterproof trousers as part of my mandy kit. I didn't expect to use them and I didn't.

BODY | MONTANE FIREBALL LITE PRIMALOFT INSULATED JACKET

This was a treat to myself and I am in love with it. So much prefer it to a down jacket for warmth and versatility. I wore it during the nights and it kept me lovely and toasty!

BODY | MONTANE WOMEN'S PROTIUM HOODED FLEECE JACKET and MONTANE WOMEN'S PROTIUM LITE HOODED PULL-ON FLEECE

The Protium hooded fleece jacket was part of my mandatory kit. Unlike the emergency base layers, we could use and wear this. I wore the Protium Lite fleece during night one and then switched to the heavier fleece for nights two and three.

By night three I was wearing a Merino base, the Protium hooded fleece jacket, the Montane Fireball Primaloft, a cheap DHB windproof layer AND the Montane Spine Waterproof.

I had all three hoods up plus a buff and a beanie hat!

HANDS | MONTANE PRISM DRY LINE WATERPROOF MITTS

How many times can I say game-changer? Like waterproof socks, proper winter, waterproof mitts were an absolute game changer. As someone who suffers from poor circulation and has finished many a winter run with no feeling in her fingers and toes, hands and feet were one of my big worries. If my hands get cold, I lose dexterity and I can't do things. If I can't use my hands, simple tasks like eating and drinking become harder because I can't open a packet or grip a bottle.

Montane Prism Mitts are NOT cheap but they are worth every single penny. My hands were the warmest they have ever been. With a pair of liner gloves underneath, at times my hands were so hot I had to take the mitts off!

I will never again skimp on gloves. And hopefully, now I have these, I will never again suffer from cold hands when jogging!

LEDLENSER MH10 HEADTORCH

Worn for 48 of the 71 hours this is a brilliant head torch. Super bright with a long battery life. I carried two torches (thanks Brian for the loan of the second!) with a battery charger in the crew car. Whenever I saw my crew at night, they would pop a new battery in. I put it on at sunset and took it off at sunrise and didn't have to think about it between the two.

I think this really is the end now...



Sunrise on day two at Ditchling Beacon. My favourite moment of the race! ©Pierre Papet

THE WINTER DOWNS 200 (by Debra Bourne)

I've been '200-miler curious' for a little while, so when Centurion announced the inaugural Winter Downs 200, much of it on familiar trails, I found myself signing up. That was in May, with seemingly plenty of time for training and recces. Starting and finishing at Juniper Hall, Dorking, the course would take us in a huge loop: east on the North Downs Way (NDW), south on the Vanguard Way (VGW), west on the South Downs Way (SDW), then northeast on the Wayfarer's Walk (WW) and St Swithun's Way (SSW), to Farnham, with the last 25 miles back on the NDW.

My initial aim was to cover 70 miles a day each of the first two days and finish in about 3 days. However, as the summer and autumn passed, I found that work was taking a lot of my time and energy; regaining the fitness I'd lost due to a bout of COVID in 2022 was taking longer than expected; and I knew that I wasn't great with no sleep. Somehow, weekend days available for recce runs slipped away with other commitments, and in the end I managed to remind myself of the NDW, recce the Vanguard Way and the start of the SDW twice, and cover the last bit of the SDW and the WW and SSW, but the weekend I was going to do the remaining 60 miles on the SDW I desperately needed a rest weekend, so those two recces didn't happen.

My revised plan was to cover 60 miles a day on each of the first three days, reaching Farnham on Saturday morning with 25 familiar miles to go, and finish within 3 and a half days. Plan B was to finish by Saturday midnight; plan C, as always, was to finish.

My wonderfully supportive husband, Aidan, took me to Dorking on the Tuesday evening for kit check, and I stayed at Juniper Hall overnight to avoid any last-minute travel problems. Race morning, with all the other runners gathering outside the hall, I found the bottom of my pack soaking wet. By the time I'd dug down and sorted out the leaking water bottle, James was starting the final countdown. I hurriedly poked at my watch to select the course – it was still loading when he reached "1", and I hadn't started the timer yet.

Day 1: NDW & VGW

It was mild for the time of year and although it rained on and off, sometimes heavy enough to make stopping and donning coats worthwhile, it was never torrential.



[Colley Hill on the NDW - ©Pierre Papet]

I ran for much of the day with Alan, who lived in the north and had not managed to recce much of the route, so I enjoyed a bit of playing native guide. Up and down the hills from Box Hill to Caterham, then less rugged slopes.

The NDW got pretty muddy in places, but I stayed on my feet until a small stone or root tipped me straight forward, emerging with muddy thighs and forearms but no injuries. Onto the section where the NDW and VGW run together, past the recessed plaque noting the Greenwich Meridian, then south on the VGW. A

brief pause at Limpsfield Chart (an official crew stop) where Nick Fiander met me to restock food and water and sip some hot tea.

I normally love running on the Vanguard Way, but I'm more used to it dry and cracked in summer. Recent recces had prepared me for the mud, in all varieties from sticky to slippery. Long sections were so treacherous that running was impossible; my poles really helped with balance. Muddy paths, muddy woods, muddy fields, periodic stretches of road.

Then the unexpected: where on my recces there had been two rather wet meadows with a bridge between them, instead there was a field-wide slowly-moving river with a bridge in the middle. My heart sank. Looking left and right there was no possibility of going round, so we shrugged philosophically and set off wading towards the bridge, Alan first, using his poles to check the ground ahead; I followed, very glad of my knee-high socks. The water got deeper, reaching to and then past my knees, and a few inches deeper still just before the bridge, where I was very glad for Alan's helping hand up. Back down into the second half of the river-field, very glad we had reached this still in daylight. I reassured Alan (and myself) that underfoot conditions would mostly be better once we reached the SDW – except for a stream section, and the muddy forestry trail before Alton... I decided not to tell him about those – time enough to worry about them later..



[Looking back over the river – the bridge is to the left of the telegraph pole]

Where the route was runnable, part of me wanted to push on faster to 'bank' mileage, but that's rarely a good idea in ultras so I held myself back. Was it the right decision? Given how much sleep deprivation and sore feet, rather than tired legs, slowed me later, I'm not sure.

