

## Taking on a Classic – The Borrowdale Fell Race

By Dave Allaway

August 2011, I worked out I would be in the UK following two weeks of fairly strenuous trekking in the Swiss Alps. A quick glance at the calendar told me I could have a trip up to Lake District and be able to run in the Borrowdale Fell race which always falls on the first Saturday in August. I figured I would have good fitness from my trek and so should be in reasonable shape.

I've been living in New Zealand 9 years now and love all the great places we can run, tramp, do multisport events and be generally outdoorsy. There cannot be many countries in the world that have such a diverse playing ground for such a small country. I've been fortunate enough to race and play in some of these amazing places but there is still one event that is and I think always will be a firm favourite and certainly in my Top 10 of races completed and this is the Borrowdale Fell race.

Back in the early 90's I used to drive up from London with mates after work on Friday. We'd pitch our tents in a small camp ground (more of a lumpy field full of cow pats and sheep droppings) in a small village called Rosthwaite. Saturday morning we'd congregate in the centre of the village and shortly be on our way up onto the fells.

The Borrowdale fell race is an iconic race in the fell running calendar. It has been running for years and takes in the highest mountain and other summits in the area. It is a classic. In the local hotel bar aptly named the 'Scafell Hotel' is a plaque with the names of all the winners over its history.



The event is put on by the Borrowdale fell running club but it is largely organised by a family who live and farm in the village called the Blands. The Blands have been dominant in fell running in this area over the generations and have on many occasions won this event along with others in the Lakes. Billy Bland still holds the course record for this with 2hrs 34mins 38 seconds won in 1982. Pete Bland has his own fell running attire business and for years pretty much held the market in fell running footwear with his brand of shoe called 'Walshes' In the 90's pretty much everyone that ran would be wearing these blue and yellow studded fell shoes. It was interesting to see this year that has all changed; there are still Walshes but a range of shoes and the more popular being the Inov8.

So I had worked out it had been at least 12 years since I last ran in this event and wondered how I'd fare being a bit older than the youthful lad I was back then.

I had planned this trip to the Lakes with my parents and they were looking forward to coming out to support me. In the week before our trip up back in London we were experiencing a little mini heat wave with temps in the high 20's, the day we left to drive to the Lakes it had dropped down to 15c and was pouring with rain.

Race day dawned grey and overcast with rain showers forecasted all day.

We arrived in Rosthwaite with plenty of time before race start. The weather was as indecisive as I was about what to wear. It would heave down with rain then stop, brighten, then heave down again. Just 10 minutes before the start congregating in a field by the start line the skies opened up again and it lashed down. I along with many others decided to put on my lightweight rain jacket and at least start the run with this on. Much like NZ off-road races, there is a kit list requirement that has to be carried, thermals, map, compass, whistle, waterproof and food. I had this stuffed in a bum bag and also had a small camelbak with electrolyte drink. Looking around I was surprised how few people had any form of camelbak. For a long race you'd need a reasonable amount of water but I knew there would be streams higher up in the hills that you could drink from. I decided I'd keep my camelbak none the less.

The Borrowdale fell race is a grade A race – (regarded long) it is 17 miles / 27k with 6500ft / 2100m of ascent. There are 6 check points you have to run through which form a loop back to the start. Four of these are on summits, the others are significant crossings. I had purchased a lightweight sheet with a map of the route and checkpoints marked, although familiar with the route it could easily mist up on the hills and if you happened to be running by yourself you would need to be able to navigate your way round safely.

11 am and the race started a group of 300 plus runners set off. It was still raining hard. The first couple of miles are flat; you immediately turn off the road out of the village and onto a path that runs parallel to a small river up to Stonethwaite. *Previously at Stonethwaite you used to break off the road and immediately into wood and up incredibly steep slopes for 30 mins or so before reaching open tops. This route was now considered too dangerous with fallen trees and many rocks that would get dislodged by runners scrambling up. I remember often seeing huge stones and rocks come tearing past me with cries above and below me of 'rocks coming' I was always amazed that nobody got wiped out. Perhaps someone did, hence the minor route change.*

So from Stonethwaite we were directed right along a 800 meter section of road before breaking off and up open fellside. The route up started gentle with a nice section of rocky single track to follow. There was already a long line of runners ahead and behind and I figured I must be pretty middle of the pack. After a while the route steepened and became a walk with some small scrambles over rock. Just 10 mins after the start it had stopped raining and I was already overheating, as I walked up I took off my jacket and stuffed it back into my bum bag. After 30 mins or so the route became less steep and we were able to run, there was a very faint sheep track to follow and we followed each other as we picked our way up and across the open fells. Occasionally you would hit a boggy patch and if not judged correctly you would be up to your knees in bog. This happened to me on a few occasions and was quite draining to pull yourself out and continue. The line of runners had now begun to spread out and seeded itself accordingly. A fair few of the runners around me I would see all day. After about an hour we reached the first summit and checkpoint 1 – Bessyboot. Feeling good I took a gell and continued on, the gradient was still gentle and the terrain soft and boggy as we slowly began rising and traversing our way around a mountain called Glaramara and on towards Allen Crag and Checkpoint two. The cloud cover was high and whilst it looked like it could rain was remaining dry. The views were impressive and I had to remind myself to look up occasionally and take in the great environment I was running in. Another 30 minutes and checkpoint two the Esk Hause Shelter. This is a significant crossing of tracks as routes from here direct to various summits and passes. This also joins you to one of the main routes up towards Scafell Pike our third

