

BARF'S GRAND DAY OUT

Friday 18th August, teatime, 12 hours to go until the start of the inaugural BARF challenge, and the heavens open. Rain, rain and more rain. But only one phone call querying if the challenge is still on.

Rostrevor, Saturday morning, 6.30 and it's still raining as ten BARFers set off on the first of eleven Hill & Dale race routes to be completed within a 24 hour period. Last night's caller is left hanging on the telephone.

The BARF challenge was devised at the BARF AGM when Dave Ewart suggested that completing the eleven Hill and Dales race routes within a twenty-four hour period would pose a suitably stiff challenge. This was enthusiastically greeted as being 'a good idea' and the planning started. As far as we were aware, nobody else had undertaken this run previously and it was a big challenge keeping our intentions within the club in order that no other club would attempt to steal our thunder. The project was known as 'Hills & Dales in a Day', not even an Enigma code breaker could work that out.

At our monthly post-training pizza feast, various routes were suggested and discarded until we finally agreed on what we considered to be the optimum route. The challenge would start in Rostrevor and work its way clockwise around the Mourne, the completion being at the top of Binnian. A schedule was devised allowing two hours per route, leaving a cushion of two hours in case we got waylaid, hopefully in a pub!!

Rostrevor, Saturday morning, 6.30 and it's still raining as ten BARFers set off to the summit of Slieve Martin, the first of eleven Hill & Dale race routes to be completed within a 24 hour period. An easy jog up onto the open mountain and then off along the fence to the summit. No chance of any scenic views over Carlingford Lough as the mist is ever-present. A group photograph at the trig point and then a jog downhill to the finish. First one in the bag, one and a quarter hours gone.

Rocky was next, no hanging about the car park as the midges are starting to appear as the rain eases. A jog up the track, staying faithful to this year's race route and then a run across the mist shrouded summits. Team photo at the top of rocky and a jog downhill back to the car park. No dramas and another hour and a quarter on the hills. Dave produces an enormous Tupperware box of pasta and proceeded to dig into it with gusto. A quick cup of tea and then off to Hen and Cock. The number of routes to complete is now in single figures.

A very brief discussion took place as to whether we would drive up Hen track but as nobody was driving a tractor or Landrover, we all parked in the car park. Andy Bridge is caught taking additional energy supplements – blackberries. The rain has stopped, coats in bumbags and we're off. A brisk walk up Hen, jog down the other side, a longer brisk walk up Cock, the obligatory summit photograph and a return over the way we came. No dramas, another hour and a quarter on the hills and eight more to go. The blackberries were yummy.

We are on schedule and head to the Spelga Dam car park for the first of our regrouping and refuelling stops. Dave produces his pasta bucket and digs in. Norma produces a more ladylike portion and digs in. Public toilets are visited (in twos if

you're female). Kettles are filled and boiled, warm clothes donned and everybody is in good spirits. Brian Ervine appears from behind the dam on a training run and becomes the first person outside BARF to be made aware of what we are doing – he's suitably impressed by our madness. A quick check of the watch to ensure that we are keeping to our schedule, wagons roll and we are off to Deers Meadow for the assault on Slieve Moughanmore.

At Deers Meadow we meet the S.A.R.D.A. (Search and Rescue Dogs Association) on a training exercise. Having worn the same wet kit since the start, you would not need one of these dogs to find us if we got lost (imagine!!), we are very pungent from up to two miles down wind. We trot off on the now traditional diagonal route across Pigeon, over the wall, down to the stream and up to the summit of Slieve Moughanmore. We are surprised that despite the recent heavy rain, this years race conditions are not repeated, it's actually quite dry underfoot. We take a long pause at the top for photos – Fred is now attempting arty farty snapshots – and a discussion about the best route for the upcoming Spelga Skyline race takes place. On the way back over Pigeon we encounter a Duke of Ed. group frying sausages for lunch – Dave and Gerry start to salivate over the smell from the stoves. Another cup of tea, more banana's and energy drinks and we're off to tackle Slieve Loughshannagh. Four down, seven to go.

The weather is perfect as we trot over Carn, around the lake and up to the summit of Doan – more photos. Pub quiz question 'How many H&D race routes can you see from the top of Doan?'. Off we go over Slieve Loughshannagh and a gentle jog down Ott to finish. This is the longest race route of the day and takes an hour and three quarters. Dave and Gerry are still talking about the sausages. We are having more food and energy drinks when the heavens suddenly open (again) and another downpour envelops us. Quickly into the cars and head for Meelmore Meelbeg.

Off we go, a brisk walk up Meelmore, still sticking to this years race route, a pause at the tower for yet more photos, then on to Meelbeg. The weather's closing in a bit, drizzle and mist. Half way up Meelbeg Trevor's mobile rings – it's expectant father, Jim Brown, enquiring how we are getting on. Trevor tells him about the weather, Jim says he's basking in the sun at present. What's that cheering? Quiet!! It's SUN, not SON!! Nothing has popped yet. No time to dally at the top of Meelbeg due to the stench from dead sheep, one group photo beside a headless ewe and then off to the finish through the mist. That's the mountain routes completed, now into the forests. Six done, five to go, we're on the homeward stretch and still on schedule.

