

RACE TO THE STONES 2015

On 11 July 2015 my son, Matt and I ran the Race to the Stones over 100k (63 miles) between the village of Lewknor in Oxfordshire and Avebury in Wiltshire. It took us 16 hours 45 minutes and 57 seconds and we finished in joint 436th place out of 862 (non-stop) runners.



This is a breathtakingly beautiful challenge through 5,000 years of history along The Ridgeway, the oldest path in the UK. It is lined with Bronze Age hill forts, Neolithic burial chambers, Roman river crossings and culminates in the largest Neolithic stone circle in Europe at Avebury.



We started at 8am on a glorious summer's morning in high spirits. We were amongst over 2,000 other participants, the vast majority of which would be walking or running the route over two days. Matt and I, however, would be running the whole route non-stop. The mood at the Start was upbeat as runners and walkers alike prepared themselves for the ordeal ahead.

There was a pit-stop every 10k offering water, juices, food, rest and medical facilities and, at the half-way tented village where those doing it over two days would stop for the night. The marshals and pit-stop assistants were incredibly enthusiastic and supportive, throughout and this was a very well-organised event.

For the first 10k we ran at a comfortable 10mm pace along a tree-lined track, enjoying the camaraderie and banter amongst the runners, still excited and full of energy at the start of our challenge.



At one point we crossed a golf course and then a narrow track through a field of corn with the corn-sheaves reaching up to our waists. We even ran alongside a racecourse at Lambourne Downs, overlooking Didcot in the far distance.

Shortly after the first pit-stop we ran along Grim's Ditch, a dead straight 5 mile path through overarching trees. Grim is the Anglo-Saxon word for the devil and his name was often attributed to unnatural features in the landscape. Grim's ditch was probably built during the Iron Age to mark a boundary as it's not big enough to be a defensive earthwork. The going here got tough as you had to be careful to avoid the many roots sprouting up everywhere across the path.



Suddenly we emerged from the trees and found ourselves running along The Thames. Without the cover of the leafy paths in the direct sunlight the temperature rose rapidly to reach 32 degrees at midday. We crossed the river at Goring-on-Thames, cheered on by the spectators enjoying a Saturday afternoon pint at the many pubs along the river. At this stage along the Thames path, country lanes and through the roads at Goring we were still keeping up a good pace of around 10mm but that didn't last long as, after 25k the route went steeply uphill and back onto the rockier trails of the Downs. In that heat we were relieved to reach the third pit-stop where a child was having a wonderful time dousing the sweaty runners with his water-gun!



The scenery up there was stunning, with long, sweeping vistas over the Chiltern Downs, capped by azure-blue sky-scapes broken only by fluffy white clouds. Underfoot the chalk paths were hard and unforgiving and many runners were complaining of blisters. Fortunately Matt and my long training sessions on the North Downs Way and Greensand Trail had hardened our feet against that.

Shortly after completing the first marathon in just over 5 hours were met at the fourth pit-stop by my wife Alyson, daughter Verity and Matt's girlfriend, Becky, with hugs, welcome food, a chance to replenish our electrolyte drinks and a change of kit.



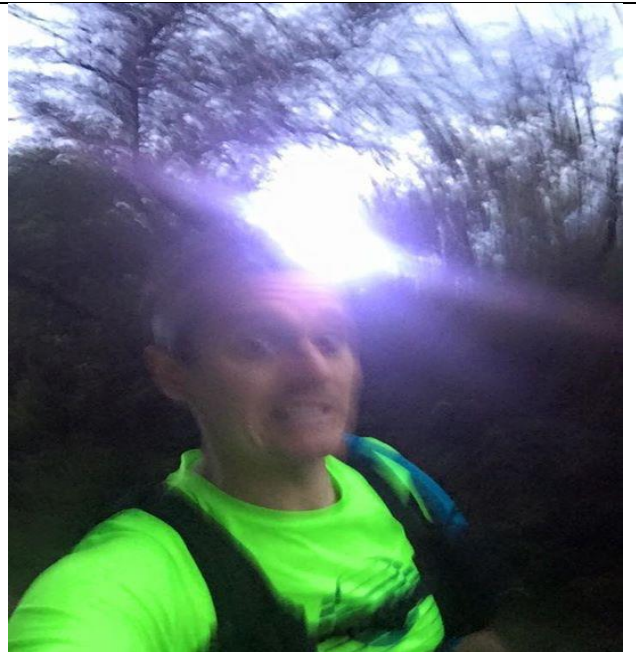
Suitably refreshed we set out again for the half-way village at 50k which we reached in 7 hours 45 minutes. A farmer's field had been commandeered for a huge marquee and a tented village with toilet and shower blocks for the majority of the participants who would over-night there. We wolfed down a meal of hot pasta and chocolate cake in the marquee and exchanged "war stories" with fellow runners. After this much-needed refuelling break but envious of those runners stopping here and enjoying a cool pint of cider, we set off on the second half of the challenge before our aching muscles seized-up too much. Now the trail got even hillier and rougher underfoot with the paths evolving into hard rocky tracks. My heel started to ache painfully but once we got back into our stride it became bearable enough to ignore.



What was amazing about this route was that, even though we were running through the heart of England, with the exception of Goring, we didn't pass through a single town or village. Virtually the whole route was through farming land along the top of the ridge, high above the settlements in the valleys below. We rarely ran on, or even crossed, a road. There was a sense of peace and calm throughout; far from the madding crowd.

