

The Grand Union Canal Race – 2004

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Gas Street Basin, 0530hrs..... in the cold light of dawn the place is it is in fact marginally more attractive than the name implies. Maybe it's the fact that we have just picked our way along Broad Street, where the detritus of yet another night of binge drinking by the pimply youth of Birmingham is ankle deep. Maybe it's the fact that Dick Kearn's down to earth pre race briefing letter has prepared us for the worst. Or maybe it's just the fact that we are about to embark on the UK's longest non stop ultramarathon that makes us cling to any positive thoughts that we may have left.

The 145.4 mile Grand Union Canal race is a relatively simple affair. Start at 0600hrs on Saturday, run along the canal in the direction of London, finish with minimal ceremony in Little Venice anything up to 45 hours later. Not many rules: do the whole thing under your own steam, don't stop for longer than 40 minutes or you will be deemed to have retired and follow the route without falling in to the murky waters of the canal. Oh yes, there are no loos at the start and if you quit, tell race HQ as soon as possible. In 10 years of running the event, there have been about 75 finishers. Despite some low numbers in the early years, around 55 - 60 brave souls now attempt the distance annually, and the number of finishers is up.

The race is a very well run, exceptionally friendly affair. Dick Kearn strives to get to know each runner by sight - a feat that must become simpler as the race progresses, mainly owing to the high numbers dropping out! Support crews give encouragement all round – must be a canal related phenomenon, as we found that it was the same during the Devizes to Westminster Canoe race last year. The checkpoints are far apart, but the cut off times are pretty generous. There are no prequalification standards for the race, just being bloody minded and paying the entry fee will do, but Dicks pre race correspondence should be enough to put off those who entered without really meaning it. There are no gimmicks to this race – it is purely about running, endurance and mental strength.

Amongst the 80 or so on the official start list (of whom 54 turn up on the day) Dick Kearn can cater for about 20 'unsupported' runners. Unsupported are those unable to con, cajole, bribe or blackmail a friend to give up their Bank Holiday weekend to accompany them in order to provide sustenance and encouragement en route. The rule of thumb for unsupported places is first come first served, but for a nominal fee Dick will look after your drop bags and provide food and water at predetermined points en route.

So to the race itself – 145.4 miles is a long way in anybody's language, and the field set off as though they know it. Ducking under low bridges at a slow trot, slowing to a walk over the innumerable hump backed bridges the field remains bunched for the first five miles or so. Although no one is trying to get through, it would in fact be difficult to overtake on the narrow towpath at this point in any case. Terrain under foot is good, however, and other than the bridges, it is also, of course, flat.

The rain that has been forecast has arrived and a steady drizzle soaks the runners as they leave the confines of Birmingham. The rainfall increases as we near Catherine de Barnes Bridge at just over ten miles, where the first marshaled checkpoint is. I have only spotted one or two runners wearing SealSkinz waterproof socks, and a combination of the steady rain and long grass mean that most runners are changing their socks, if not their shoes regularly. I do not have the luxury of a second pair of shoes until the 120 mile point, where I am hoping that my wife will meet me, but I am pleased to see that the "unsupported" bags are neatly laid out under a tarpaulin. Dry socks, a check on the zinc oxide tape adorning feet, refill the water bottles and we are off again. Running still, but keeping the lid on the pace. The temptation to try and "pick off" runners ahead of you is always there, and Jackson and I strive to keep to our race pace.

At 20.4 miles Shrewley Tunnel is an obvious landmark. Not so obvious is the fact that it is dark in there, and about ten metres into the tunnel the ramp turns into steps. I manage to smash my foot into the first step, thereby generously giving Jackson an audible warning that the hazard is there. Thankfully the only real damage done is to my sense of humour, but we plod steadily on towards Hatton locks at 22 miles. We have arranged to meet Christian Cullinane at that point, who will accompany us on a mountain bike for the next forty minutes, encouraging us in his own special way. Christian duly appears, laden with water, chocolate bars and advice. "Don't know why you took this on, lads" – apparently he can be booked for motivational

talks, but has yet to get any repeat bookings..... CC escorts us around the one mile detour courtesy of British Waterways who are carrying out towpath repairs. What's another mile when there are still 120 to go?

The second pair of dry socks for the day feels great on the feet, but my heels are getting sore. I have failed to deal with some rather heavy calluses on both heels before the race, and I am starting to regret not getting that foot file out. I know from bitter experience during the Marathon des Sables that blisters underneath a callus can go in deep and be very painful. Somehow in my preparation for this race I have neglected to do anything about my feet and I will later regret it.

Jackson is in outstanding form, keeping us to our race pace with a 20 min running - 5 min walking routine. I have marveled at Jackson's pace keeping since our 55 mile London to Brighton effort back in 2001. Jackson had devised a plan to get us to the finish in 9hrs 30mins and despite 7 hours of driving rain and high winds, got us there in 9:31:56. Whether it was by luck or good judgement, he has never said, but as a result of that I'll happily trot along beside him and leave the pace keeping to him.