The group are now scheduled to have their second pit stop to refuel and regroup at Meelmore Lodge. The thought of a bacon butty and hot tea has kept us going but as it's nearly six o'clock there is a dreaded thought creeping in that the café might be closed. Worry, worry but no need to worry. Neville's wife Eileen appears as support crew, carrying two pizza's (still warm – the luxury!) and a couple of dozen jammy croissants. The pasta buckets and Meelmore Lodge are forgotten as we tuck into the luxury food right at the bottom of Happy Valley – aptly named for today. Fred has a bathe in the river, dons fresh clothes and announces he's off home, forest runs don't inspire him. Ian Taylor has been feeling unwell for the last two routes and announces that he's also off home. Ian's final contribution is route maps for the forest routes, which are to prove priceless later on. Stephanie was also due to depart at this stage but was enjoying it all so much she was persuaded to stay by Norma for at least one more route. What powers of persuasion does Norma have? By plonking herself in the front

seat of the Pruzina Toyota and refusing to move until she has been driven to the next race start! Norma has no problems getting a taxi in Belfast on a Saturday night!!

We are now down to eight hardy souls and have been on the go for twelve hours. We propose an amendment to the published schedule in that we will go to Castlewellan after the Tullymore routes, so off to the Mountain Centre for number seven.

At the Mountain Centre one thought is on everybody's mind – a change of clothing and footwear. With everybody in fresh, clean clothing and changed into dry running shoes, the sun shining and coats left behind in cars, we head off on the forest tracks. The girls start five minutes early with the lads following behind. Within twenty minutes the lads have their first navigation conundrum – do we head up this fire break or is it one further along the track? A debating huddle is formed and a decision made, rightly as it turned out. Rain plops are now falling, quickly followed by a deluge, all fresh clothes and dry shoes are soaked. Good idea to leave our coats in the car. Anybody who knows both Tullymore routes (and I know six BARFers who don't) is aware that one particular track is used for both races, only run in opposite directions. So the lads were running downhill along this track and suddenly the girls appear running uphill along the same track! How the lads laughed, the girls have got it wrong!! Another debating huddle ensued while both groups put forward their reasons for being right but no consensus was reached. Both groups went their separate ways, the lads realising at the bottom of the track that the girls were right. About turn and off to the finish to be greeted by grinning girls – muttered apologies but gloat factor of 10. Stephanie decides to stay for one more route. More tea, bananas and energy drink. Only four to go!!

In Bryansford we park our vehicles at Neville's house and walk over to the start, a quick visit to proper loo's on the way. We are very confident over the Monument route as this happens to be Neville's fav. training run, so off we go together with Neville at the helm. Dusk is settling in so we have head torches at the ready and indeed they are needed in the later stages. Thanks to Neville, no dramas and an hour and a quarter later we are at the finish. Off to Neville's house to visit Eileen for tea and buns. Stephanie stays for one more. Three to go.

It's now officially dark as we park up in the lakeside car park in Castlewellan Forest. Coats and head torches on and off we go, following Ian's maps. Everybody is running together and it's not long before we've missed the proper turn off – where are those sawdust lines when they are most needed? Retrace our steps, find a reference point and get back on track. Some reference points are hard to find – don't think that finding a castle in dark woods is easy- time is starting to tick away as we miss more track turn-offs. Trevor's mobile rings again, it's Expectant Father Jim Brown checking up on our progress. Have a bit of a start stop conversation before the signal gets lost in the trees – just like the eight remaining Barfers. We eventually complete the course but it takes a mammoth two and a quarter hours, that's well behind our schedule and has eaten into our two hour cushion. At this stage Andy Bridge decides to call it quits and heads back to Belfast, well knackered. Andy had the joy of having a meeting in Carlingford on Friday night and electing to sleep in the back of his car in Rostrevor rather than driving all the way home and back again – it's disappointing but fatigue has caught up with him at last. Seven people left with two more routes to go, four and three quarter hours left to complete the challenge – will we do it? More pasta and energy drinks to help us on our way.

We arrive in Newcastle at chucking out time, Norma still firmly ensconced in the front seat of Stephanie's car. There is four and a half hours to complete the challenge. We park on the main street and head off to Donard Park, mixing with the revellers, who pose a strange sight. Off we go up the Glen river, Gerry at our head with the map, determined to make no more detours. Donard forest is littered with mountain bike trails and finding the correct one in the dark takes a lot of concentration. We safely make it through the forest and onto the open mountain, up to the quarry and then the final descent back into the forest and return to Donard Park. While we were methodical, we were also slow, eating up another two hours of precious time. We decide that there is no time for a brew and head off for Binnian with two hours twenty minutes to go.

It's still dark and head-torches are on. The girls set off first, the boys catching them up at the quarry. Gareth leads up along the right hand side of the quarry to the wall and then it's just a straight climb up to the wall junction. Lots of glances at watches on the climb until we reach the wall junction and it becomes clear that we are going to complete on time. It's cold on the climb due to the wind off the sea and head torches are switched off as the light is shining back into our faces due to the mist. We all wait at the wall junction until everybody is gathered and then make the final climb to the top of Binnian – a round of applause to ourselves as we reach the summit - Brrrrrr - the cold wind blowing over the top quickly forces us back down another 10m before we sit down and have a rest. Gerry pulls two cans of cider out of his rucksack and we have a drink out of a varied selection of tumblers to celebrate our achievement.

42 minutes short of the 24 hours, (well paced you might say) – challenge completed.

A gentle jog downhill back to the cars, noting that dawn has broken while we were up in the mist, a few photographs, then it's into dry clothes, into the car and off home for a well earned rest. A typical 24 hours in the life of BARF?

The seven people who completed the BARF challenge were,

Dave Ewart
Gerry Kingston
Gareth McKeown
Stephanie Pruzina
Norma Rea
Neville Watson
Trevor Wilson

The challenge covered 43 miles of mountain and forest terrain and over 5000m of climbing (without the backtracking in the forests).

Trevor Wilson
Running Secretary.