

To the marathon and beyond!

Sue Bains

Saturday 10 May 2014

New shoes! No really! New shoes!

It's been raining non-stop for 3 days and the photos coming through on the Dukeries Ultra Facebook page show mud and puddles along every section of the route.

"I'm wearing trail shoes" competitor after competitor announced, often providing the make and model.

I looked at my off-road shoes. They are a much loved pair of Salomon Fell-raisers. Snug fitting with massive rubber lugs – perfect for romping along Stanage Edge. I have total confidence in their hold and love wearing them – except on tarmac road where they are hard and unforgiving and actually are prone to skid if it's wet! The longest run I've done in them was the 17 mile Grindleford Gallop recce. I can't remember any particular pain after, but could they really support my feet for an additional 24 miles on top of that? And what about the road sections? 41 miles is a LONG way in fell shoes.

Very helpfully (in some ways), the Dukeries Ultra organisers promoted two trail shoes they felt appropriate to the conditions. Well that was that!

I Googled them, read the reviews and poured through the shopping pages. Yes, they were both trail/road combinations and seemed readily available – at full price! There definitely wasn't time to try to find an internet bargain for these. I quickly sent off emails to Jenny and Pete asking for their views.

I got out my Fell-raiser and loosened the laces. These have an all-in-one type of lace that tightens through a sort of spring loaded buckle which is great if you want your laces the same tightness all the way down, but I need the toe area to be as loose as possible, yet tight enough around the ankle to prevent my foot from moving forward and slamming toes against the end. Plating three lengths of embroidery silk, I fashioned a lace to thread through the top of the lace holes, so allowing the top to be tight and the rest loose! Success! These could be OK now.

After waiting for a few hours with no response from Jenny or Pete, I gave up and decided to go out for a walk in the Fell shoes. I could go down to the key cutting shop / cobblers and buy a small lace to do the job properly. The cobbler had exactly the laces I was looking for and at £1.95 I felt I'd got a bargain and saved £100 on new shoes!



"Lets go back along Sharrow" I suggested.

I could say that it wasn't deliberate, but I'd be lying. I knew full well that there was a new running shop on the Sharrow Road and that they could have the trail shoes I'd been looking at. I really didn't intend buying any, but the shop called out to me and yes, they did have the ones I wanted; in my size; and they felt wonderful when I tried them on the treadmill. The assistant was so helpful. He got out a good selection and was keen to ensure they would fit right. With a smile on my face, I walked back home, put on the shoes and spent the rest of the evening "wearing them in" and reading the emails from Pete

and Jenny both of whom seemed to think new shoes were not the best idea, but nowadays, you shouldn't need to wear them in so it should be OK as long as they are comfortable.

Jam and peanut butter sandwiches made. M alt loaf weighed and buttered. Pork pies packed. Chia bar cut and wrapped. Electrolyte drink – 2 litres of it – in the plastic bladder in the rucksack. Map, directions, small phone with emergency numbers, silver wrap, spare glasses, compass, loo-wipes and 2 gel bars all in the rucksack and ready.

Just one sleep to go! I carbo-loaded on roasted veg and home-made chicken in breadcrumbs followed by a mound of fruit and yoghurt. A slice of cake forced down with a glass of milk finished the day leaving me feeling totally full but excited beyond anything! Please let it be alright!

Monday 12 May 2014

I am still buzzing! I didn't have the energy to write this yesterday and by the time I'd rested and eaten, my eyelids were dropping.



Very nervous waiting

The race morning started at 4:30am, 10 minutes before the alarm had been set, and I was up and making cup of tea, determined to try and make the pre-race morning routines as normal as possible. This worked well and as we drove out of Sheffield, I felt that it was nearer 9:00am than 6:00am. The van was packed with all the "might need" stuff as well as Jes's bike, panniers packed with spare running kit (in case I felt I needed a full change) and the old trusted trainers (in case I didn't like the new ones).

The weather was awful; dark clouds and pouring rain. We arrived at Walesby Sport and Social Club just before 7:00am and managed to park the van on the hard surface before diving into the hall to register. No numbers just a wrist band! That was unexpected as I'd taken my safety pins and

even my Tri-belt so I could cope with any size or shape numbers. 10 minutes before the start we congregated for the briefing which just went over the changes in the route and the need for courtesy when meeting walkers. Everyone looked so professional and experienced. No one else had home-made sandwich bags hanging from their rucksack belt. In fact, Jes even went and asked one runner where he's got his belt bag from (probably out of embarrassment for me!). Most runners had compression calf guards or socks and for a few moments, I pondered on going to get mine. Sense prevailed and I remembered how uncomfortable I had felt in them.



