The ups and downs of my Lakeland 50

By Ken Jones

Late August last year I was browsing the web with my wife, Sarah, and saw the Lakeland 50 website.

“I’d really like to do the 50 one day – if my legs could take it,” I said. “Great idea,” Sarah replied – “You can train up for it, and we’ll go to the Lakes on holiday next summer”. Sarah loved the Lake District, where we went on many family holidays, especially when the children were young.

Sarah had always given fantastic support for my various sporting activities and was a good sports person in her own right, although she had been ill over the summer, suffering major complications from a routine operation 4 months earlier.

The Lakeland 50 is a running race from Dalemain in the north east of the Lake District (near Pooley Bridge) to Coniston in the southern Lakes. Off road, unmarked course, covering trails and mountain passes carrying a rucksack with spare clothing, food and water – 50 miles and with over 10,000 feet of ascent. There are 600-700 competitors each year, and the race is so popular that it fills up within minutes of entries opening. Website at [http://www.lakeland100.com/the-lakeland-50](http://www.lakeland100.com/the-lakeland-50)

Exactly at 9am on 1 September 2014 I sat at my computer constantly pressing the return key until my entry went through, although I did note the ability to withdraw by the end of January and receive a refund of most of the entry fees. I had a suspicion that my legs wouldn’t hold up to the training, and that I might well be applying for that refund.

Sadly, Sarah did not recover and passed away on 22 September. In the weeks which followed Sarah’s death, my family decided that we would do some activities and events to commemorate Sarah’s life, and also to raise money for charities which were dear to her. This also gave us all a much-needed focus.

My son Adam (22) immediately said that he would run the London Marathon, which Sarah had done in 1998. This involved Adam transforming himself into a runner after living what’s best described as a “university life” for the last 3 years! My daughter Charlotte (25) and her boyfriend Pritesh are planning their own challenges, and have been great support to Adam and me.

My task was that I would get round the Lakeland 50 within the 24 hour time limit – even if I had to walk the whole way. No question of that refund! A 50 mile challenge seemed appropriate as Sarah was just 50 when she died.

Although I do have a decent background of mountain events: Alpine climbing, 20+ mountain marathons, and numerous other mountain races - these were mainly completed 20-30 years ago! In recent years, whenever I tried to start a running programme, recurring injuries have meant that I struggled, and I have concentrated on cycling instead.
In one of the training weekend briefings, the organiser described the 50 as “significantly harder” than an Ironman Triathlon. Aged 56, and 15 kg heavier than my racing weight in the 1980's, I knew that getting round the Lakeland 50 was going to be tough.

The build up

Training for both Adam and me commenced in October. Initially 20-30 minute sessions - running for one minute, then walking for two - we progressed by the end of November to longer continuous runs, interspersed with some walking. Unfortunately my injuries continued, and I struggled with regular pulled muscles (both calves went within the first couple of weeks of training), tight quads, hamstrings, etc.

I quickly realised that I needed to get some external assistance if I was going to have a chance of getting round the 50. Andy Buckley and Judy Campbell of Team Buckley have been excellent with physio and sports massage for my various injuries, and Judy’s evening Pilates classes (during which the men, especially me, show our lack of flexibility/balance!). Without Andy’s and Judy’s help I doubt I would have even made the start line.

In addition, I approached Nick Thomas of The Endurance Coach (Nick works with Lakeland 50 organiser Marc Laithwaite) who set some very good training sessions, balancing fitness with the need to avoid injury. Finally, I attended weekly Wattbike sessions with local cycling coach Tim Ramsden.

Training was going pretty well over the winter and into the spring. I completed the first official Lakeland 50 training weekend at the end of January: the 16 mile section of the race route from Ambleside to the finish at Coniston. This training run was done in the dark, since with the race starting at 11.30am most people reach Ambleside close to dusk, and all but the fastest will run at least some of this section at night.