It gradually became evident that Alan wanted to slow the pace while I wanted to push on a bit, so at Buxted we parted company. It was dark by now – there were 16 hours darkness each day.

I joined a group of runners for a while and we chatted and wondered when we would reach Blackboys, the first aid station, at 49 miles. Finally there, we wrestled muddy shoes off before heading inside for food and drinks, clothing changes, topping up supplies. Then back out. The hardest part was wrestling my muddy shoes back on.

Outside, the sky had cleared, the stars were out and several times I stopped briefly, turned my headlamp off and just looked up at them, spending a few minutes simply appreciating the still, silent night. During one of those times I had the extra reward of seeing a meteor – wow! I was alone for this section, which was fine – I'm happy with company but also enjoy peaceful solitude on the trails.

Into the woods after Chiddingly and a deep stream to cross – thankfully another runner told me to use the bridge and after a brief confusion (what bridge?) I found it – surface under water, but much better than wading thigh-deep.

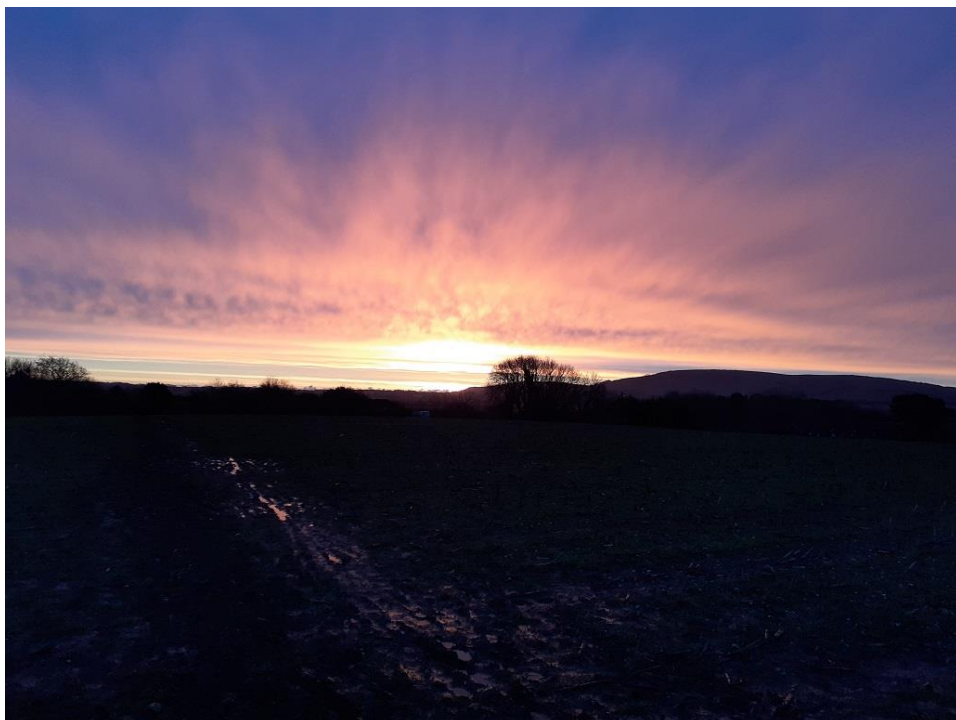
At Berwick Station I met Nicky, my friend who had offered to crew and would be alternating nights with Aidan. As planned, I stopped for a longer break. Food, tea, muddy socks off (amazingly they were dry inside), warm socks on. I thought I would never get to sleep – then Nicky was waking me and it was no longer totally dark outside. One day and 61 miles done.

Day 2: VGW & SDW



[Leaving Berwick Station – Photo courtesy of and ©Nicky Kidd]

I left the station soon after dawn, and looking back across the fields, the sky was lit with glorious colour – a great mood-lifter. Soon I was descending into Alfriston, where normal people were going about their normal lives, then up the steepish ascent from the village, now on the South Downs Way.



[Sunrise day 2, shortly after leaving Berwick Station]

I passed a couple of other runners, one looking particularly sleep-deprived, so I offered him a caffeine tablet (he looked a lot better when I saw him later). I had somehow failed to fill my water bottles at Berwick, but thankfully was able to do so at Southease Youth Hostel.

It was another grey day, with a fair amount of drizzle and mist. Past Housedean Farm I entered the 60-mile stretch that I hadn't managed to recce. Some bits were familiar from running it in the other direction, but not enough to give me a good feel for where I was. I kept expecting to see the beacons ahead and know that it wasn't far to Truleigh YHA, yet each hill or corner I reached, they were still not in sight.

By the early afternoon, my apparent lack of progress was getting me down – I had hoped to make better time on the drier trails and now I felt sure I was slipping behind on my schedule. That was when I was lucky enough to stumble across two amazing trail angels: Bex and Steve. I was able to sit in their van, hear and come to terms with the bad news of how far I still had to go to get to Truleigh, and get water, tea and a dose of sympathy that enabled me to set off again feeling a lot more positive.

Visibility was low enough that I could only partially see the closer of the two windmills at my closest approach, but about 10 minutes later the clouds parted, the mist lifted and for a few minutes I was treated to an amazing combination of light and mist. The last few miles before Truleigh were difficult, with the mist and dusk making navigation, even with the GPX, harder. Finally I reached Truleigh Youth Hostel. 92 miles done.



[Closest approach to the windmills – barely visible in the mist]

Leaving the aid station after food and a 90-minute sleep, I found that the mist had lifted, giving another clear, dry night. This hugely improved my mood and I happily started off down the hill, running easily on the decent track, only to glance at my watch and realise I'd missed a turning. How??? I trudged back up the hill and found the missed turning. Down, over the main road at Botolphs and a ridiculous search (I've run through here on numerous occasions AND volunteered at the Botolphs check point) for the path, which was hiding in shadows behind a crew car. Onward up the lane. Up the long concrete path through the pig farm, with grunts and occasional squeals on either side, and onwards, up further. I felt that I was still moving pretty well.



[Day 2 shortly before dusk - lifting of the mist and my mood]

Somewhere along here Sonny, who I'd met on previous races and last seen sitting at Truleigh Hill as I left there, caught up with me. We continued together for some time, each encouraging the other to keep moving, until the Cocking crew point where I met Aidan and got a very welcome hug. 120 miles.