40 mile race briefing - notice the new pink shoes

I was cold even with my jacket on and when we finally went out to the start "line" (massed in the car park in reality) I even had gloves on, though I threw these off just before the start. With upwards of 5 hours of running ahead of us (that's the fastest it's been done in!) there was no rush to be at the front of the start and we stood obediently for a photo (which it appears I'm not in) before being told there was 10 seconds to go.



The start (I'm on the right behind the hedge!)

"Ready, Steady..... GO!" boomed out from somewhere.

The mass of about 60 runners moved forward. Not with the madness of a road 10k, but with a sort of determined motion of a group of people all going forward in the same direction – like crossing a busy road!

I had worried about going off too fast and I think I could have won the first mile easily had that been necessary! The mass of runners jogged – yes jogged! – up the track towards the woods.

"Thank goodness I've got these trail shoes" I thought to myself as we met the first lot of slippery mud and I negotiated the single track along the edge of the wood. Turning into the out-and-back section, I felt wonderful. I was running at a good pace but not too fast and even though it was cold, the rain had stopped and the sun was beginning to peep out. At 1.7 miles two things happened; the leaders went past me in the other direction and my left foot began to feel funny. Oh no! Could this be the start of a blister?

I soon reached the checkpoint and again realised the difference between an all-out road race and an all-day ultra as I queued to have my wristband scanned. I was getting hot and decided to use the queuing time to remove my jacket and stuff it into my rucksack. A kind runner picked up the map that I'd dropped unnoticed and he caught up with me telling me that I'd probably need it at some time today!

My foot was definitely not right. As I reached the end of the out-and-back section, I knew I had a blister forming on the side of my left big toe! And I still had 39 miles to go! This was probably the lowest point in the whole race and I felt like crying. I was already shifting my foot to one side to avoid putting pressure on the blister and I could feel that my other leg was turning inwards in compensation. After 2 miles! How could I have been so stupid a) to think I could do this STUPID 41 mile race and b) to do it in a new pair of shoes!!



Always smile at the camera

I knew Jes was intending getting to the 3 mile road crossing and I ran along hoping that he would be there and I could change into my old trainers. Bigger the mud and puddles. Sod the stony paths and slippery slopes. I can't run 39 more miles in these. Or shall I give up.....? I could go home now and say that at least I tried.... This was the only time throughout the day when I heard these words in my head.



The lowest point of the race – changing trainers at 3 miles. 38 miles to go.

Luckily, as I cross the field, I saw Jes at the road and shouted “Trainers!” , “Socks!” as loud as I could. He must have heard (along with everyone within a 2 mile radius probably) and by the time I'd reached him the old trainers and socks were ready for me. I spent a few minutes locating the plasters – why had I taken out the Compeed?– only to find that normal plasters are not going to stick to wet feet! But I put one in place and carefully pulled my sock over it, laced my trainers (dear old friends!) and with a “Good luck” wish from Jes, set out again.

It took a while to bed my foot back into the trainer. I sensed that although the blister was there, it was not getting any worse and after crossing the busy main road (I'll be re-crossing this pelican crossing in another 30 miles!) Jes pulled in alongside me as I started down the tedious 4 upward sloping miles to the next checkpoint. We chatted briefly about the shoes and he stayed beside me encouraging me to run normally

and I soon forgot all about the blister on the firm surface of the forest track.



My first companion of many.

Another runner came up beside me and I had the first of many similar occurrences – a few minutes of talking about the race/conditions/rain/route, a few minutes of shared previous experiences, then a few minutes of silent companionship before one either runs on in front, or slows deliberately behind. It appears there's a definite protocol going on here! I liked it and it certainly helped pass what could have been some lonely solitary hours. The only down-

side was that I had meticulously planned what I was going to eat and where, but somehow, getting out a sandwich or malt loaf when you are in the midst of one of these “meetings” felt uncomfortable – although this improved as the day went on.



Checkpoint at Hazel Gap 8.2 miles

Soon we reached Hazel Gap 1 checkpoint (8.2 miles) and, like a pro, I queued to be scanned, but didn't join the group who appeared to start on their day's running buffet, tucking into bananas, flapjack and jaffa cakes! I was carrying almost everything I felt I needed and stopping at this checkpoint was not part of the plan.

So over the road and start on the southern loop into Sherwood Forest. What a change from my recce back in early April. The hedgerows were

twice the height, the previously bare trees were now covered in bright green leaves and the fields were shooting with burgeoning crops. With the sun shining, it was just lovely and I ran along thrilled with the feeling of being at one with the world!