Adam continued to train consistently during the week whilst at University in Reading, where he is completing his Masters in Philosophy, and at the weekends with me in Canterbury. He soon became much quicker than me! Adam ran a superb 3 hours 45 for the Marathon in April and the extended family, including Sarah’s relatives had a great weekend in London supporting him, Enthused by this, Adam has signed up for the New York Marathon in November.

Towards the end of May, I started to get recurring hip / hamstring niggles. On the second official Lakeland 50 training weekend, the Pooley Bridge to Ambleside section of 28 miles, I strained the hip after 8 miles. This resulted in 20 miles of steady walking to get to the finish (I wasn’t quite the last to arrive) and with numerous trips to the physio when I got home.

Worse was to come.

2 weeks later, in mid June, I ran the Box Hill Midsummer Munro – a 13 mile race ten times up and down Box Hill in Surrey, with 3,000 feet of ascent. This was planned to be my last race before the Lakeland 50, and run at an easy / steady pace to protect the hip.
Around 2 miles from the end, the rain started, I slipped on a steep chalky descent and landed badly. Helped up by a couple of other runners, I walked round the rest of the course. St John Ambulance were assisting another runner with a suspected broken ankle who had to be stretchered off a steep hill, so I drove home and straight to the local hospital: verdict was a broken wrist and 2 broken ribs. 6 weeks to go before the Lakeland 50.

I was therefore unable to do much proper training in the run up to the 50. The ribs were very sore making running extremely painful, so I walked most of the time. I could not cycle outside due to my wrist which was in a splint, so I did some shorter indoor sessions on the Wattbike. Lots more visits to physio Team Buckley, starting with daily ice and compression to reduce the swelling in my wrist.

I was cleared by the Consultant to run on 22 July, advised to go very steady and keep the splint on the wrist, but my ribs were still sore.

The Lakeland 50 on Saturday 25 July was set to become even tougher.

**The Race**

Charlotte, Adam, Pritesh and I travelled to the Lake District on the 24 July, battling the usual Friday afternoon M1 and M6 traffic. We stayed in a lodge at the Langdale Estate in Elterwater (near Ambleside), which is where we had enjoyed a number of family holidays over the last 25 years.

The whole organisation of the race was excellent, starting with the initial registration process, right up to the finish. Sign on during the Friday evening went well: lots of helpers ensured that the process, which included a very detailed kit check, went smoothly with very little waiting around.

The weather forecast was good – dry and sunny, a marked contrast to the south east where it was pouring with rain! Things were looking up.

Saturday morning: first job was to sort out taping my various injuries: Adam called me “the bionic man”! This whole process took over 30 minutes – far longer than the time I take to get ready to go out to any social event …

I used kinetic tape on my hip, hamstring and calves, and also wore calf sleeves: I was very conscious that a pulled calf muscle would mean the end of the race. Muller tape on both ankles – my running style means that my feet supinate (turn outward) when running so I am prone to ankle sprains racing off road - and have been taping my ankles for mountain running for many years. Nothing on my ribs, but I wore my wrist splint: the Consultant had prescribed one which was lighter than the heavy one I was given initially at A&E.

Adam then drove me the short distance to the finish at Coniston, where I attended the pre race briefing, and I then took the coach from the finish at Coniston to the start at the Dalemain Estate, about a 90 minute journey. It seemed a very long way! There was a 30 minute wait at Dalemain before the start at 11.30, during which I watched a number of competitors on the Lakeland 100 passing through.
The Lakeland 100 mile race is run over the same weekend as the 50, by the same organising team, and comprises a complete circuit of the Lake District. It starts at Coniston on the Friday evening, going to the north and west round by Keswick, and joins the route of the 50 at Dalemain to the finish back in Coniston. This event is also popular, entries filling quickly with a field of over 300 starters – huge respect to those competitors since it is a massive achievement to complete this race within their 40 hour time limit.