Day 3: SDW, WW & SSW

It was getting light, and I didn't want to waste daylight hours (only 8 per day) when I generally moved faster, so I decided to try only a brief nap rather than a proper 90-minute sleep. A mistake, as I felt groggy, took ages to get re-stocked and back on the trail, and then moved at a snail's pace, only about 2 miles per hour. I eventually had the sense to take a caffeine tablet, which helped a bit.

It was difficult to work out the distances to crew points and checkpoints. Elapsed miles on my watch was useless, since it kept adding miles while I was sleeping (GPX watches do that!). My husband texted me the key points in 'miles to go', but even that was sometimes quite inaccurate.

However, finally I reached Queen Elizabeth Country Park and a man crewing another runner helped me to fill my water bottles. The GPX said 72 miles to go, and I was back on trail I had recced, which boosted my confidence and my mood. My next stop would be the Sustainability Centre aid station at 137 miles. First, up a long hill, past the grazing ponies in the already-fading light. It was dark some time before I reached the aid station, where I had another 90-minute snooze.

After I woke I saw a message from Nicky saying she was waiting for me at the Beaconhill Beeches crew point. Oops – I'd forgotten to tell her I was stopping!

Having recced, I wasn't surprised when I had to wade for some time along the stream that had taken over the footpath in addition to its usual channel, although I was heartily glad that I was wearing knee-high waterproof socks. Eventually onto path that was only muddy rather than covered with running water. Yay! Onward.

Somewhere along here, two people walking a dog called out to me – James and Annabel, who had found Ally and wished her well, then continued to find me. I really appreciated it and we chatted for a minute before I went on.

At Beaconshill Beeches it was lovely to see Nicky, but I only stopped briefly for water and food top-up (and to apologise to Nicky!). Through Cheriton, with false starts down the wrong alleys, on to Bishops Sutton where I had another snooze. I couldn't face wrestling off my wet, muddy waterproof socks, and decided

warming them with a handwarmer would be enough. I woke with feet that felt clammy and damp – and I still didn't change the socks. Big mistake.

It was 11 muddy miles to Alton. The worst stretch was the section along the edge of a wood, where the wide track had been well chewed up by machinery. Into the town and Nicky had stopped by a bakery where I was able to buy a hot vegan sausage roll and make use of their toilets. I wanted to get moving, so although I had a 10-minute snooze, I stupidly still didn't change my socks. It was about 8am when I left – the time I had expected to be leaving Farnham, and I felt really down: how could I have managed only 50 miles in the past day?

Day 4: SSW & NWD

My feet were feeling tender on the soles, which slowed me considerably, but it was daylight, and much of the way felt at least partially familiar from my recce. I didn't feel like the feet were blistering, so decided not to stop and check them – they would keep until Farnham.



[On the St Swithun's Way between Alton and Farnham]

I finally made it into Farnham about noon, to be met, totally unexpectedly, by Bex – they were tracking runners they had met over the past days. Aidan was delayed by traffic, so Bex and Steve provided tea and a focaccia, and a seat in their van, where I snoozed a little.

Aidan finally arrived and I moved to our car. Gingerly taking off the waterproof socks and the now wet liner socks revealed white, swollen, waterlogged skin on the soles of my feet – I was on the way to trench foot. I spent the next 20 or 30 minutes trying to dry them out using hand sanitizer gel (apply and leave for a bit to suck out the water, then wipe it off with paper towel). Then I donned normal Injinji trail socks – I thought I remembered that most of the NDW was pretty reasonable underfoot.

With Aidan expecting to meet me at every crew stop, I discarded some of my 'just in case' gear and supplies and set off with a lighter pack and a lighter heart - until I passed Farnham golf club, turned off the road and was confronted by muddy water nearly knee-deep covering the path as far as I could see. I had somehow never run it when flooded like this, and it came as a huge shock. No option. I took a deep breath and started wading. It was cold. I rapidly developed additional appreciation for the protection that the waterproof socks had given me on the previous flooded sections.



[Flooded path on the NDW – Photo courtesy of and ©Ollie Dawson]

I thought I knew this section of the NDW quite well, but with a tired brain parts didn't look familiar. Nevertheless, I finally reached Puttenham, where I dried my feet and changed my socks - again. I popped into Puttenham Aid Station (184 miles) very briefly to use the toilet and was a bit depressed to learn that there were only a few runners behind me – during 2019-2021 I'd got used to being towards the front of the midpack and this was a reminder that I hadn't regained the speed I lost after getting COVID in 2022. I had to firmly remind myself that I was still 7+ hours ahead of cut-off and didn't need to panic.

Onward towards St Martha's where I was due to meet Aidan again, but a confusion over naming (I was expecting "St Martha's", and that's what Aidan said it was named where he was parked, but the entrance sign said "Half Penny Lane Car Park") led us to miss each other. By the time we realised this, I was past and wasn't going to turn back – we could meet a couple of miles further, at Newland's Corner, instead. When I finally got there, after a little diversion in the wrong direction, this turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as Bex and Steve were there, waiting for their runner. Bex gave me a pep talk while Steve gave Aidan directions to Denbies Hillside for the final stop. Ten minutes with the weight off my feet, then back out into the dark. Soon I passed Zoe Norman, injured but gamely inching along, one painful foot at a time. She urged me onwards.

Just five miles to Denbies. It felt like 15. Normally I love running through these woodlands, but this night they seemed to go on forever, like a nightmare in which I was always moving forwards on a path through the trees but never getting any closer to my goal. Without the GPX I would have sworn that I was running in circles.

Trees and trail, trees and trail. Then suddenly a gate and a sign I knew well: "Steer's Field".

Another brief but welcome sit-down in our car and I gathered myself for the last effort. I could visualize the remainder of the route from here to the top of Box Hill steps very well; the end was mentally within sight. This gave my legs a bit more energy and I managed to move a little bit faster, jog a little more, particularly on the downhill stretches, even though I was definitely footsore.

Above Denbies vineyard, down through the estate, through the brick arch and I looked longingly across the dual carriageway to the Stepping Stones car park before turning left and following the footpath down to the subway. I remembered one of the other runners telling me that from there to Juniper Hall was just a few hundred yards if we didn't have to go back and up and over Box Hill. I found myself getting annoyed about that – illogical because nobody was forcing me to do the 200-mile race!

