

After entering this years Skye Trail Ultra and, according to Jeff, the only way I am getting a seat on the minibus is if I finish my write up on last years adventure!! This is a remarkable race in a truly stunning location and totally unique to any other race in Scotland and the rest of the UK.

All I can hope is that my words do it justice, you get to the end of this without becoming bored and maybe even support this cracking event by giving it a go one day. One piece of advice.....if you don't put in the hard training miles or have an injury that would have stopped you doing anything you have done before then think twice about taking this on as the is one beautiful but brutal race.

I had entered in 2015 but had to withdraw due to injury and deferred to 2016 and after Graham McInnes missed out on the West Highland Way ballot I had a pal to convince that Skye would be a good replacement.

Is it Tough asked G, Hilly asked G and is it long asked G? The answer to all 3 is a resounding yes and quicker than a tramp into hot chips G entered the 2016 race. The uniqueness of the event is in part due to the race director, Jeff Smith. He is a legend in what he can pull off with limited resources on the island and always seems to get things just right no matter how difficult his job is.

The race starts at Duntulm in the northern point of the island and heads south up and over the incredibly beautiful and undulating Trotternish ridge to Portree which is home to the first checkpoint. You then continue south towards Peinchorran and CP2 at Sligachan. Its through the Cuillins and Glen Sligachan to Elgol and CP3, before heading northeast again to CP4 at Blaven and onto the finish point 74ish miles later in Broadford.

It seems and feels blissful and painless when you squeeze the route into a paragraph but this is a classic case of the words never being able to do the route or race justice.

Skye offers stunning views and apparently from the trail you'll see a ton of wildlife. Apparently on a good day Whales, Porpoises, hundreds of Dolphins, Otters, Sea and Golden eagles, Red deer, Lions, Tigers and Giraffes have all been spotted by previous visitors. Unfortunately they were all on holiday during last years race so all we got were sheep – Thousands, Toads - Hundreds of thousands- with a few poor soles taking one for the team under my slow moving feet on the Saturday night, and Cuckoo's – Millions by the sound of it!!

Staying 250 miles south east of Skye it's not really a race you should do without a fair bit planning and organisation but that's not really our strengths so after a quick change of car from small to big because the kit I'd chucked in left no room for Graham or his gear we were off.

Anyone who knows me realises I'm built for comfort not speed and always prefer the cooler running conditions so with the mercury nudging 20 degrees as we left Haddington at 9am things weren't looking good. 22 as we headed north towards

Perth, 24 at Dalwhinnie and then a nice 28 degrees as we headed west towards Spean Bridge. Fear not says G it'll be freezing in Skye. Aye right it was still 28 degrees as we pitched the tents at the Reraig campsite in Balmacara just a mile or so this side of the bridge.

Tents up by 2pm and over the bridge to Skye and registration in Broadford. You forget just how stunning the island is until you see it again and it never fails to take your breath away. Into the car park at the Broadford Hotel to be welcomed by Jeff for a kit check. A few sweaty handshakes and hellos with Neil, Patricia and Katherine and then we had the maps out ready for the brief.

Just as Jeff was about to start and just to highlight how hot it was, the bronzed Adonis from the West, AKA Stephen Schofield, sauntered into the hall minus t-shirt. Looking at the dulux gloss white torso had me thinking.....sun cream did I bring sun cream!!

At this point the enormity of the race really starts to hit home and the lack of a decent reccie made me nervous. Watch here, dangerous there, big f**k off drop on the left, stay right or you might die was the general instruction and one by one the faces of those who hadn't done the race went whiter than Stephens torso!!

The highlight of the brief was Jeff explaining how to prepare yourself to be evacuated off the ridge by the search and rescue helicopter!! Lie down or you'll be blown off the cliff and they'll really be pissed off trying to collect all the bits of you from down there sort of sums it up ☺

Brief over and cheerio's done it was up to the Sligachan hotel for a beer to calm the nerves. Didn't really work as the mighty Cuillens to your right and the stunning Trotterish ridge to your left just tower over you. Chatting to a couple of walkers who had spent the day in the hills confirmed the fact the heat would be a real factor and the lack of water in the high steams might be an issue.