The first 4 miles of the 50 are a loop round the Dalemain Estate: hilly, but grassy underfoot. 2 more miles of fields and paths, then into Pooley Bridge and off into the hills and rougher terrain for a climb, before dropping down to the first checkpoint at Howtown, on the edge of Ullswater, after 11.2 miles.

I had told Charlotte, Adam and Pritesh that they would know how I was getting on by my time at the first checkpoint. My original target had been to run the 50 in around 13-14 hours, and I was going well in the spring, but after the broken ribs I could not even jog for more than a mile or so without slowing to rest.

The family knew that I was now aiming for about 20 hours, giving 4 hours of leeway on the 24 hour time limit. My tactic would be to jog as far as I could on the flat sections, and walk the uphills and downhills - trying to run downhill with broken ribs was a no-go since it was agony!

After an initial climb through the fields, the Dalemain and Pooley Bridge sections were relatively flat, and on decent surfaces. I managed a slow jog for about half of it, and was ahead of my schedule – the Howtown checkpoint time of 2 hours 20 minutes put me on target for around 18 hours.

The race website was updated with live checkpoint timings, allowing family and friends at home to track runners’ progress. In addition, my 2 nominated supporters of Charlotte and Adam were automatically sent text messages by the organisers every time I reached a checkpoint, which showed my race time together with the estimated time for me to arrive at the next checkpoint.

The next section to Mardale Head headed up the Fuesdale valley to cross the highest point of the course, High Kop, at over 2,000 feet. This was a very long climb, with the weather becoming hot. The long descent off High Kop was very painful for my ribs, the lakeside path along Haweswater rough and rocky, with the ground underfoot quite wet in places, so I ended up walking nearly all of this section.

In addition, I was not helped by the insole of one of my running shoes disintegrating! I had to stop on a few occasions, finally ending up having to take both insoles out and tighten the shoes – inevitably leading to bruised feet as the day went on.

Elapsed time at Mardale Head, after 20.6 miles, was 5 hours 43 minutes - still on course for around 18 hours.

The next two sections were to Kentmere and then Ambleside. Both featured long climbs and descents, including the Gatescarth and Garburn passes. By this time I had settled into a steady rhythm and was “in the zone”, focussing on getting round, ignoring the aches, pains and sundry niggles. I certainly did more walking than running, but jogged wherever I could.

Arriving at Ambleside was quite an experience! I had been out for 10 hours 42 minutes – 34.4 miles of hill and mountain covered,
position 476th out of 615 starters, and it was getting very dark. Ambleside was pretty lively at 10.15pm, with holiday makers and locals enjoying a lovely warm, still, Saturday night: the pubs doing a roaring trade, and a Lord of the Rings themed stag party in full swing!

The race route goes through the centre of the town, passing under an archway adjacent to the pubs. Drinkers (including orcs and wizards) greeted runners with increasing enthusiasm as the evening drew on, with plentiful offers of liquid refreshment! All seemed rather surreal after nearly 11 hours on the hills.

The Ambleside checkpoint was at the church hall on the edge of the town. All checkpoints were well-stocked with food and drink: marshals and helpers really contributed to the spirit of the race by dressing up in costume. Each checkpoint had a particular theme: Howtown’s was Wild West, Mardale’s was Sparta, Kentmere’s was rock and roll, and Ambleside’s was clowns!

I stopped briefly at Ambleside, met up with Charlotte, Adam and Pritesh who were waiting for me, having themselves had a great day in Langdale, going up to Stickle Tarn. I didn’t stay long - headtorch on and I disappeared into the night for the climb up Loughrigg, the start of the last 16 mile section.

Back “into the zone” after Ambleside, my mountain experience kicked in and I felt comfortable on the hills at night, passing quite a few competitors, moving at a fast walk for most of the time.

Through to Chapel Stile and a checkpoint with a large and very welcoming marquee in a field, along the Langdale valley, and some unexpected rain.

Over the climb to Blea Tarn and the very rough, boggy section down to the start of the Wrynose Pass, up and over old quarry tracks to the final checkpoint at Tilberthwaite. On my own for most of the time, but aware of other headtorches bobbing around the hills in front of and behind me.