That illogical anger – in retrospect really frustration at being behind my goal finish time – gave me energy that pushed me forward: up the road, plunging into the little bit of woods and over the bridge, then up the steps a lot faster than I would have thought possible after 200+ miles. I overtook two runners, including Sonny. The last step climbed, I started looking for Centurion markings – James had said that the route from the NDW back to Juniper Hall would be marked. My watch buzzed just as Sonny called out to me, “We’ve missed the turning.” We retraced our steps and finally spotted a Centurion marker some distance off the path.

I jogged and ran as best I could, first with Sonny then ahead of him, dividing my attention between looking for the next marker, scanning the ground so I didn’t trip, and stealing quick glances at my watch to confirm the direction. There was the stone tower at the top of the crazily steep section. Normally I would have descended slowly, extra-cautious on tired legs, but my anger gave my feet wings and I hurtled down it, then along the last bit of woodland path before plunging onto the driveway and through the finishing arch.

I felt odd – drained, happy to have earned my buckle and coaster, and to have maintained my no-DNF record (122 ultras), but also disappointed with my finish time – 88:28:26, missing my B goal by half an hour. Could I have done better? If I’d slept before tackling day 3, and not let my feet get waterlogged and sore, probably. Being better trained, back to my pre-COVID fitness would have considerably improved my pace. Still, reduced fitness, sleep and footcare mistakes and all, I had covered the 200+ miles on my own two feet.

Would I do it again? Well, there are other 200s out there and I find, slightly to my surprise, that I am still 200-curious.



[Finished! – Photo courtesy of and ©Nicky Kidd]



TROMSO MORKETIDSMILA 10K (by Sarah Allport)

As with most of my running adventures it started with a bright idea by the husband... This time it began six years ago when he suggested as his first half marathon the Polar Night Half in Tromso, which is in Norwegian Lapland in the Arctic Circle. The event also offered 5 km and 10 km races and has since expanded to include marathon distance. I was new to running, having not really gone further than parkrun, so I opted for the 5k. I remember crossing the finish line having enjoyed it but with a sense of 'was that it?' Fast forward to mid-2023 and Stephen suggested a repeat trip; having now raced a number of marathons he was curious to see how we would do re-running his first half and I had said that if we came back I would try for the 10 km.

So, on Thursday 4th January we flew out of Gatwick with Norwegian, saying goodbye to daylight and heading for Denmark, as it is no longer possible to fly direct from the UK to Tromso. There was a short layover in Copenhagen, with just enough time for coffee and the first cinnamon bun of the trip, before our onward flight into Tromso, and the regular shuttle bus into the town centre. We had once again reserved a room at the Scandic Ishaven Hotel, which is the official race hotel and is very handy not only for most sights but importantly for the start/finish area.

Having settled in we headed across the road to a pizza restaurant we remember from last time via a short walk to see what had changed. We spent Friday exploring Tromso and trying to get used to just a little lightness around lunchtime otherwise permanent darkness. Although it is a small town there are a considerable number of museums and other attractions including the Tromso Bridge over to Tromsdalen to visit the Ice Cathedral. Outside the Cathedral a Spaniard spotted Stephen putting on his Yaktrak (a rubber harness with steel coils that sit on the underside of the shoe) and stuck up a conversation about shoe choice for tomorrow, he was thinking about trail shoes but wondering about buying ice grips for running the half, we suggested he see how much snow fell overnight as he would have time to buy them in the morning. We then walked on to the cable car, whose lights we could see from our hotel room, to ride halfway up Floya. The viewing complex gives an amazing view over Tromso and allowed me to see just how far out of town I would be running.



The view of Tromso from the cable car at 2.30pm

Next we headed to the race pasta party, which also included number collection and the merchandise stall (both also available on Saturday morning). Everyone gets the same medal but if you want a T-shirt or other merchandise you need to buy it at number collection. Suitably filled with pasta (four different varieties were available plus salad and bread) it was an early night before race day.

Overnight there was considerable snowfall, for which I was relieved. Conditions underfoot on Friday had been very icy and I had been having doubts about my ability to stay upright and move at a reasonable pace. My race started at 3.15 pm, which allowed for a reasonable breakfast and lunch. I had taken with me both trail shoes and road shoes with Yaktrax to fit over, so between lunch and the race I slowly got myself ready. Given our reasons for coming back it was strange that Stephen wasn't also getting ready, but he had developed a knee issue before Christmas which prevented him running and was therefore switching to be my support crew. Prior to the warmup I ran in my trail shoes on the quayside beneath the hotel where it had been very icy the day before. Having no issues at all I decided to stay with trail shoes.

Whilst I was getting ready, the marathon runners were collected from our hotel and taken by coach to Sjøtun on Kvaløya Island to start their run at 1 pm: across Kvaløya and over the Sandnessundbrua (Sandnes Strait Bridge) to enter Tromsø by the airport and follow the west coast into town. All other routes start in the town centre. The half marathon left at 3 pm and I arrived at the start area just as their warmup finished. Within seconds they were off and then it was our turn. It was a very good warm up and much needed as it was around 2°C. No sooner had we finished our warmup than we were also off, west along the main street Storgata and out into the suburbs. The snow was very fresh and there was no difficulty running either on snow in the centre of the road or in the tyre tracks, confirming that trail shoes were the best option. The 5 km runners started five minutes after us and we all followed the same route. Those on the half marathon ran further along the coast to the airport before making a U-turn and retracing their route back. It was not long before we reached the turn point for the 5 km route, a large cone surrounded by burners, and I was glad (at that stage) that I had opted for the longer route. It was around here that the leaders of the marathon came hurtling towards us as they headed for the finish. As we reached the peninsula at Sydspissen we turned to follow the coast north and as the houses thinned the snow that had been predicted all day began. A kilometre before my turn point there was horizontal snow freezing my left ear, but I reasoned after the turn it would soon thaw and then I would have an equally numb right ear. It was not to be: about 800 m before the turn the wind changed direction to hit me from behind, which on a downhill helped me speed up, but my worst fears were realised when I looped around the 5 km cone and turned for home. Horizontal snow and wind straight in my face, it was now around minus one and it was uphill. Here there was a drinks station, but it was only offering cold drinks (there are hot drink stations available on the half and marathon routes) and I decided that I didn't need it, nor could I face the cold liquid. I briefly slowed to a walk, and assessed my options: yes, the weather was miserable, but I wasn't super cold, and I had taken some Cliff Shotbloks with me as a precaution, so I started to eat one. Ahead of me I could see the lights of the Norwegian Red Cross car, my ride back if I abandoned, and as tempting as that was for a few seconds I knew I wouldn't. There was roughly a parkrun left and the effects of the snow would lessen once back between buildings, so I pulled myself together and started a slow jog uphill, head down against the snow. The route back turned away from the coast sooner and it wasn't long before we were back amongst the houses heading along the main roads back towards town.

