

The advert for this event popped up on my Facebook page about 10 days before the day and curiosity made me investigate it further. The advert had said 10k, half marathon or marathon although, on reading more I think this was an enticer as the challenge was a 6 hour period during which you could run any distance you wanted. Details were sparse but I gathered that it was laps – seemingly (although not actually) 10k each. I entered without really having any idea why or what I wanted to do.

During the next 10 days, I made some effort to plan my running so that I would be partially “rested” by the challenge, keeping my runs slow in the last 5 days. I thought about the challenge frequently, but not in my usual nervous way – which I found encouraging. I told a few people about it, stressing that I hadn’t decided on distance or strategy, but may do anything between 10k and who-knows-what!



Despite emailing the organisers and putting questions on the Yorkshire Runner FB page, I still couldn’t find out any details – including a post code or address for where it started. Finally on the Thursday before the event, an email arrived with a map. The postcode provided didn’t exist(!) but the running route – now confirmed as a 3.3 mile loop – showed an approximate starting point which allowed me to programme the SATNAV.

By Saturday, nerves had begun to arrive and I started to look at what nutrition etc I would need to complete anything over a half-marathon. Luckily I had enough gels and blocks to cope with anything up to about 30 miles. I decided that I was going to wear my orange, new (Christmas present) sub-4 hour marathon vest and got everything ready for an early start on the Sunday.

The trip from Sheffield to Masham is easy – provided you don’t follow the SATNAV and DO follow the road signs (it seemed to be a regular problem to people in this area from what I heard later) and I arrived at the start/car park with an hour to go. After registering and having a little walk down to look at the River Ure, I got race-ready and went to warm up. ... but no one was warming up! Not a soul was doing anything other than standing around chatting! I wandered to the far side of the playing field and did some stretched and skips, but I could see people looking and (sorry!) I gave up and went back to the start area.

I got into conversation with two women who’d parked next to me and it transpired that one of them was supporting the other to her first half-marathon. I did my best to make encouraging comments, but the sub-4 hour vest was probably not the best attire to appear as anything other than an exhibitionist and they kept apologising for their slow target which made me feel very uncomfortable and wish I was in my usual Smiley Paces vest.

I wished them luck and listened to the organiser’s welcome speech and last minute instructions. These including her asking “Who is going to be in front? You need to watch out for arrows as we’ve got a marshal missing...”. Needless to say, no one proposed that they would lead, although several young men looked as though they would have stuck their hand up with the slightest encouragement!

“Get to the line!” She instructed and as she began to count down from 10, I felt myself nudge forward towards the front of the pack.

The hooter blew and we were off. What was this! A 10k race? A parkrun? The front runners were off like they had a train to catch – with me fighting to go with them! “Wow woman!” I chided myself as we hared around the edge of the field “You’ve got a long way to go and this is NOT the pace you need to be running at!”. Slowing slightly I edged past a few more runners and settle – sort of – into a slower pace as we left the field, ran across the car park between two parked cars and entered the river path.

Now I don’t do that many races, but those that I do tend to be on roads that are wide enough for several runners to run abreast. I had no experience of running in single file whilst the early enthusiasm was coursing through my veins. I tried hard not to push runners out of the way and was relieved in some ways when we turned a corner and met a

stile. I'm not good with stiles – it's probably much to do with having short legs – and this was not a welcome sight, especially as we'd be going over it twice on each lap and I knew from past experience that stiles get about 10cm higher each time you meet one in a race!



Once over the stile we turned into a wide track and I belted forward overtaking a few more runners, ignoring the voice in my head asking exactly what I thought I was doing! Up a slope and through a gate into a field where the path degenerated into a sandy uneven, barely single track at times edged with long lace-catching grass. It passed round the edge of a beautiful wheat and poppy field and the River Ure on our left reflected the bright sunshine with a cooling wind blowing across the field. It was just lovely!