Like true athletes we headed back to the Kyle of Lochalsh for a fish supper, a couple of beers and an hour's sleep before the 1.30am alarm call and the battle with the evil midgies started in earnest.

An eventful 10 mile drive to Portree when we almost wiped out some deer and the local Police we reached Broadford hall, dumped the drop bags and piled into the mini bus just after 3am.

Now's probably the time to confess that I can get lost in Tesco's so 70 odd miles of self-navigation had me slightly worried but at the brief Jeff reassured me that he had never lost anyone during a race and we were in safe hands. All in the minibus and then out again as Jeff had lost the keys!! A search party was quickly assembled and the lost keys were found safe and sound on Jeff's seat!!

Drama over I thought as we settled into a nice 40-minute drive north as everyone chilled and took time to reflect on what was ahead. A couple of runners even tried to get a quick kip but Jeff made sure they got none with some nifty driving and then surely the quickest stop ever in a 20-seat minibus as he missed the turn to the start!!

No portaloos, PA systems or handy snack vans for a last minute cuppa and bacon roll at the Skye start line but the slowly rising sun broke the darkness and revealed the stunning ridge.

Some final instructions for the runners and before we knew it the marshals and helpers who really make the race happen were away in their cars with maps and instructions for checkpoints and drop bags a plenty.

Sunrise and trepidation



The London marathon has a Royal or 3 as celebrity starters, the Great North Run has Ant & Dec but we were blessed with the Scottish ultras finest to set us our way. Up stepped the legendary Pauline Walker & Fiona Rennie to hurl some encouragement and once they had herded the 20 odd bodies into some order there was a quick count down, which tested Pauline's patience 😊, and we were on our way at 5am.

Off, off and away



A couple of miles or so on the road and a short sprint over the surprising dry moor before the hard work started with the first ascent up the ridge. The group had already split with the lead group of whippets already near the top but our hope was that the slow start would help later in the day as it was already very warm.



First climb over and I started to relax and chill a little as I realised there was absolutely hee-haw I could do about the heat but would need to watch the water. Possibly relaxed a little too much as the first big red mark on the map was completely forgotten about and I missed the sharp left-hander over the stile down into the magical Quiraing.

The mighty Q





This is a brilliant short section and we took it slowly to really enjoy the scenery and get our breath back. A quick photo stop and temp check...25 degrees at around 6am and I was sweating like a fat lad in a donut shop. As we made our way out the valley we had the savvy to look back and see the stunning vista for one last time. The smiles then broke out for Jeff and the superhero marshals who had set up an impromptu water station in the Quiaing car park. A quick refill and off we went to catch the leaders!!

The nice part about the undulating ridge is that we had a good view of Jonathan, Gregor and Stuart a mile or 2 ahead, then lose them, then see them again which helps keep you on track. The stunning panorama looking south was a welcome distraction from the heat, as was a chat to Stephen on the 4th or 5th climb. He was struggling already and just couldn't get going on the day which was a real shame for such an experienced runner and really good lad. The offer to join us was politely refused and we found out at Portree he had wisely called it a day.

Spot the leaders



It was hard work on the ridge and on the climb up to Beinn Edra we caught up with Gareth and Michael who were great company and would be key to my race later in the day. A quick search for the stream and the battle to get my solid water bottles into the trickle commenced. A wee tip, take a soft bottle and refill from that if you have one if there's likely to be a shortage of water in the streams.

The next 5 miles or so was really enjoyable and despite losing sight of the lead runners we were making great progress, strong on the ups and making good time on the downs, including some bum sledging coming off Bienn fecking muckle!!

Up and over The Storr and my mind switched to the time and the fact we had been on our feet for over 5 hours and not covered 20 miles. I knew we had Ben Dearg to go and a couple of smaller climbs before a nice quick decent into Portree and CP 1. Michael and Gareth are much more experienced in the mountains than we are and know this section well. As I waxed lyrically about the prospect of cracking 7 hours into Portree they exchanged knowing glances but thankfully stayed quiet.

Stream found on the climb up the Ben and then the scrambling and slipping started as the worst ascent so far proved to be a real killer. The quads were burning and the feet were on fire due to the heat and the battering coming off so many hills.