Also, having left most of the field behind at half-way, there were now fewer runners on the route so it was much lonelier than before. I'm afraid that serenity didn't make the challenge any easier and, as the day drew on, so it became muggier and the route changed again, this time to rutted grassy chalk paths. We were by now into our 12th hour, by which time in our ignorance before the start, we had imagined we would have finished the race! We had totally underestimated how difficult it would be. As we plodded on the race became an exercise of survival between pit-stops.

And then, after the 8th pit-stop at 78.4k it started getting dark! Things got even tougher as we strained our eyes to pick out roots and rocks underfoot in the beams of our head-torches. What was always going to be a physically-draining challenge now became mentally draining too as we had to raise our levels of concentration. As darkness fell it also got colder and the atmosphere became moist with the twilight dew. This was where our spirits were at their lowest. Our energy was dwindling, our minds were scrambled and our muscles were screaming. My heel was locking-up so I had little flexibility in my ankle.



The final ridge run over the Marlborough Downs seemed to last for ever. We passed many runners on their last legs, now reduced to walking, but we were determined to run where the terrain allowed. The organisers had marked the route with tubes of

luminous fluid every 250m, without which we would certainly have got lost. We knew that at the point in the trail where we turned off The Ridgeway down into Avebury there would be a marshal with a torch guiding the way. Hill after painful hill passed us by but still no sign of that torch. The relief when we saw it bobbing like a firefly in the distance was massive!

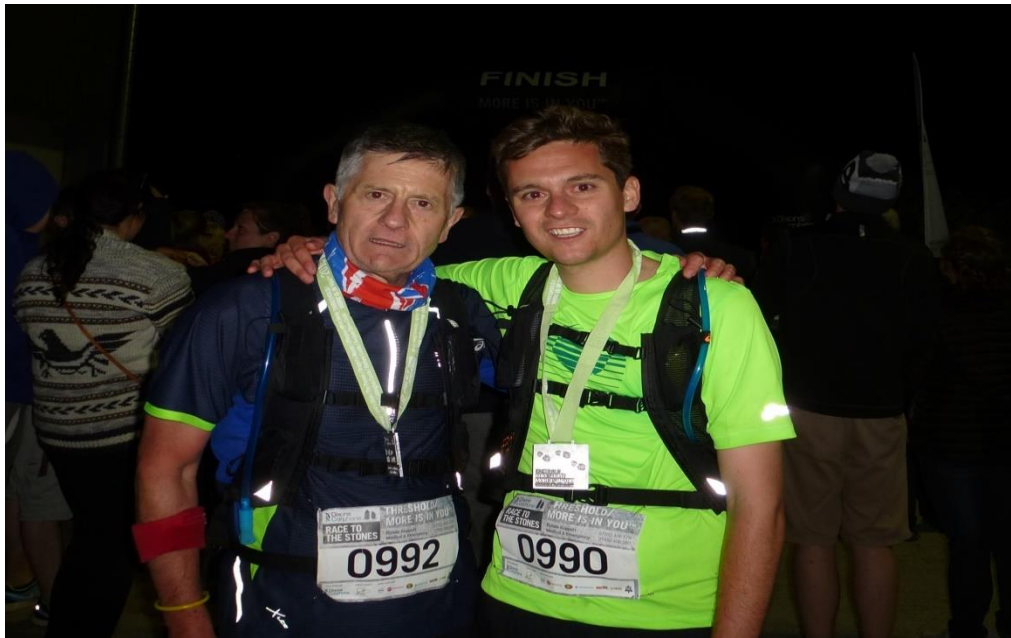
Down the steep hill into Avebury we ran, picking up the pace and overtaking still more runners, now, with the end in sight, care-less of the dangers of tripping on a rock or turning an ankle or a rut in the track. Suddenly the majestic stones reared up eerily around us out of the dark, their ancient, mysterious and concentric bulk guiding our way to the Finish. We picked up the pace again, frivolously using up our last ounces of energy to cover the last straight, lined with luminous tubes and flood-lights, in a painful hobbling “sprint” – but in style!



We ran up the final cruel slope to the Finish Line to the welcoming cheers of the many loyal supporters who had braved the cold night to witness the completion of this gruelling challenge. At 12.45am on Sunday 12th July Matt and I crossed the Line arm-in-arm and into the thankful embrace of our loved ones. There were medals, smiles and tears of relief; there was pain (especially in my heel which was by now locked solid) but most of all there was massive pride in our achievement.

The sign across the Finish gantry read “*More is in you*”. After 100 gruelling kilometres of physical and mental strain, I had to disagree as I had absolutely nothing in me left to give!

Over the 100k we had taken 16 hours 45 minutes and 57 seconds. We finished joint 436th out of 862 non-stop runners and over 2,000 participants in all. Our average speed was 5.96k/h and pace 10.03mk. I finished 40th out of 90 V50 male runners and Matt 185th out of 289 senior male runners (he definitely could have done it faster without me). In the second 50k we overtook 57 male runners.



What a challenge! This was a true test of endurance and determination. I have run the Comrades three times and never imagined anything could be harder. The fact that Race to the Stones is run on trails and partially in the dark raises the bar against an ultra on roads in the daylight. To have completed it is a major achievement. To have completed it with my son is an honour and a privilege and the highlight of my running career.

Richard Thomas