I was praying that the Mack Brewery sign would reappear around every corner as I would then nearly be home; finally it appeared and not long after there was Stephen yelling words of encouragement as I headed for the finish.



200 metres to go

I would normally sprint but having managed to stay upright for this long I did not want to go down in front of the crowds and as it happened Stephen was filming me. I crossed the line in 83 minutes, not my fastest 10 km but not bad for the conditions. Never have a hot blackcurrant drink and a banana been so welcoming. Stephen appeared with warmer clothing, and we made the short walk to the hotel. After the hottest shower

ever and a coffee I began to feel human. Stephen confirmed that there had been blizzard conditions in town and that he had seen from my live track (Garmin feed from my watch, there was no official tracking) when the blizzard had hit me as my pace had slowed considerably.



The prize ceremony and after race party were both held in our hotel which provided a massive buffet for some very hungry runners where the topic of conversation frequently turned to the weather.

Sunday there was time for a celebratory cinnamon bun before the bus back to the airport. Unfortunately, whilst in the terminal it began to snow heavily, and the runway was eventually closed for a time. After over an hour on the plane we eventually took off with the connection in Copenhagen very much in doubt. We landed in Copenhagen 30 minutes before our flight was scheduled to leave and needing to go through immigration to leave Denmark. We were not the only ones sprinting through the terminal and I really wished I had running shoes not my winter boots on (and had a husband whose knee would move). They were in the case in the hold which I hoped was also being moved rapidly to the next plane. I had taken the precautions of flying out with my entire running kit as hand luggage in case my bag was delayed. In the end we needn't have worried, they were holding the plane for us as there were another 42 people making the same connection and our luggage also made it.

Kit-wise I wore Trail shoes, water repellent leggings, thermal base layer, waterproof shell, gloves, a beany hat and buff. If it had been icier, I'd have worn road shoes with Yaktrax, and any colder an additional run top.

So, would I recommend it? – Yes. It is great if you are looking for an event that caters to different distances and there is plenty to do around the race or for any non-runners. If the darkness and snow are an issue, they offer the same distances in June for the Midnight Sun Marathon, where the races start in the evening so that everyone gets to run under a never-setting midnight sun. The only difference is that the marathon starts in town and follows the half marathon route to the airport before running back through town and out over Tromsø bridge to Tromsdalen, where it follows the coast west before turning back to re-cross the bridge and finish in town. Or for something completely different there is the Tromsø mountain challenge or the Arctic snowshoe race. Norway is expensive, but Tromsø has a variety of accommodations and in such a small town all are handy for the race, so you don't need to stay in the race hotel. The event websites are in English as are all the communications. It is really easy to book the pasta and after-race parties and they also provide a link to pre-book the airport bus tickets. Whilst we haven't tried them you can also book other activities around the race such as reindeer feeding, dog sledding and whale watching.

HIGH-INTENSITY INTERVAL TRAINING (by Alan Dolton)

One of our women recently asked me for advice about 'high-intensity interval training'. This is a form of training which alternates periods of short intense anaerobic exercise with short recovery periods, usually involving jogging or walking. The session usually lasts for no more than 30 minutes. The principle was originally developed more than 60 years ago, and was used by Sebastian Coe when he was being coached by his father Peter Coe in the 1970s.

The principle of alternating periods of hard running with periods of easy jogging was used by the Finnish coach Lauri Pikhtala and the athlete Paavo Nurmi in the 1920s. Nurmi won the 10000 metres at both the 1920 and 1928 Olympics, and also won the 1500 metres and the 5000 metres in the 1924 Olympics. However Nurmi's sessions sometimes lasted up to two hours, so that although they were a form of interval training, they could not be described as 'high intensity'. Similar methods were adopted by the Swedish coach Gosta Holmer and by the German coach Woldemar Gerschler, who became director of physical education at Freiburg University. Gerschler was apparently the first leading coach to focus on the length of the recovery between repetitions: he suggested that an athlete should train with a heart rate of about 180 beats per minute, and should begin another new rep when his heart rate had dropped to 120 beats per minute. The athlete's fitness could be gauged by how quickly his heart rate dropped to 120. In the early 1950s Gerschler began coaching Gordon Pirie of South London Harriers. Pirie would travel to Germany once or twice a year for physiological testing, and Gerschler would then set a training schedule based on the results. Gerschler set Pirie track sessions such as 20 x 300 metres with a brisk 100 metre jog as a recovery. These sessions were copied by many other distance runners of the period, although not many of them could keep up with Pirie's pace (and particularly his relatively fast recovery jogs).

A British coach who popularised the use of short recoveries to produce a high-intensity session for 5000 metre runners was Frank Horwill, who was the founder of the British Milers Club. Probably the most successful of the athletes whom Frank coached in person was Tim Hutchings, who twice finished second in the World Cross-Country Championships. However Frank is probably best-known for mentoring Peter Coe in the early stages of Sebastian Coe's running career. Seb had begun training with Hallamshire Harriers, but his father (a former racing cyclist) was dissatisfied with that club's emphasis on long-distance running at a steady pace. He decided to begin coaching his son himself, using the type of sessions which Frank Horwill recommended. These included regular sessions of fast 200 metre reps with only 30 seconds recovery between repetitions. As Seb Coe grew older, one of his toughest regular sessions was 6 x 800 metres with only 30 seconds recovery. This type of training helped him to win the 1500 metres at both the 1980 and 1984 Olympics.