Salomon speedcross on the feet for me but there was a complete array of foot ware so my tip for this would be go with grip over the ridge but you would get away with something more road based for the remainder unless the weather is unkind.

This climb took forever, the banter and chat slowed right down, and the lack of a reccie really started to come into play. Portree came into sight, probably about 2 miles away as the crow flies, but I'm not a crow and I don't fly and the descent over moss, bog, bracken and every other natural obstacle you can imagine sapped the spirits and energy and the next 2 hours was nothing other than a big bastard slog.

Michael confirmed we were only a mile or so from the road and it was then I noticed just how drained everyone looked. Thankfully Jeff had dropped some water at the exit from the hill onto the road and we grabbed a couple of bottles before hitting the

tarmac for the final mile on a glorious smooth man-made surface. WRONG.....hitting the tarmac after 8 hours or so in the hills was horrendous and Michael took a heeder on the pavement and our legs called a flash strike and just refused to work.

A slow plod through the metropolis that is Portree and I could not have been happier when we turned the corner to see Fiona, Pauline, Neil, The Supertramp and Donna a couple of hundred yards down the road looking bright, cheery and welcoming.

My normal checkpoint strategy is a quick hello, grab my dropbag and head out but I was more than thankful to sit down and be pampered for 5 minutes. Graham was struggling with the heat and literally crumpled onto the grass verge. Pauline sorted his food and drinks and then tried to coax some life into his legs. He's a unit and she went above and beyond trying to lift his tree trunks up and give them a shoogle.

The legs



CP highlight was this as everyone burst out laughing but a special mention must go to and his massive portion of watermelon, not vodka soaked apparently!!

For 4 hours I had been dreaming about the feast of mini porkpies, small tatties and brioche with peanut butter and jam but as soon as I took a bite I realised the heat had killed my appetite and it would be a long day with little food as I just couldn't eat much so packed what I could into the backpack for section 2. Graham was in a worse state and manged a sandwich and some juice that made a reappearance as soon as we moved away from the checkpoint. 50 miles to go and we were buckled already!!

The tide was out as we waved cheerio to the Portree massive and we took it easy along the beach to try and give G a chance to get some strength back. As we

reflected on the 8:30 marathon it was pretty obvious we had underestimated how tough the Ridge was and the impact the heat had on our bodies. Tough to train for the heat staying in Scotland and we both agreed more hills were required but we'd have a belting tan given the fact we were already glowing like a 4-bar electric fire!!

As you come off the beach heading towards Peinachorrain make sure you look back over your left shoulder and take in the sheer enormity of the Trotterish Ridge and the Storr. It really does take both your breath and also any pain you are feeling away for a couple of minutes and is an amazing sight.

Back to the grind and the road/track was actually OK and we started to pick up the pace and ran most of the section as we edged towards the coastal path up the edge of Loch Sligachan. That section will be remembered for the number of sheep, there were thousands and the couple of hire cars whose satnav had obviously said the track was brilliant and in no way resembled the surface of the moon.

At the car park at Peinachorrain we caught sight of Michael and Gareth for the first time since Portree and caught them just before we arrived at the hotel and CP2. It was on the Lochside that I noticed Graham was really struggling. He couldn't keep anything down and was starting to stumble and trip as we made our way over the streams and boulders. The weather had turned and rather surprisingly the rapid drop in temperature and rain hadn't helped matters.

Crossing the road, I spotted Patricia and Bryan Grant who had set up alongside the hotel. We were suffering and the soup and treats they had alongside the banter and general shite chat was great. That was the good part of the Sligachan CP and the next was without doubt the lowest I've ever experienced whilst running.

Graham was done in and as we looked at each other we both knew he couldn't carry on. Few words had to be said, just a nod as he headed into the shelter to try and get some soup down and some heat into his body. I'm not sure who was more broken but not knowing the route and the battering our bodies had taken made the decision the right one. Patricia was great and gave me a cuddle, told me to dry my eyes, man the fuck up and finish it for Graham. He is without doubt the toughest man I have the pleasure of knowing and an absolute diamond.

Taxi for 1 as I left and headed towards the Cuillins and decided that Gareth and Michael deserved my chat and good humour for a bit and that would be my buddies for the next 30 miles or so. Once I sorted my head out I actually felt really strong physically and maybe pushed the pace a little hard as we made our way past a couple of hillwalkers through Glen Slighachan, under the mighty Marsco only to be blessed with the finest view of Bla Bheinn Gareth had seen in the umpteen times he's ran this section.