checkpoint and also the highest mountain in the Lakes (and England). At Esk house there were a small group of people handing out lollies and pieces of flapjack. From boggy fell to a rocky track which was much easier to run on. The route began to climb steeper as we began to get close to broad crag. The last 30 minutes or so to the summit were a boulder hop, care had to be taken crossing a mix of slab and rock, as one turn of the ankle here would put an end to your race. I enjoyed this section as I was concentrating hard and was very much living in the 'here and now' all other thoughts excluded from my mind. There seemed to be no obvious line and runners were picking their way across on both sides of me. I was hoping that all my coast to coast prep (of last year) and two weeks of similar terrain in the Alps would have helped me across this section but I was still tentative in parts and would stoop down to use my hands for balance rather than just leap across. This is a skill that really has to be practised and I remember thinking this is where the leaders really make huge gains as they just bound across this stuff with no fear.

In the distance I could make out the top and the cairn and a few people cheering and checking runners through. The weather was still clear which pleased me as I knew the next section down was tricky and not one I would want to do in a white out.

1hr 45 min to the top and now down scree slopes to the Corridor route and onto Great Gable. The first part from the top was a small bit of back tracking before breaking off North West and down steep scree slopes. Every year the organisers advise us to avoid this section and back track further to broad crag and follow a safer route down to the Corridor but every year I'm sure the majority take the steep scree slopes. The gradient down is similar to that of the descent from Avalanche peak in Arthurs pass but follows more of a shoot. Again I had hoped I could descend this quickly but found myself leaning back and running down side ways using my hands to balance. Whilst I thought I was going ok, this older guy came literally flying past a group of us taking huge steps and facing forward rather than to the side, he was moving scree down with him and I watched him get half way down in less than a few minutes. Clearly a local I thought and someone well practised in the art of scree running. Once at the bottom and ankles and legs in tact we picked an awkward line across fell side to the bottom of Great Gable. There was a path that we could have followed but runners around me were taking a more direct line which kept breaking away from the path. The grass was clumpy and high enough that you could not make out holes or rocks and I found crossing this section particularly challenging. I was actually looking forward to being able to ascend again. After 30 mins or so we arrived at the bottom of what now looked another almighty climb to the top of Great Gable. The steepness is such that you can only walk, hands on knees acting as pistons we all pushed on hard. It was a tough relentless climb about 30 mins and finally another summit and checkpoint 4.

My time was 2hrs 45 mins and I still had two checkpoints to go and at least another 90 mins of running. It occurred to me that the leaders would be very close to finishing and I had to quickly extinguish this thought from my head.

The route to Honister pass was mainly downhill but again required picking a line directly across the fell side away from any tracks. I was beginning to feel tired in the legs and wasn't feeling at times very co-ordinated with my running. I had been running close to a pack of girls who I figured were contending for top places in the women's race. There were four or five of them fairly close together and this awkward section across the fells they started to pull away from me. I knew we had one

more big climb to go and climbing seemed to be my strength so I would try to pull them back on that.

In the distance I could see the slate quarry which meant Honister Pass. There is a slate mine at Honister pass and also here we would cross a road before our final climb of the day. At the checkpoint, more lollies and flapjack and the last 30 min ascent. My time was 3hrs 15 and I figured I had about an hour to go. 30 mins up and 30 all the way down to the village.

This last climb was a struggle, just as I remembered it, by this stage you are starting to think of the finish but there is still an hour of work to do so have to block this thought out for now. Again hands on knees and a tough 30 mins of walking to the top. Once on top, the last checkpoint and the descent begins. During the climb I could see the girls who had pulled away from me but could not make any gains on them. The descent begins very grassy with the occasional sheep track to follow and tarn to pass before coming to a plateau which takes you to a fence line, from here over a style then a steep descent which takes you through another slate quarry above Borrowdale and in the distance you can see the village and finish and could almost taste the finish. Suddenly runners appeared from nowhere and the pace and intensity picked up as we all get competitive again and can sense we are nearly there. A last steep slippery grassy slope takes us down to a river which we follow for about 800 meters before crossing onto four wheel track and the last mile down to the finish. Just as we descend back towards Rosthwaite it begins raining heavily again. There are people cheering us on and the last few meters we weave through a farm and past cottages into the field and the finish line. On the side I see my parents and my Dad with his camera. Unfortunately having waited in pouring rain for me for 30 mins or so his camera had turned itself off and he missed a finishing photo of me. I was pretty spent but happy. The rain was pouring down and my parents said it had pretty much been like this all day so must have been very local, we were able to climb up and away from it and had on the most part a completely dry day.

My time was 4hrs 20 mins, This was 10 or 15 mins down on previous years but on the whole pretty similar. I was stoked; it really had been a great run, tough and testing but a whole lot of fun.

I drank cups of tea and eat soggy ham sandwiches served up at the village hall.

This year was another year of firsts in that the organisers had decided not to have the disco and steel band in the Marquee on the field. This in years gone by was legendary; it was always such a great night full of fun and energy but for whatever reason had been canned this year in place of a local band in the Scafell hotel.

We were staying down the road so jumped in the car and off for a nice soak in the hotel spa.