I think that many Striders could benefit from adopting some form of high-intensity interval training. Pirie's 300 metre reps usually took about 45-50 seconds, and were followed by a 100 metre jog in 25-30 seconds. This is similar to the guidelines set by the present-day American and Japanese proponents of high-intensity training: a popular session is 30-40 seconds of hard running alternated with 15-20 seconds of jogging or walking. A slightly easier track session involves running hard for 130 metres followed by a 70 metres jog. (On a marked track such as Croydon Arena, the distance from the line marking the end of a 4 x 100m relay zone to the line marking the start of the next 4 x 100m relay zone is exactly 70 metres, and the distance from that line to the line marking the end of the next 4 x 100m relay zone is exactly 130 metres).



(This article originally appeared in the September 2013 club magazine, but is republished here – in a slightly revised form – for the benefit of newer Striders)

COMPETITIVE HIGHLIGHTS: DECEMBER 2023 – FEBRUARY 2024

In the British Masters 5K road championships at Battersea on 3 December, Steve Corfield ran very well to place fourth in the M60 age-group (17:54). Andrew Aitken placed tenth in the M45 age-group (17:13). In the Valenica Marathon on the same day, Consuelo Kennefick set a club W50 record of 3 hours 36 minutes 31.

On 16 December, Ally Whitlock was the third woman to finish the Centurion Winter Downs 200-mile race, completing the course in 71 hours 07 minutes 43. Debra Bourne was the 12th woman to finish (88:28:26).

The South of the Thames Cross-Country Championships took place at Lloyd Park on the same day. Consuelo Kennefick was the 20th woman to finish. Ellyw Evans was 33rd, Cindy Siu 38th, Selena Wong 55th and Angela Seesurrun 59th. Striders' men had 16 finishers and were seventh in the 12-to-score team event. Tatsuya Okamoto was 74th, Matthew Stone 91st, Martin Filer 92nd and Andy Perks 95th.

In the Surrey Cross-Country Championships, at Dorking on 7 January, Striders' men placed 15th in the team event. They were led by Phil Coales who placed 96th. Tatsuya Okamoto was 106th, Martin Filer 134th, Andy Perks 138th, Luke Burden 144th, and Tom Gillespie completed the scoring team in 155th.

The penultimate Surrey Cross-Country League matches of the season were held at Oxshott on 13 January. Striders' men placed third in their Division Three match. Harry Madgwick-Lawton placed fifth, completing the five-mile course in 28 minutes 30. James Rhodes was tenth (28:55) with Andrew Aitken 13th (29:15), Luke Burden 32nd (30:39), Martin Filer 36th (30:45), Liam Redmond 38th (31:03), Conor O'Hara-Barrett 46th (31:17), Andy Perks 47th (31:18), Tom Gillespie 52nd (31:27) and Simon Ambrosi 53rd (31:30).

Striders' women placed 12th in their Division Two match. They were led by Jennifer Gutteridge who placed 30th (35:04). Ellyw Evans was 44th (36:36), Cindy Siu 84th (39:33), Selena Wong 93rd (40:45), Susanna Lutman 119th (43:42), Linda Jones 131st (45:42) and Ruth Pearson 145th (47:47).

In the South of England Cross-Country Championships, at Beckenham on 27 January, Striders' senior women placed 30th in the team event. They were again led by Jennifer Gutteridge who was, 144th of the 362 finishers. Consuelo Kennefick was 169th, Selena Wong 266th and Linda Jones 320th. Striders' senior men placed 34th in the team event. They were led by Andrew Aitken, who was 230th of the 720 finishers. James Rhodes was 266th, Andy Perks 349th, Tatsuya Okamoto 357th, Luke Burden 374th, Conor O'Hara-Barrett 454th, Steve Harris 510th and Rob Zietz 632nd.

The tenth annual 'mob match' between Striders and Croydon Harriers took place on 3 February, in conjunction with the South Norwood parkrun. Striders were led by Phil Coales, who placed fourth (17:52). Nick Andrews was first in the M40 age-group, placing eighth overall (18:39). Lee Flanagan was first in the M50 age-group, placing ninth overall (18:56). Matthew Stone was first in the M60 age-group, placing 16th overall (19:35). Striders' women were led by Consuelo Kennefick, who was the fourth female finisher, placing first in the W50 age-group and 44th overall (22:04). In total, Striders had 51 finishers while Harriers had 47 finishers. However, Harriers won the match by 2596 points to 2255.

In the final Surrey Cross-Country League matches of the season, at Lloyd Park on 10 February, Striders' men did very well to win the Division Three match and finish second in the final Division Three table, gaining promotion back to Division Two. They had 26 finishers, led by Harry Madgwick-Lawton who placed seventh of the 172 finishers. Andrew Aitken was 11th, Phil Coales 13th, Tatsuya Okamoto 14th, James Rhodes 18th, Lee Flanagan 21st, Luke Burden 27th and Liam Redmond 35th. Matthew Stone was first in the M60 age-group and 37th overall, while Marc Burrows completed the scoring team in 42nd.

For the first time since February 2012, Striders were unable to field a complete team of five women. Jennifer Gutteridge placed 18th of the 131 finishers, with Cindy Siu 48th, Ruth Pearson 96th and Angela Seesurrun 97th. The team were 13th in the final Division Two table and were relegated to Division Three.

In the British Masters Indoor Championships at Lee Valley on 17 February, Steve Corfield won the M60 B 800 metres in 2 minutes 21.3, which would have placed him fifth in the A race.

40 YEARS AGO: LOCAL ATHLETICS IN JANUARY – MAY 1984

The Surrey Cross-Country Championships were held on 7 January, on a hilly course at Frimley. The senior race was won by Bob Treadwell, who lived in Warlingham and ran for Surrey Beagles. Epsom won the team event, with Aldershot second and Herne Hill third. Of our local clubs, South London Harriers finished fifth, while Croydon Harriers were ninth. Croydon's first finisher was Ken Penney, who placed 17th. Their second finisher was future Strider Alan Dolton, who was 36th.

The Surrey Women's Cross-Country League completed its fifth season with a match at Brockwell Park on 11 February. Croydon Harriers won the league for the second successive year. They won three of the four matches and also had the individual winners in three of the four: their outstanding teenager Niobe Menendez won two of the races, while Karen Ellis, a talented 800 metre runner, won the final race. Woking placed second with Ranelagh third and South London Harriers fourth.