As we passed the Major Oak, I realised that the field was spreading out dramatically with my previous companion some way behind and the next group a couple of hundred metres in front. I'd not eaten as much as I had planned, so used the easy running sections to catch up on some nutrition and drink. Reaching the most southern section of the route felt good as I knew that this meant I had run the equivalent of a half marathon – just a whole one and a bit to go then! Rain interspersed with sunshine throughout the morning, but the forest was bright with spring growth and bluebells and apart from the cloggy mud, this was sheer bliss.



Feeling sorry for myself as I arrived at Hazel gap 2 checkpoint 18.2 miles.

With four miles to the next checkpoint, I caught up with the group in front. I think they had stopped to do some map reading (thank goodness I had done those three recces and knew where I was going!) and for a while I ran amongst them feeling the miles pass easily. Suddenly, out of nowhere, my right foot caught something and I fell. It was one of those time-stood-still falls where you seem to fly horizontally through the air for ages, until I crash landed full length on the muddy forest floor. One of my companions pulled me to my feet and asked if I was OK.

“Yes I’m fine” I replied as you always do, injuries ignored as you try to get over the embarrassment!

I could feel my right elbow was badly grazed and bleeding, my left knee felt a bit sore and I had horrendously muddy hands and legs, but I didn’t think there was any permanent damage and certainly nothing to stop me running, so I continued to the next checkpoint Hazel Gap 2 at 18.2 miles. As I approached I could see Jes with Jenny and Barry and they quickly saw that I needed a bit of cleaning up. Antiseptic wipes came from somewhere and a marshall poured water over my arm. We all agreed that there was nothing too bad and after eating a (planned) banana, Jenny and I set off together up the woodland track that we’d covered together just a few weeks ago.

I hadn’t known how I would feel running with someone and had been a little concerned that they would make me go at a different pace and destroy my personal thought process, but in fact, it was really comforting to have a friend there jogging (yes Jenny, jogging!) alongside me chatting about anything and nothing as we’ve done so many times before. I think it also helped me settle back into my rhythm after my fall and we trotted through the bluebells and along the familiar country lanes. I was beginning to feel a bit tired – this was only just coming up to half way – but Jenny assured me that I was looking good and strong (I think she was lying, but who cares!).



Jenny and I coming into Norton village

We encountered a strange experience as we went through the Welbeck Estate. First we came across an unexpected drinks station. Thinking that this was being manned by a group of enthusiastic villagers, we accepted a plastic cup of water, thanked them and moved on. Shortly after, we saw a sign. “5 Miles done. Only 1 to go!” it said.

“I’ve done 21 miles and I’ve got 20 to go” I moaned.

Catching up with another runner, but this one had a number on her back, we asked what was happening.

“It’s a 6 mile fun run” she replied.

Just a few minutes later, we ran through the finish line of their fun-run! They were giving out medals and there was a small crowd cheering them in. What must they have thought of us!!



I forgot to smile for this one!

Jenny left me at the turning in Holbeck village at 23 miles and I carried on, out onto the fields leading to Creswell. Just three weeks ago, these fields had been a couple of foot high in rapeseed growth and we'd laughed about running through the channels between rows of them. Now, the growth was well over my head and the ground below slimy and slippery. The intense smell of the rape was unpleasant and I was glad I could see the runner in front because there was no way I could see out over the top of the crop!

Luckily we soon came out into open field and up the slope to the top of the Creswell escarpment. The view was wonderful! Brightly lit by the sun, the view stretched across Creswell village and the wind blew sharply into my face as I ran down the steep slope, knowing that very soon, the wind would be on my back helping me along the 17 miles to the end! Through the Creswell Crags gorge and up to the road and into the car park.

The checkpoint will be at the Visitor Centre, the instructions had said. So where was it? There was no sign of it as I passed the Centre and I headed onto the car park silently cursing the possible need to turn back at some point if I couldn't find it. Thank goodness! There was the gazebo for the Creswell Crags (24 mile) checkpoint and a welcome short stop for banana and water and to refill my little water bottle. There was no queue for this checkpoint, but their scanner wasn't working anyway, so I just gave them my number (49) and shortly got going once again.

Less than a mile from the checkpoint was the busy A60 crossing and Jes was waiting there on his bike. We carried on together along a formal avenue that morphed into an uphill road crossing the fields. This gave way to a grassy, muddy track leading to the Shrubbery Lake crossing and up across fields towards the steepest section of the whole route. At this point the heavens opened and it poured down. We caught up to three runners who had stopped to put on rain jackets, but I was already so wet, it didn't seem worth bothering and we passed by them and up onto the rocky hill.