The first mile beeped on my Garmin and I could see that with the queue and stile crossing included in this, I was going far too fast (9:09) and I attempted to slow a bit as we went down a flight of wood edged mud steps into a cool dark wood. The path now provided the added hazard of uneven tree roots with rampant plants overhanging the sides and tree branches and leaves flicking at our heads. Once again it was difficult to pass anyone, and as the front runners came through on their way back, I realised that I was going to have to cope with passing people throughout the event so must stop stressing!

Once out of the wood, we came to the road crossing and was told to stop! STOP!! In a race!! Whatever next!! Why didn't they stop the traffic rather than us stopping!! Pah!! Sensible runners went to the water station at this point and took a swig of water. I just stood bouncing in frustration and as soon as there was a gap in the traffic, I sprinted across to get to the gate into the field before a queue could form!

The turnaround point could be seen in the far side of a grassy field, but before we reached it, we had to run the gauntlet of a herd(?) of frisky beautiful white horses who had got themselves into a frenzy of excitement by all these runner going across their field and were stampeding with an appearance of pure unadulterated joy in their bodies. I was in a race, but even so, I was a little apprehensive and stayed with a group of others passing across a narrow bridge and to the turnaround post. A marshal at this point shouted encouragement accompanied by motivational music playing from some device.

The narrow bridge was just a short distance back and I started the habit of sprinting to beat anyone else approaching from the opposite direction as there definitely wasn't room for two to pass and no way was I going to queue – this was a race after all!!

Back across the road (less traffic this time) and into the woods and I met the two women I had talked to on the start line and we made mutually encouraging comments to each other.

As the second mile beeped I realised that including the road crossing and other hazards, I was still going too fast (9:19) so once again tried to slow. At the end of the woods, I ran up the muddy slope ignoring the steps but thinking that this was going to get harder as the run progressed. Once on the field, I felt or heard the steps of someone close behind me and moved to one side to let them pass. No one passed, but I could still feel that there was someone there and as the path narrowed, I felt a little uncomfortable feeling that I could be holding back a faster runner. The path widened and I went to the side again and a man moved up beside me, not saying a word or making any eye contact, but running step by step beside me. This was even more uncomfortable, but in spite of me slowing slightly, he dropped back behind. I put on a slight spurt but he did too and once again pulled in beside me. This was too much and I actually slowed nearly to a stop!! In a race!! Luckily this was sufficient for him to pass and I allowed him to go on ahead, but as we neared the stile my Garmin showed my fastest mile (8:56). Maybe there is a protocol that I'm missing here....?

Over the stile and through river path, we got to the start/finish line and I collected my first rubber band, continuing without a pause to start the second lap round the field.

Who would have known that a simple rubber band could cause such discomfort, bouncing onto the back of my hand at each step? This got worse with each progressive lap as the bands had to be pushed higher up my arm. I think I must be such a road-running wuzz! However, the competitive side of me took much pride in the increasing number of bands as the laps passed and were the subject of my first photo after I finished.

The laps started to accumulate with each one merging into each other, only separated by events such as tripping over a dog, stopping to allow the horses to stampede across the path in front of me and getting stung by nettles as I was nudged off the path by a fast young man.

So. What was my strategy?

Maybe if I'd have had one, I may have run this much more intelligently, although I don't know that I would have enjoyed it as much if I'd have had a definite target. One of the most interesting things about the event was finding out how my mind would cope with an open-ended run. However, I know that the word "marathon" was wandering across my consciousness far too often, although equally I knew I had not in any way trained or prepared for a marathon race.