The Surrey Cross-Country League completed its 22nd season with matches on 17 February. Aldershot won Division One for the twelfth successive year, but only after an unusually close battle with Herne Hill, with each club winning two of the four matches. Belgrave placed third, with Epsom (4th) and South London Harriers (5th) also retaining their Division One status. Metropolitan Police (6th) and Hercules-Wimbledon (7th) were relegated to Division Two. Division Two saw a three-way battle involving Croydon Harriers and Ranelagh, both of whom had been relegated from Division One the previous year, and Division Three champions Omega, a short-lived club who had been formed as a breakaway from Walton AC. Omega won the first and third matches with Croydon Harriers winning the second match. However Ranelagh turned out their strongest team of the season for the final match at Lightwater. They won the match by a sufficiently large margin to take the second promotion spot behind Omega.

The East Surrey League held its annual road relay at Box Hill on 10 March. The race was won by Epsom, while Crawley, who had entered the league for the first time despite being based outside Surrey, took second place. Croydon Harriers' hopes of retaining the league title suffered a setback when some poor team selection saw their B team finish third, one place ahead of their A team. Two future members of Striders represented Croydon in this event: Alan Dolton ran 10 minutes 14 for their A team, while Peter Yarlett ran 11 minutes 07 for their C team. Croydon turned out a full-strength team for the final race of the season, which was the annual road race at Ewell on 11 April. They comfortably won the team event with Alan Dolton winning the race, Ken Penney finishing third, Gary Bishop fourth and Robin Dickson sixth. However this was not enough to stop Crawley from taking the overall league championship.

In March 1984 Wandsworth Council had agreed to replace the old six-lane cinder track at Tooting with a new synthetic surface. The old track was closed at the end of April, and the new synthetic eight-lane track eventually opened in August 1985.

The Surrey 10000 metre championship was held at Croydon Arena on 29 April. Ollie Foote of Belgrave retained the title in 30 minutes 55.2. Paul Sanderson of Woking was second (31:35.8), while Alan Dolton placed third (31:55.8). Croydon's Ken Penney won the Surrey 3000 metre steeplechase in 9 minutes 35.2.

The fourth London Marathon took place on 13 May. The first local runner was Bob Treadwell of Surrey Beagles, who placed 69th in 2 hours 21 minutes 09. Don Faircloth of Croydon Harriers ran 2 hours 27 minutes 17. His club colleague John Lee was not far behind in 2 hours 28 minutes 10. The first local woman was Anne Roden of South London Harriers, in 3 hours 03.

Striders were again well represented. The club's press report in the Croydon Advertiser claimed an impressive total of 15 finishers, led by David Robjohns in 2 hours 50. Philip Radband ran 3 hours 04, and the other Striders were Graham Ellis (3:13), Rob Pinfield (3:15), Steve Lunn (3:16), Tony Brown (3:34), Bernie Wright (3:43), Val Pinfield (3:59), Rob Hardy (4:05), Verina Smith (5:10), Elaine Mason (5:12), Catherine Locking (5:12), Maggie Hubbard (5:25), Saku Vethavanam (5:45) and Sashi Dave (5:45). At this time Striders were still primarily a club for people who worked for Philips (as the club name 'Philips City Striders' indicated), and none of the club's first three finishers trained with the Croydon group of Striders. Robjohns lived in Orpington and was a first-claim member of Blackheath, while Radband worked in the Halifax branch of Philips and Ellis worked in the Cambridge branch. Some years later Striders' committee decided to exclude these performances from the club's all-time ranking lists.



**The first leg of the Southern Road Relay at Wimbledon in April 1984
(with future Strider Alan Dolton running for Croydon)**



**Elene Kayum, pictured here in a Surrey Cross-Country League race,
was Striders' first female finisher in the 2004 London Marathon**

20 YEARS AGO: LOCAL ATHLETICS IN SPRING 2004

On 21 March Striders produced a good team performance to place third out of 15 teams in the East Surrey League's annual road relay at Box Hill. Second-claim member Lee Morgan gave the team a good start on the first leg, covering the 2.1 mile course in 11 minutes 14, which was the fifth fastest time of the day, and placing third. His South London Harriers colleague Billy Corr made an encouraging debut for Striders and held third place with 12 minutes 11. On the third leg Tom Thrower, the youngest member of the team, ran a very good 11 minutes 36 but was overtaken by Ed Prickett of Reigate, who ran the fastest time of the day. On the final leg Justin Macenhill pulled Striders back into third place with 11 minutes 29. Crawley won the event in 45 minutes 22, followed by Dorking (45:59), Striders (46:30) and Reigate (47:17).

In the young athletes' race, held over the same course, Striders' Daisy Collingridge had an excellent run, recording an impressive 13 minutes 49 and beating all the other girls and all but two of the boys.

The 26th Croydon 10K took place on 4 April. The winner was Australian Lee Troop in a course record of 29 minutes 25 seconds. Jonathan McCallum of Croydon Harriers was second in 31 minutes 48. The first M40 was Dave Ogden of South London Harriers, in 35 minutes 14. The first woman was Annie Emmerson of Bridgend, who ran 35 minutes 43. Thirty-two Striders competed, led by Don Kayum who placed 23rd in 36 minutes 54. Dave Shaw was 29th in 37 minutes 30.

On 6 April Striders produced a good team performance to place third in the East Surrey League's annual road race at Ewell, lifting us to second in the final league table. Our leading runner was again Lee Morgan who placed fifth, covering the four and a quarter mile course in 23 minutes 37. Justin Macenhill placed tenth (24:18) while his brother Damian was 22nd (26:23) and Nigel Davidson was 23rd (26:31). Peter Yarlett was 27th (27:08), and won the M50 category.

The 24th London Marathon took place on 18 April. Striders had an impressive total of 20 finishers. Our first man home was long-distance specialist Dave Shaw who covered the distance in 2 hours 56 minutes 26, finishing 845th overall. Our second man home was Tim Bett, who had completed the Two Oceans 35-mile marathon in Cape Town the previous week, and still had sufficient stamina to record 3 hours 28 minutes 27. Striders' next three finishers were all female. Elene Kayum ran 3 hours 33 minutes 21, and was followed by club colleagues Kate Custis (3:36:38) and Emma Haillay (3:41:56).