We are looking forward to the Heart of England checkpoint at 53 miles, where we know that my sister will be waiting with a bowlful of hot pasta. We arrive in great spirits and wolf the food down, followed by a 'Brucey Bonus' of a slice of chocolate cake and cup of tea, before hitting the road once more. Each stop, no more than 15 minutes, leaves us fairly stiff, but we feel that any opportunity to take the weight off our feet for a few minutes is well worth it.

The next checkpoint is about 20 miles away at Navigation Bridge, where Dick Kearns Race Headquarters van will be waiting. Our plan is to change into our night gear at this point as well as to snatch a ten minute powernap. It is still raining and even when the rain is not falling, the often long grass is wet, which means that feet are constantly soaked. Spare shoes would have been a good idea. Better still would have been getting the calluses off my heels, as in descending the hill on the London side of Blisworth Tunnel at 63 miles, the blister on my right heel bursts somewhere deep under the skin. The discomfort is immediate and I have to walk on the balls of my feet for the next mile or so. Unfortunately the pain is lessened when we are running, so there is no excuse to slow down. I decide that I will not attempt to treat the blister and when I next get the chance, I will just change my socks without looking.

At Navigation Bridge we change in the back of the van – the previous night was cold and damp and we do not want to lose too much energy through heat loss. We both don Ron Hills and a dry top, with hat and running gloves to hand, then, after an abortive attempt at a power nap that is soon disturbed by rain, decide to kick on towards our next goal, the tantalising 99.8 mile marker. We hope to reach this at dawn, and slow the pace for the hours of darkness. This slower pace is for two reasons: Firstly, we do not want to overheat only to get a chill in the early hours of the morning through damp clothing and Secondly, the going is somewhat more uneven than before and we do not want to risk turning an ankle.

Approaching Milton Keynes in the driving rain in the small hours of the morning, we decide that we will try and rest a while at the number checkpoint at Bridge 99 at mile 84.5. Our progress is slow, we are drenched by the rain and increasingly frustrated by the inaccuracies of the Geo Projects map. It seems that every turn of the canal stretches, featureless, into the distance. Although we later calculate our progress to be an acceptable 4 mph, it seems to take an age to reach the elusive Bridge 99. The steady rain has been replaced by a light drizzle as the checkpoint finally comes into view. It is around 0130hrs and we decide to try and rest for 15 minutes.

Unfortunately the hard, damp ground makes it impossible to get any sleep, however brief and we are soon up on our feet. I am merely stiff jointed and tired, but the stop seems to have taken all the wind out of Jackson's sails. He struggles to get to his feet, complaining of nausea and dizziness. I refill the water bottles as he eventually makes it to his feet. We change back into our 'day' clothes and lurch off once more down the towpath. As the light improves towards 0330hrs, we decide to up the pace and break back into our run/walk routine. Jackson, who has been unusually quiet for the last hour, cannot keep up a running pace for more than a minute at a time. It is clear that he is suffering, and a decision has to be made. We are just

short of 90 miles and now falling behind as far as our race schedule is concerned. Jackson manfully decides to throw in the towel at 92 miles, leaving me to continue towards Little Venice, now 'only' 53 miles away.

It is with regret that I leave Jackson to summon help from Dick Kearn and I break into a stiff run. Within half an hour or so I am moving smoothly again and the sleep monsters recede into the distance as the sun comes up. The waterproof is now consigned to my Kimmsac and I suck water down as I run fairly freely towards our dawn goal, the 99.8 mile checkpoint and feed station in the grounds of the Grand Junction Arms.

A cheerful crew greets me as I arrive to find Jackson wrapped in blankets, looking grey and disappointed – his wife Karen is already on her way to collect him, and he will return home to sleep for a good 14 hours before making a full recovery. A breakfast of Weetabix, tea and toast – yes, that's toast and marmalade – is eaten in a hurry and I elect not to inspect my feet for fear of finding all sorts of horrors hidden in my shoes. I stop for no longer than ten minutes before striking out for the next landmark, the 120 mile point at Springwell Lock. After that there will be less than a marathon to go, and I feel sure that, if I can reach Springwell in relatively good shape, that I will be able to finish.

One of the runners who passed us earlier on in the race quit during the 2003 race at the 110 mile point. I hear his warning words in my head "My feet went first, followed closely by my head. I just suddenly collapsed mentally and couldn't bear to go on...." Passing the 110 mile point in good shape becomes something of a mission for me. As luck would have it, the point was well marked on Jackson's Geo projects map. A couple of hundred yards past Bridge 153 marks the point, and I think that it looks like a strange place to give up as I cruise past feeling remarkably good. I am still trying to keep up a run/walk routine, but have given up on timing myself – instead I am disciplining myself to run to a particular spot then walk on to another. I choose the landmarks far in advance and refuse to let myself "just take those extra couple of paces" past it before breaking into a run. Every step I take is a step closer to the next checkpoint, from where I have convinced myself that I will be able to finish, no matter what.