The track at this point demanded we travelled in single file and I went ahead of Jes. It was dark and the rain dripped off the trees forming even more claggy mud underfoot. My ipod had stopped working – why, I don't know – and I could hear a rasping breathing behind me. Looking round, I could see Jess puffing as he forced the pedals of his road bike against the soft muddy incline, his dipped head covered in the black hood of his rain jacket. It's the Grim Reaper I thought to myself with a little inner grin!

As the path levelled, the sun came out again and the going got slightly easier. I'd passed the marathon distance but for some reason started thinking that my Garmin was not working properly. I think this was the start of the mind wandering, because it was perfectly right and totally aligned with the distance I had worked out during my hours of preparation. So why did I think it was reading wrong? Who knows!

At 28 miles we came to the road into Clumber Park and Jenny was waiting to start her next section with me. Jes cycled alongside us for most of the next 4 miles, alternately going in front or behind, taking photos and enjoying the sun. I can remember Limetree Avenue from our recce but knew that the route change had added another mile to this section. It may not sound much, but after 30 miles, it was hard to pass by the previous turning knowing that we had to go further up the hill before we could turn down towards Hardwick village. Jes disappeared down the "short way" and we continued to the field crossing.



Turning off into Clumber Park

By now, I was walking up any hill – even if on a normal day it wouldn't feel like a hill. Jenny constantly encouraged me, probably seeing that I was tiring badly and helping me to cope with the walk/run strategy that I had always known was going to happen and not seeing it as a failure to run throughout. She pointed out that even when I was walking, I was catching up on other runners who were walking slower! That really is a person finding small grains of optimism in anything!



Running through the fields

The extra section of route was particularly hard as it was over muddy field and was really slippery and difficult to run – even when it was finally going downhill, so it was good to meet the road at Hardwick village and to have a section of solid surface running. The ford was fabulous with white froth coating the sluice gates and the water nearly bubbling up to the footbridge level. Jes declined the offer to have a photo taken going through the ford on his bike and followed us across the bridge – as the sign had commanded!

Shortly after, we turned into the field and the climb up to the main road and to the final checkpoint (34 miles). Just 7 miles to go! I asked the marshall for the time and was thrilled to hear that it was only quarter past 2! I was nearly exactly at the average pace I had set myself! I drank 2 plastic cups of real Cola in quick succession, relishing

the cold and sugary drink – so different from the sickly electrolyte that I was having difficulty drinking now. Another banana scoffed down and I was ready for the last section.

“Only a little bit over a park run to go and I’ll be with you again” Jenny promised.

“I’ll be at the next road crossing” Jes assured me.

Cross the pelican crossing (I was last here at 4 miles! Where has the time gone!!) and along the roadside path, passing two other runners and off out into the countryside.

How lovely it was. I think this was the highest point of the whole race. OK I was tired, exhausted even, but I knew I was going to finish and in a respectable time! The sun was shining. The fields were beautiful. The birds were tweeting in the trees and I was running! Yes, really running! It couldn’t get better than this!

I crossed the field and met up with the road to the ford at Ekersley, being passed by a monstrous 4-wheel drive which contemptuously drove at a ridiculous speed through the ford, water splashing high either side, much to the evident disgust of a runner watching as he waited to cross the narrow footbridge. I caught up with him and we had the usual short dialogue during which he informed me that his knees were “shot” and he was intending to hobble to the finish. I walked up the steep hill behind the recycling factory with him, wished him luck and carried on, forcing down a vile tasting pork-pie. Why didn’t it taste like it did last week? I’ll have to look this up!



Just 5 miles to go!

Shortly after I caught up with another runner who told me that he’d gone off too fast and was cramping. We continued together along the path behind Ekersley village worried that we’d missed the turn-off in the high hedgerows, but no, it was fine and we turned down to the nasty little stile-controlled bridge.



Nearly there!

I had been dreading this bridge! It is a narrow footbridge, but to get onto it, you have to climb over two stiles – not one, TWO! And I knew that cramps were a likely possibility at this stage. I needn’t have worried. I was so full of electrolyte that nothing was going to allow me to cramp and I nipped over the stile (possible exaggeration there!) and jumped off the other end of the bridge. I didn’t stop or look round, but the poor “cramping” man behind me did not have as good an experience and, from the noises he made, was obviously in agony as he negotiated the two stiles.



*It's really hard
now!*

Through the woods, up the fields and there was Jes at the top with Jenny waiting by the road for the last section. Just 3 miles to go! It felt so good to be near the end yet still able (just) to break into a run. Some of the field paths were muddy and we walked and talked about our last run here, breaking into a slow trot whenever possible.