The sun was back out and now feeling hydrated and with water a plenty from the streams we headed south towards Camasunary and the section I had been dreading since the brief. As we approached the beach the views were stunning and I asked

Michael how tricky the cliff edge was. Pretty scary was the response and I confessed I'm a shite bag with heights but laughed out loud when mountain man Michael said he was as well. So holding hands as Gareth stormed ahead we slowly plotted out way around the precarious path and I have never been so relieved to move away from the seaside as I was 20 minutes later as we descended into Elgol and CP3.

The midges were pretty brutal but the welcome we received from Karen, Alex and Neil amongst others was brilliant and crashed on a bench, took a cuppa with sugar the decision as soon as I took 1 shoe off. My feet went from being Ok to agony and as I searched for the Vaseline, ibuprofen gel, dry socks and my left Asics the midges were having a field day and I really could have chucked it.

Yet more words of encouragement from the checkpoint heroes and I gave myself another shake, checked Gareth was good to go and out of the shelter we went. It was only then we realised Michael wasn't with the other 2 stoogies and we waited on him getting his gear ready and off we went.

I felt Ok and tried to push the pace but Michael was having some issues with his stomach and we slowed the pace to a quick march as we headed up the track towards Loch Slapin in what was left of the daylight. It's a funny section and we were making good progress but as always moving alongside water when you can't see the headland is deceptive and this really started to play with our heads.

As the headtorches went on and the mood dropped we marched on hoping Michael's stomach would start to behave after a pack of chewing gum as we spotted the lights of CP4. Never have I been so glad to see a campervan as I was to see Susan and Terry Addison and the tea was possibly the best drink I have ever had in my life.

The only disappointment at the now renamed 'Campervan of Love' was the lack of Rennies, Tums or Alka-Seltzer for the now grumbling tum but we left in better spirits than we arrived.

The final push was on and we headed off towards Torrin before dropping back of the road onto the toad infested tracks and I hate to think how many poor wee slimy creatures were squashed by slow moving feet in the late hours of Saturday night into Sunday morning. The pace slowed as the weather closed in and all 3 headtorches were required as we hugged the coast at Boreraig.

As fatigue kicked in it was no surprise our sense of judgement wavered, we spent the best part of an hour walking up and down and round and round trying to find the track towards Broadford. It was the suggestion of Michael's suggestion to get comfy and wait until sunrise and Andrew Singleton joining us that gave us a shake and within minutes we had located the track in the pouring rain and set out for home.

A good climb on decent ground allowed for fast progress but after 20 odd hours we rained it in to ensure we all stayed together. Andy decided to drop back a little and as the wind packed up we tucked in to get over the ridge.

I'd missed a sub 24 hour finish at the WHW race the year before and was really keen to dip under that time here. As we approached 23 hours I saw a sign that said 5 to Broadford and my heart sunk a little as I realised we were suffering at different levels and there was no way anyone was going to make a sole break for the finish now.

Almost immediately I saw a sign that said 4 and 10 minutes later a 3 and I realised we were looked at KMs not miles and that gave me a right boost. A pep talk with the boys and we picked up the pace, hit the road and then saw the sign for Broadford and saw Pauline had drawn the short straw and the nightshift on the finish line.

23.44 so we had a massive 16 minutes to spare as we crossed the line together and hugs and handshakes were shared with Jeff, Pauline and Graham who was back on form.

In the car and back to the campsite for a quick kip before the prize giving and storytelling back at the village hall in a few hours time.

It was great to see everyone on the Sunday and what really shone through was the camaraderie that had been formed over the weekend between the runners and support who were utterly brilliant.

Big shout out to Gregor, Jonathan and Ben for winning but a bigger one to Barry, Ruairidh and the brilliant sweeper Andy O'Grady for really toughing it out.

Final thank you to Jeff for putting on a race like no other with some truly wonderful people who make it happen. If you are fortunate enough to be able to then once in your life you must give this a go. If you have done it once you may be back and if you gave it 100% but didn't quite make it you will be back.