On 2 May Striders had an impressive total of 24 finishers in the Sutton 10 kilometre road race, which was the first Surrey Road League match of the season. Both our men and women finished sixth in the team events. Our first man home was Justin Macenhill, who placed 30th, covering the three-lap course in 37 minutes 39. Don Kayum was next home in 37th place (38:06), with Damian Macenhill 50th (39:10) and Alan Dolton 53rd (39:33). David Batten had a good run to finish third in the M50 category, placing 58th overall (39:45).

Striders' women were led home by Kerry Backshell, who finished 171st (47:33), ten places ahead of team-mate Emma Haillay (48:25). Patricia Carr completed the team, recording 53 minutes 32 for 238th.

The first Southern Veterans League match of the season took place at Crawley on 4 May. Striders only had five competitors. They placed sixth in the men's match. Nigel Bongers, Kevin Burnett and Neil Riches showed good team spirit by competing in three events each.

On 5 May Striders produced a good team performance to place third in the annual Beckenham Running Club road relay. On the first leg Lee Morgan brought Striders home in a close second place, covering the 2.6 mile course in 14 minutes 19. Don Kayum took over and moved Striders into the lead, recording 14 minutes 41. On the final leg Justin Macenhill faced strong opposition from Aldershot and Kent AC, and despite running a very respectable 14 minutes 23, had to settle for third place, just ten seconds behind the Kent runner.

On 16 May Striders' men produced an excellent team performance to place third in the Richmond Half-Marathon, which incorporated the Surrey Championships. Striders were led by Justin Macenhill, who placed 20th of 468 finishers, recording 83 minutes 53. Don Kayum placed 25th (84:38), Damian Macenhill 29th (85:25), David Batten 59th (90:36) and Ian Campbell 85th (94:01).

10 YEARS AGO: LOCAL ATHLETICS IN SPRING 2014

In the Sidcup 10-mile road race on 9 March, Colin Cotton ran very well to set a club M65 record of 78 minutes 23. In the Cambridge Half-Marathon on the same day, Rachel Lindley was the 13th woman to finish, recording 89 minutes 04.

In the Cranleigh 21-mile road race on 16 March, James Bennett placed fifth in 2 hours 10 minutes 57. On 22 March, Ernie Hann had an excellent run to win the Selsdon Half-Marathon, covering the undulating course in 83 minutes 21.

The fourth Croydon Half-Marathon took place on 30 March. The race was won by Kevin Quinn of Herne Hill in 73 minutes 43. Striders won the men's team prize with Bill Makuwa fifth (79:40), Dan Jewell eighth (81:00) and Ernie Hann 31st (91:07). The first woman was Lisa Harris of Croydon Harriers in 86 minutes 49, with her club colleague Sophie Bates second (89:40) and Lisa Rooney of Collingwood third (92:37).

Striders had 14 competitors in the Brighton Marathon on 6 April. They were led by James Bennett who ran very well to finish 43rd, recording 2 hours 52 minutes 57. He was followed by Mike Stewart (3:13:27), Graeme Drysdale (3:14:23) and Chris Morton (3:24:22). Striders' first woman to finish was Ally Whitlock (4:06:16), who was followed by Louise Grech (4:21:56). In the Paris Marathon on the same day, Rachel Lindley ran well to finish in 3 hours 20 minutes 47.

Striders had 15 finishers in the London Marathon on 13 April. They were led by Dan Jewell who ran a personal best of 2 hours 55 minutes 12. Tyler O'Callaghan ran a personal best of 2 hours 58 minutes 36, followed by Matthew Chapman who ran 3 hours 03 minutes 33. Striders' women were led by Karen Stretch, who finished in exactly 3 hours 16 minutes.

In the first Southern Veterans League match of the season, at Kingsmeadow on 28 April, Striders' men placed fourth of the eight competing clubs, finishing just one point ahead of local rivals Croydon Harriers. Justin Macenhill ran well to place second in the M35 1500 metres (4:45.9) and third in the 5000 metres (18:10.9), while David Gunaratnam was second in the M50 long jump (3.79).

Striders' women also placed fourth. Their leading points-scorer was Steph Upton, who was third in the W35 1500 metres (5:59.5) and fourth in both the 100 metres and 400 metres.

In the Richmond Half-Marathon on 4 May, Ernie Hann placed 26th out of more than 700 finishers, recording 80 minutes 30. Chris Morton also ran well to place 111th in 91 minutes 24. Striders' men placed 15th in the team event.

Karen Stretch ran well to be the sixth woman to finish the Sutton 10 kilometre road race on 11 May. She placed 91st overall, recording 40 minutes 55. She led Striders' women to 12th place in the team event. Their second woman to finish was Becky Laurence who placed 234th overall (48:22). Linda Daniel completed the scoring trio, placing 306th in exactly 53 minutes.

Striders' men placed 15th in the team event. Ernie Hann was 22nd (36:41), Graeme Drysdale 88th (40:40), Stephen Harrison 106th (41:45) and Steve Massey 141st (43:09). Colin Cotton ran well to place fourth in the M60 category, recording 47 minutes 08.

Striders produced a good team performance in the second Southern Veterans League match of the season, at Croydon Arena on 19 May. Striders' men placed second of the seven competing clubs, only six points behind Epsom. Daniel Hassett set a club M35 record of exactly five metres to place second in the long jump, and also placed second in the M35 400 metres (56.5). There were also second places for Sam O'Dongo in the M35 100 metres (13.0), Justin Macenhill in the M40 1500 metres (4:46.2), Julian Spencer-Wood in the M60 1500 metres (6:23.2), Dave Hoben in the M50 2000 metre walk (13:13.5), Damian Macenhill in the M35 2000 metre walk (13:19.8) and the 4 x 100 metre relay team (51.3).

Striders' women placed fourth. Maggie Statham made a welcome return to Striders' colours to set a new club W60 1500 metre record of 5 minutes 55.0, winning her age-group. Steph Upton won the W35 2000 metre walk (13:28.2). Lorraine Hunte was second in the W60 100 metres (18.2) and third in the W60 400 metres (98.4).



**Damian Macenhill and Steph Upton in the 2000 metre walk
in the Southern Veterans League at Croydon Arena in May 2014
(photo by Kevin Hann)**

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