



Race Report

5 Marathons in 5 Days

Date: September 2011
Location: Suffolk and Hampshire

By: Ian Culton

I had booked up to run the New Forest marathon on Sunday 25th September and when I was asked by the parents of my goddaughter if I would run a marathon for sponsorship in aid of the paediatric ward at St Richards as she had spent some time there last year, decided to use this one. I was then sent a link about the Great Barrow Challenge by a guy I meet regularly at marathons, Rik Vercoe, who was running 30 marathons in 30 weeks for charity and decided to finish with an extra push. The Challenge is four days of marathons running from Wednesday 21st to Saturday 24th from a base in the village of Barrow, just outside Bury St Edmunds, thinking that it might be easier to get sponsorship for 5 marathons instead of 1, I signed up as well.

I had booked a space inside, rather than out in a communal tent and when I arrived on Tuesday, I found that the sleeping area was a karate hall. There were perhaps 3 others there before me and another 10 or so arrived over the next 30 hours or so.

All four days of the Challenge were multi-terrain and covered roads, sand, forest trails, mud and grass, often though some fairly pretty scenery. The event was essentially a larger version of the Chichester Challenge with four different distances for walkers, runners & cyclists. Routes had been marked out with different coloured arrows for each distance and we also had a sheet of instructions and a map. We were told that the primary source should always be the directions, followed by the map and then the arrows, but there were no mileages against the directions and the clarity of the map was not always great.

Day 1

The first day started well. I ran with Rik for the first part and we reached halfway in just over 2 hours. Unfortunately, I had been struggling to maintain the pace for a little while and felt that I was holding Rik back, so I told him to go on alone. I had deliberately done very little running in the 3 weeks before the event to rest my Achilles, but began to think that I had reduced too much as my fitness seemed to be lacking. I carried on as best I could, listening to comedy on my iPod to keep my spirits up. I've done this before on runs & find it can be better than music, though when I was laughing to myself on the 3 Forts last year in pouring rain running up hills, I got a few strange looks.

I walked quite a bit, mostly still enjoying it, however, the last couple of miles seemed to last forever & I was checking my Garmin what seemed like every few seconds. It was a relief to see hill we'd started out on that morning, even if I had to go up it this time.

26.9 miles, 5.05.37

Day 2

The routes for the 2nd and 3rd days started out the same way and then separated. The organisers had covered the signs for the 3rd day, but unfortunately these were removed and a number of people ended up following Day 3's route by mistake, some getting about 8 miles before realising and getting a lift in a passing van back on to the correct route. Rik and I managed to stay on the correct route, but this time I told him to head off at about 11 miles. We turned onto a road, but had forgotten about the map and directions and were just following the arrows. We missed a left turn off the road and ran on for a little while before the arrows started again. I started feeling things weren't right, so checked the



map, found the left turn and saw that the route looped out and then rejoined the road where the arrows had started again. Rik had already gone, but I traced my steps back and took the turn.

It was a good run, going through a couple of country parks and along a number of quiet roads, but knowing I'd added extra was starting to get to me. The last 4 miles were pretty tough – 2 were along some fairly busy roads with a lot of trucks and I would have preferred to have done them at the start when I wasn't feeling so tired – and the very last 2 were the same as Day 1, so felt as long as they had then. After I finished, I walked an extra couple of miles into Barrow to go to the shops and get some food for lunch, but can't say it was the fastest walking I've ever done.

29.3 miles, 6.34.23

Day 3

Day 3 started very badly. There were several very loud snorers in the hall. The night before Day 1, I'd got very little sleep, so the next night I slept on a sofa in the reception area outside the hall. One of the others had also come out to do the same & as there was only one sofa, I let her have it on the night of Day 2 and slept on the floor. It was a concrete floor and I woke up with a pain in my left leg and was unable to bend and stretch it properly. It remained as a sort of dead leg all day and meant I was only able to run sporadically. I think there were a couple of other factors that had a further psychological impact on me – it was my birthday & while the idea of running a marathon on that day had sounded quite good initially, it started to grate as the day went on, but more importantly, most of the others were only running the Challenge, so had been talking about being halfway through at the end of Day 2, while I would only get there halfway through today