Finally, we came out into Walesby village and onto the road. Where were the crowds! Where were the flags and bunting! Didn't these residents realise that I had run 40 miles and only had a mile to go! It was a long hard mile and uphill for most of it, but the brow was reached, then the junction and finally, having crossed the road, I turned into the track leading to the Sports and Social Club where I had started this morning.

A small crowd straddled the road and I raised my arms in celebration as I approached them, but was this the finish, or would we have to go onto the field? I looked round, confused. There was no obvious finish line or gantry.

"Where do I go?" I yelled at a marshal in a yellow fluorescent coat

"Over to the man in yellow" she shouted, indicating towards the Sports Club door.

I weaved around the cars in the car park and saw a man with a scanner! This was the end. At the club house door!

"Come on girl!" he shouted!

I stopped my Garmin. I'd finished! 41.2 miles in 7 hours, 30 minutes and 55 seconds!

Pie and peas? Jes can have that! All I wanted was my cold recovery drink, a leg massage (£10 for 15 minutes – a real bargain) and my lovely tee-shirt.

So what hurts?

A good set of battered toe nails, blistered and bloody red. They need a sharp pin through them to release the pressure...

Bruised and grazed knees, a bit swollen, but nothing too painful, though a hole in my new Skin leggings!

A sore grazed arm with a scabby cut

The strangest injury of the lot is a swollen dark red turning to a bruise wrist bone – due to my garmin constantly knocking against the bone for 7 and a half hours!

Afterthought

I've done it! It appears that this was obvious to everyone who knows me, which always surprises me. Did people just say "I know you can do it" to keep me happy? They didn't know, any more than I did! I know I never even considered what would make me NOT do it, but I also knew that running 41 miles was going to demand far more from my body than anything I've ever done before. All the training has been helping prepare me for it, but it doesn't really prepare for the reality of the relentlessness of the task. I know I'm stubborn, but stubbornness is not a guarantee for success – in fact it could cause total long term failure. I know I'm determined, but all the determination in the world can't make everything go to plan – there are some things outside my locus of control (I think!).

I'd listened to so many podcasts and read so many books about Ultra running and they all stressed the mental strength required; being prepared to push through the inevitable low points and taking advantage of the high points and how you need to talk yourself into continuing even when your body is screaming for you to stop. I honestly didn't know if I could do this. I've never met "the wall", ever! I've never been at that crazy breaking point where you need to make these decisions. None of my training runs had taken me there and I was scared that when - inevitably it seemed – I reached this dark place, I may find that the cocky, confident, I-can-do-anything Sue Bains would fail. But I didn't fail!

24 hours later, this feels a much different achievement than finishing the Manchester marathon in a "good for age" time. The buzzing has stopped. The pain from blisters, stiff neck, grazed arm, swollen wrist and knees remain, but are background noise to something else.

This is a softer achievement. Softer in that this feels far more internal. I know I've shouted it on Facebook, but the real warmth of doing it is inside me. It's not something I feel I need to boast about – yes, I'll tell the story and enjoy doing so, but where I couldn't wait to tell anyone, everyone, that I'd done a sub-4 hour marathon, this is different. You can't tell someone that you overcame yourself or put in words how it feels to conquer your own fears and worries. No one would understand the intrinsic pleasure in knowing that you can not only make yourself keep going, but can actually enjoy the experience of doing so. The world I ran through in those last 7 miles wasn't the world of pain that I'd expected, but a world of colour and brightness and life. I am so lucky!

Thank You's

So, thank you to everyone who made this possible:

Jes for being my best friend for ever, supporting my mad urges every time I get one, following me round this race in the rain and mud on his bike and best of all, for being there with the trainers and socks when I could so easily have called it a day.



Jenny for being the best running buddy ever. She hates running slow, yet jogged along for nearly 13 miles telling me how well I was doing. She's been my personal map reader, preventing me from having to put my glasses on to see where I am going and has accompanied my journey to this ultra for the last 12 months, always encouraging, always believing in me, always being there – thank you! Oh and not to forget to thank Barry who drove the car allowing Jenny to do her bit!

The Smiley Paces – every runner needs a group of Smileys in their mind's eye when the going gets tough! Thank you to you all!

My family! Thank you for your unstinting support. It's probably not easy having a mother who is so relentlessly determined not to grow old gracefully, but then the genes that made my boys such wonderful young men must have come from somewhere...

Finished! Filthy dirty but who cares!



It took effort to lift my arms up after 41 miles!