

FELL RACING



Intrepid or naive? Jo Sharples finds out the difference the hard way in her first attempt at fell racing.

Story by Jo Sharples > Photography by Tom Bailey

# SOFT CENTRE MEETS HARD CORE

I've jogged one 4hr 30min London Marathon but prefer a gentle half hour forest trail, she's raced a 2hr 28min Olympic marathon and is the only woman ever to have won the deadly Seven Sisters off-road marathon outright. I want water stations, space blankets, St John's Ambulance, hot showers and massage, she's happy with a draughty corner of a pub car park in which to whip her clothes off. Apart from that, there's hardly anything to choose between us.

Of course I was naturally suspicious when the hardest of the hard core, our own Dr Sarah Rowell, casually suggested that her >



➤ local Bunny Run would be an apt way for me to celebrate Easter. Great fun, she said, not a serious race, just three miles and the prizes are pure chocolate. Come on, don't say you wouldn't be tempted.

Thus it was that from the bosom of the London Marathon, one of the most slick, commercial, and user-friendly races in the world, I was thrust onto a wet Yorkshire hillside, giving my all for the glory of a Cadbury's Creme egg.

**All because the lady loves chocolate... and yards of ale**



But first, I had to work for it. From what I could gather, what I was about to experience was typical of the hard-working, hard-playing world of fell running. Even now, I can't accuse Sarah of lying. Not exactly. Just concealing part of the truth - the truth about the bogs, hills, single track stony paths and grand finale of a bank which could only be tackled by clawing up on your hands and knees, grasping tree roots in your teeth on the way up to gain a little more leverage. Even cresting the top of the bank offered little relief. Nobody, and I mean nobody, ran away from it. A significant number couldn't even walk, and stood wheezing at the top until lungs once more connected with legs and the race continued.

The race follows a fixed three mile route, which no doubt helps those who are familiar with it to know when the end is nigh. As a first timer, I had no idea at all and found that spying routes and runners in the far distance offered little consolation.

At last I rounded a gate post and mirage became reality - it was the mercifully flat final straight. And there was Sarah coming towards me on her cool-down jog, obviously having finished much earlier.

"How did you do?" I asked, mainly concerned for the cash I had invested in a



'I was thrust onto a w

## Now that's what I call a fell race...

Story by Sarah Rowell > Photography by Peter Hartley

How do you break something this difficult to a friend, I wondered? How do I tell Jo that, in the eyes of anyone worth their Walshes, a Bunny run does not really count as a proper fell race? While it might have many of the ingredients - great fun, mud, a hands and knees scramble, some bog, a pub to start/finish at, top quality 'hard' men running, and good prizes - it's also lacking that certain something. To a fell runner, it's just a good hard old fashioned cross country course.

For a standard 'hard core' fell race, think navigation,

mandatory full body cover, map, whistle, compass, spare food and a route that often has a distinct lack of anything resembling a path. Even one of my favourite races, the Yorkshire Three Peaks (24 miles and 4,500 foot of climbing) has, due to changes, recently developed a reputation for being a 'runner's course'.

Don't get me wrong, it's hard - you have to carry kit for your own safety and there have been some pretty serious accidents (and unfortunately even one death) in the race. It's certainly not to be taken lightly.

Imagine. There you are at mile 20 in a marathon, you have six left to go, and there are no more drinks stations. These six miles are slightly down hill most of the way, on a rocky, lumpy path requiring good balance and nimble feet, with a good few stiles to climb over thrown in as well, and then just as you hit the last half mile you are brought to a juddering halt as you sink up to your knee in mud...that's the Three Peaks for you.

But it's pretty difficult to get lost, with little navigation required and even less route choice. Apart

from the lung-busting climb up the face of Wherside, its also run on good tracks (the last field aside) with duck boards over the really bad stuff. The climbing and descending may be hard, but it is all pretty runnable.

Compare this to a sunny day's outing to any one of numerous 'A' grade fell races. Firstly you have to remember that sunny is a misnomer. It might be nice at the start, but once you are up on top it can be cold, windy, wet and very nasty and that's just in summer. The true fell race often just consists of a series of check points (normally on top of something steep) that you have to visit in a set order. Other than that, where you go is up to





Look carefully: Jo is in the background, grasping tree roots in her teeth

Wiltshire hillside, giving my all for the glory of a Cadbury's Creme egg'



Sarah gets stuck into the Three Peaks - 'A REAL fell race for REAL fell runners'

you - after a couple of miles, the field splits into two groups going off at 90° to each other as different routes are taken. That's why it's always useful to know the colour of local runners' vests as there is a good chance that they know the best lines to take.

This however is not fail safe. Take any decent fell race, cover it with low lying mist and rain and you can guarantee someone will go wrong. I once managed to turn a 45 minute lead into a 45 minute deficit on a 70 minute relay leg! A major part of the post race pub ritual is swapping stories about who made the biggest navigational cock up of the day, and it always goes down well when its one of

the 'stars'.

Even if the backside in front knows where it is going there may be problems ahead. It is not unknown for good navigators to hide/stop/go the wrong way and then double back to get rid of those whose map and compass skills are more suspect.