Rik and I set off a bit behind the others and made the same mistake of ignoring the directions and the map and went wrong where others had the day before and ended up on Day 2's route again. We managed to get back on track fairly soon and talked about taking short cuts in races, agreeing that it cheats yourself & we wouldn't want to do it. However, I did admit that the way I was feeling then, if a car had pulled up and offered me a lift to the end, I might have taken it ☺

I was struggling quite a bit, so told Rik to head on after only about 8 miles and had to walk most of the route after that. At two points, arrows were in direct opposition to the directions and map. At each, I stopped and discussed with other runners and walkers which to follow. Each time, the map and directions were right, but we could have followed the second arrow and got to the right path, but missed out a loop. Even though I had thought a few hours earlier about accepting a lift, I found that I wanted to complete the correct route, despite being sure that due to earlier mistake, I would have made the mileage anyway.

Towards the end of the route, we went through a deer farm and it was pretty cool to take a path between two fenced off areas with herds of them running past on each side. The path took me back into the village of Barrow, with a left turn back to the hall, but I turned right to go to the shops and get some lunch as I couldn't face walking back later. As a result, it was the first marathon in which I crossed the finish line with a bag of shopping in one hand and an ice lolly in the other.

28.5 miles, 6.57.05

Day 4

Today was a lot better in every way. The weather had been good every day, but it was especially so on the last. I'd had a decent night's sleep and my leg was virtually back to normal. Although I knew I had one more marathon to go after this, I was able to feel good about this being the last of the Challenge.

As Rik wanted to head off early to get down to the New Forest, I told him to leave me behind straight away, but actually felt good enough that I was fairly close behind him for the first 7 miles or so. I had to slow down though, as I was running up hills faster than I had planned to, talking to other runners and eventually ran out of breath.



The route was probably the best of the four as we went through Newmarket, including along the gallops and the training grounds, seeing many strings of racehorses out and about. In the town, I was interested to see the double pavements they had – one for pedestrians and the other for horses. In the morning briefing we had been told that the horses had priority over everyone else and if we were approached by security when crossing areas of land owned by one of the sheiks to do whatever they said. Luckily no-one approached me.

26.2 miles, 4.59.31

Day 5 – New Forest

The final day. I could go all out, knowing that I didn't have to get up the next day and do it again. Well, as all out as I could manage 😊.

I set off far too quickly, caught up with trying to keep up with Tim Boone. After 7 miles of averaging 8.30 minute pace, I dropped back, only to find myself running with a guy called Simon. He was a member of the 100 Marathon Club and this was his 172, but he had also been at Barrow for all 4 days of the Challenge and we had spoken a number of times over the previous few days. He told me about a mate of his who was actually running his 801 marathon that day, but who was too far ahead of us for me to meet. I stuck with Simon until just after halfway, but again had slow down as tiredness began to get to me. We'd gone through the halfway point in just under 2 hours 10, but I had to keep alternating between running and walking after that.

I'd not seen Dave Butler since the start as he was going far too quick for me, but knew several others in the race and started seeing some of those coming past me in the last few miles. I tried to keep up, but couldn't and decided to go back to running my own race, hoping to get in under 4.30. With about 2 miles to go, I came up alongside a young guy limping along. I'd passed him a little while ago, limping then, but he'd passed me in one of my walking sections. I started talking to him and he explained that it was his first marathon & he'd not run beyond 18 miles or so before and had started to suffer around 20. We walked together for a while and I decided to forget the time, but then he seemed to feel a bit better and was agreeable to trying to go for it. We sped up to a jog and I kept checking the time, but it looked like it wasn't going to happen, when he suddenly had the worst cramp yet. We both pulled up and I looked on a bit helplessly as I realised that my knowledge of how to deal with fairly basic running complaints is sadly lacking. He very kindly told me to go on & after a few moments of dithering, I did so, being reassured by the fact that we had pulled up just short of an ambulance, so more qualified helpers were on their way. I pushed off as fast as I could, running flat out for the last half a mile, but finished a few minutes outside of my target. I hung around the finish line and was pleased to see him cross the line only a couple of minutes later. We spoke and I congratulated him on completing his first marathon, asking if he would do another. He paused and said he would think about it the next day.

26.3 miles, 4.32.23