Finally, the last climb – known as the “Stairway to Heaven” (or “Hell”!) – the steps from Tilberthwaite up through the disused quarries onto the moor below Weatherlam. After the steps, a long steady climb, before the final very steep and rocky descent towards Coniston.

I managed a jog along the old miners’ track leading into the village, to be greeted just before dawn at 4.15am Sunday morning by Charlotte, Adam and Pritesh as I arrived at the finish.

Total time was 16 hours 42 minutes, 434th out of 615, so I’d picked up 42 places after Ambleside, and was pleased to have comfortably beaten my 20 hour target.

Postscript (written nearly 4 weeks after the 50)

“NEVER AGAIN”, I said immediately afterwards.
But “never” is a strange word which can change its meaning over time. Shaun Connery was reported to have said he would never make another James Bond film, and 12 years later went on to play 007 in the appropriately named “Never Say Never Again” (perhaps acting pays better than amateur running…).

I’m now enjoying getting back into some cycling, my ribs have healed, my wrist is about 90% so I’m on the mountain bike, rather than the road or time trial bikes, and I’m also doing a bit of jogging.

I will do more cycling in 2016, but would like to do another 50 mile running race, possibly next year – a different one to the Lakeland 50, since I like variety. Even though age is not on my side, I reckon I could go much quicker with a bit more luck in the build up – and also if I lose a few kilos.

Charities and sponsorship

Total fundraising to date for charities which were dear to Sarah is now around £5,000, the majority of which was raised for Mind by Adam as sponsorship for his London Marathon.

My Lakeland 50 was more of a personal challenge, rather than a fundraiser. With me being injured and only given the all clear 3 days before the start after my crash at Box Hill, I decided not to ask in advance for sponsorship for a race which I was not sure I would be able to even start, let alone finish!

We have made family donations to charities after my completion of the Lakeland 50, and if any family or friends would like to contribute then it would be appreciated. Please make any donations either directly to any of the charities listed below, using the links in their websites where a suitable message can be left if desired, or by cheque (made payable to the charity) to me at my office: Burgess Hodgson, 27 New Dover Road, Canterbury, CT1 3DN.

The two main charities my family have supported are:

Mind - national mental health charity for adults and children, and a very worthy cause.

Website - http://www.mind.org.uk/

Lord Whisky Sanctuary Fund – local animal rescue charity which was Sarah’s favourite. Sarah and I have rehomed rabbits, doves and ducks over the years, as well as riding their annual fundraising sportives, and using their tea rooms as a stop off point for long rides or walks.

Website – http://lordwhisky.co.uk/

In addition, we are also supporting the following:

Kent Air Ambulance – local triathlon club Deal Tri has been fundraising for the Air Ambulance in memory of Dan Squire, a young rider who died whilst cycling in 2013.
Even though Sarah had never met Dan, she was moved at hearing of his death. Sarah and I attended the club’s fundraising ride shortly before Sarah’s death last year, and a donation is being made to Deal Tri’s fundraising for the Air Ambulance.

**Canterbury Wheelchair Rugby** – Sarah believed that sport should be enjoyed equally by men and women, irrespective of race, colour or disability, views which I fully agree with. Sarah particularly enjoyed a day watching the London Paralympic games in 2012 which she felt was inspiring.

Members of my cycling club Adalta CC carried out a collection for the Wheelchair Rugby shortly after Sarah’s death, and my firm is a sponsor of the rugby club.

**Women’s cycling** – (not a charity) we have supported a local women’s race team and the new women’s only cycling race series at Fowlmead Country Park which local cycling club Thanet RC have promoted. The Sarah Jones Cup is being awarded to the series winner.

A link to Thanet RC’s announcement is below, which contains some details on Sarah’s background and sporting activities:


Finally, I would like to thank all my family and friends for all the support which has been given over the past year.

Ken Jones
August 2015