I had thought – and even emailed to check if it was allowed – of taking a break after each two laps, but I just couldn't do it! At the end of my second lap, I saw people stopping to have a drink and some sweets, but I just continued. On completing the third lap, I just thought that it was only one more to do a "half" so I may as well go on – feeling a bit smug as some of the people who I had run with for the last hour or so stopped (sensible folk!). Why I felt the need to keep going I can only put down to some inane desire to get a "good time" although that should never have been a priority and was already well out of sight. I knew that the hot weather would require that I stop off at the van (parked on the course) to replenish my drink and this became imperative after 5 laps. I think this stop allowed my brain readjust itself and to think about the reality of what I was doing. I had run somewhere around 16 miles at a good pace across a very mixed terrain and had enjoyed it. There were 3 more laps to go for a Marathon, but either my sensible brain or my Monkey-on-my-shoulder persuaded me that the damage I would do by doing the "whole distance" would far outweigh anything I would achieve from doing it. The medals were the same whatever distance you did and there were no prizes. My marathon time – if I had managed to complete it – was certainly not going to be anything to brag about and I was happy with my progress so far. So with my mind made up I decided to complete one more lap and enjoy doing it.



That was a good decision and I actually did my slowest miles, not from fatigue but because at last I was running for enjoyment and had given up on racing. If only I'd done this from the start. I passed the two women on my way out as they were heading to achieving a first half, massive grins on their faces showing exactly how hard it had been for them. We exchanged our usual encouragements and I continued on my way to the turnaround for the last time, only to find that the marshal had abandoned his post, so I simply ran around the white pole, no music to send me back on my way this time. At the road crossing I stopped to thank the marshal and have a Liquorish Allsort (he'd run out of jelly babies he said) and a cup of water. (note to self: Liquorice Allsorts leave coconut bits in between your teeth which are a pain to remove whilst running... avoid in future!)

Going through the wood, I caught up "Beth" a member of the 100 Marathon Club and we ran together for a while as she decided that it was too hot to run for 6 hours so would be retiring early (she actually "won" the challenge with 33 miles in 5:28). I didn't want to waste her time explaining all my angst and just said that I was stopping at the end of this lap as I only wanted to run 20 miles – a slight "economy of truth" but not far from reality.

I will admit the stile was becoming increasingly hard to climb over and the spurt up the muddy slope defeated me on my last return as I resorted to walking up the steps – but it didn't matter now, I was nearly done. As I came into the start/finish area the two women were standing by the line shouting encouragement at me and nearly made me change my mind, but I quickly asked where the bell was and picking it up rang it to indicate that I had finished and wanted my time stopped.

Within seconds, I was regretting my decision although I still feel in hindsight, that it was the right one. I was not marathon ready and I have always believed you should respect the longer distances and to continue certainly would NOT be respecting it! However, once I'd collected my medal and goody bag (complete with a can of Black Sheep Ale) I was beginning to ache and knew I'd done the right thing, only to confirm this as I drove the 2 hour journey back down the motorway with legs screaming in pain.



I had entered this event on a whim and definitely enjoyed it. However, I know that I wasn't prepared mentally for an open-ended event and had tackled it with far too much of a race mentality. I also feel that I would need to do something (no idea what) to match my determination and persistent obstinacy when racing hard, to maintaining an appropriate pace in such an event. Maybe having people doing different distances – some stopped at 10k, some at Half... in fact there were 8 separate concurrent races going on - must have had some effect on my complete lack of ability to pace myself sensibly. Maybe in a team event I would have been able to develop a strategy that satisfied my competitive nature. Who knows?

I also know that however good my endurance, I can't just go out and "race" a marathon. In the past 12 weeks since the Blackpool marathon, I had run just one 16.5 mile run and nothing else over 15. That is definitely not enough for suddenly deciding to do a marathon at a sub-4 hour marathon pace. I have no doubt I could have done 2 more laps, but I don't think that would have made me feel any more satisfied and in fact, the inevitable slowing pace and subsequent muscle damage, would have left me far worse off.

So Yes! This is a great event if you enter it in the right frame of mind and want a thoroughly good day out running, but No! Its not a good one for a marathon (or any other distance) PB. Finishing at 20 miles was the right things to and two days later my legs are just about recovered, I'm feeling good about my finish time (4<sup>th</sup> lady in the 20 mile distance at 3:13:40) and the only physical reminder remaining is the bruise on my wrist from the rubber bands!