Consider also the terrain. The straight line from A to B is not always the quickest and factors such as gradient, surface underfoot, amount of climb/descent and distance all have to be taken into account. Just because some demon descender has chosen the shortest route bounding over loose, greasy rocks followed by a massive scree run (how do

they do that?) does not mean this way is the best for those more delicate. Going the longer way round might even be quicker for you, as well as reducing the likelihood of a twisted ankle, blood exposure or later muscle failure.

When you consider the terrain that fell races are typically held in it will come as no surprise that drinks stations tend to be rather scarce, if present at all. This leaves a number of options:

- drinking nothing - not so clever in four hour-plus races
- carrying it with you
- persuading friends/loved ones that they really would like to walk to the top of Great Gable with

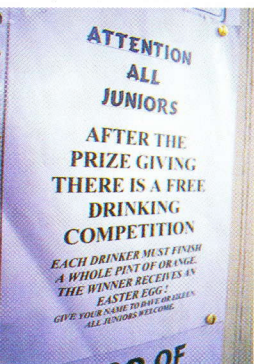


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➤ sweepstake at the pub earlier. Oh yes, my money was on Sarah alright.

"If you can still talk, you're not trying hard enough," she reprimanded, and with that, sprinted back round the course for a second time, this time picking up flags and signs on the way through. I tried harder.

**Beer, chocolate and partying - what every race needs**



There is really no such a thing as 'only' three miles when you're in this kind of company in the heart of the Yorkshire Dales, but thoughtfully, fell races invariably start and finish in a pub and this one was no exception. I can only assume it's her awesome stamina and sense of team spirit which kept Sarah going through the yard of ale drinking competition later on. Specially brewed Hoppity beer retailed at the highly reasonable £1.20 a pint, for those who could get anywhere near the bar of course. Even those years spent fighting it out in a packed Student Union during Happy Hour can't prepare you for the social aftermath of a fell race. Believe me, these guys are competitive in every sense.

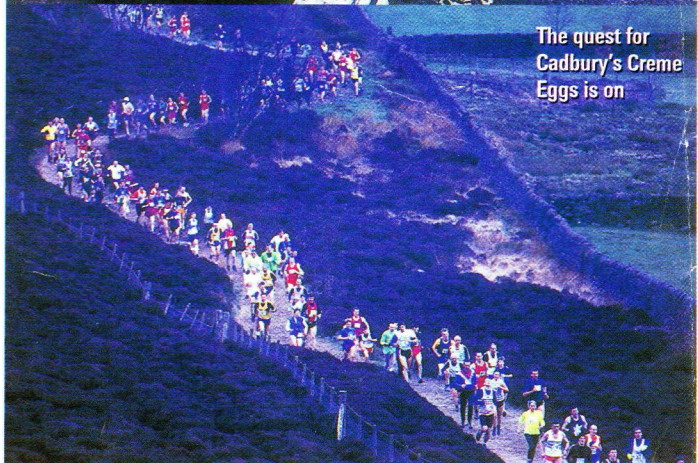
True to form, Sarah came out of the prize giving with armfuls of chocolate eggs, bunnies and chicks, some of which she kindly donated to the *Running fitness* office in the full knowledge that her supplies would be quickly replenished when she won again the following week.

My hard-won creme egg long gone, I thoughtfully bit the head off one chocolate bunny on the way home (the only way I could see of reaching the jelly beans within), and was left with just one question. How do you eat yours?

• For information on next years Bunny Run contact Dave Woodhead on 01535 669100



Just another day's training for the Army boys



The quest for Cadbury's Creme Eggs is on

'Get to know the **colour** of local runner's vests. They know the best lines to take'



➤ drinks for you and all your club mates

- drinking from streams etc when you can (remember to check a dead sheep is not just round the corner in the water)
- going out the day before and hiding drinks near check points/road crossings. This is fine as long as you remember which rock you hid your drink behind and that none of the faster runners have already 'borrowed' it.

So, if the Bunny run is easy and the Three Peaks only just makes it, which are the really hard races? This, as you might imagine, is a question which occupies the minds and computers of the fell members. Is it Wasdale - 21 miles 9,000 foot of climbing with the

final descent coming off Scafell Pike? Or maybe Scafell itself, only 4.5 miles but with 3,000 foot of climbing? What about Ben Nevis, 10 miles, 4,400 foot, frequent dodgy weather and always plenty of fallers? Then there are the shorter old professional style races - Burnsall might be only 1.5 miles and 900 foot but its infamous wall on the way down adds that certain something. Which ever it is, fell running has

courses to suit most tastes as long as you do not mind mud, pain and beer. Just remember that when the race organiser asks you to sign saying you understand and accept the risks involved as disclaimer against injury, they mean it! **Rf**

• For more information contact Pete Bland at the Fell Running Association, 34A Kirkland, Kendal, 01539 731012

### Ed's note

She may have been too polite to mention it, but Sarah holds the course record for the Three Peaks of 3hrs 16mins 17secs, and has won the race four times out of six starts. Not to mention eating a greater percentage of her body weight in chocolate than any other fell runner we know.