I start to break the route down into one mile sections and try and keep up a steady 4 miles per hour. Every 15 minutes, another mile gone. I have no real idea of my rate of progress, but I feel remarkably strong and soon I am only a few miles from the checkpoint. As I round the final bend on the approach to Springwell Lock, I see my wife and family waiting for me. My three children and family friend Dominic Hanson run the last hundred yards or so with me. I sit in a chair and enjoy some food and yet more tea, but after less than ten minutes I am off again, keen to crack another mile.

I allow myself the luxury of thinking that I am on the "home run", and while I have 20 miles to go, this is still potentially 5-6 hours more running at the pace I am going. There is only one more checkpoint left before the finish, at 133.2 mile (Hanborough Tavern) and I make the serious mistake of relaxing mentally. I am soon in trouble. I start to feel the overwhelming exhaustion that hitherto I have controlled through mental strength. I have simply not allowed the massive distance to be a factor and have pictured the race as a series of manageable sections. Whether an hour, a 5 mile section or just making it to the next bridge, I have never had a doubt that I would make it to the next landmark. Now I have allowed myself to think about a 20 mile section in one go and the thought of putting one foot in front of the other for another 5 hours or so almost defeats me. "My feet went first, then my head...." wise words indeed. Quitting midway between bridges and so near to home looks distinctly appealing.

I manage somehow to get my head together again and return to concentrating on manageable sections. I rant silently about idle cartographers who have irritated me by producing inaccurate maps. No matter that the Geo Projects map is meant as a rough guide for canal traffic. That railway bridge is in the wrong place! I write a couple of 'Mr Angry from Purley' letters in my head and soon the miles are going smoothly again. The Hanborough Tavern checkpoint, however, takes forever to arrive and the finish seems an age away. I lurch into view of the checkpoint, but on sitting down in the proffered chair am unable to tell the kind lady there whether I want tea, coffee or squash. I am too tired to make a decision and quite frankly I don't care. She gives me tea, which I gulp down along with about six Jaffa cakes and a banana, then head off for the final stage with a weak wave of the hand.

I have managed to pass three or four runners in the last ten miles, most of them stopped with their support crews. As I climb over one of the many hump-backed bridges, some 'likely lads' lager cans in hand, cheer me on. They tell me that there is another runner less than ten minutes ahead of me, and he looks pretty bad. "Worse than me?" I inquire, "Oh yes mate, he looked knackered!" I stumble on, running several hundred yards at a time, then walking for five minutes, sometimes more. After about an hour I see the runner in question – it is runner 297, Stuart Shipley, M40 of Chesapeake Road Runners and he has shin splints like never before. We have a brief chat as I pass – at this stage in the race everyone is going at their own pace. I certainly cannot go any faster, and certainly do not want to go any slower. Little Venice is five miles away, and I finally allow myself the luxury of envisaging the finish line. The final landmark for me is the massive flyover near Paddington Station and I call ahead as go under it. I will be there in 20 minutes.

Before turning the corner along the final straight, I use some of my water to wash my face as I run. I do not want to finish the Grand Union Canal Race looking like some vagrant who has spent the night on the embankment! The fact that I have spent the night on the embankment is neither here nor there and I even find the energy for a final surge, almost sprinting towards the line.

I have finished in 8th place overall taking 37 hours 46 minutes to cover the 145.4 miles (+ detour!). Jackson's race plan had us finishing in 38 hours, so his reputation as chief wizard pace and time keeper remains intact.

There were 80 entrants, 54 turned up on the day and 23 finished. The winner was Gary Wale of Riverside Runners in an amazing 32 hours 36 minutes, last finisher was Allan Pollock of Rolls Royce in 45 hours 5 minutes. That time means that Allan finished at 0305hrs on Monday morning, and Dick Kearn will have been there to award him his medal. He was not there when I finished, but then some scumbag had broken into the race van and he was off seeing Mr. Plod, so he is forgiven! Full results are at <http://www.comptonharriersrc.cjb.net>

Worst things about the GUCR: The rain, Milton Keynes at 0130hrs in yet more rain, the long wait for Bridge 99, Jackson scratching at 92 miles, the loneliness of the long distance runner, thinking that you are 'nearly there' just because you ran under the M25, the endless finish section.

Best things about the GUCR: The distance, the camaraderie, the bemused looks from weekend narrow boaters, the loneliness of the long distance runner, encouragement from all support crews, particularly the wonderful lot that accompanied Rupert Chesmore – thanks for the bacon sandwich! Seeing my family at 120 miles, and, finishing the bloody thing so I never have to go back!

What's next? Providing our entry is accepted, Jackson and I will be running the 152 mile Spartathlon on 1st & 2nd October 2004. Cut off time 36 hours. <http://spartathlon.webvista.net/>