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Country Diary

Peak condition

The Lake District

A Harry Griffin
Monday September 23, 2002
[The Guardian](#)

Geographically, I suppose, Kendal is still "the Gateway to the Lakes" - or one of them - but, nowadays, the gate is barely ajar. As an example, it took me an hour last Sunday to drive from Kendal to Ambleside - usually a 20-minute run. The first problem, caused by a crazy, uncoordinated traffic system, was getting out of Kendal, the second, driving along the A591, now bedevilled with roadside works.

I was on my way to the 50th Lake District mountain trial - an annual event that is, surely, the most demanding fixture in the athletics calendar - far tougher than any marathon. Some competitors train for it the week before by running up and down Ben Nevis, Britain's highest mountain, but this is not nearly hard enough.

Briefly, the mountain trial involves running along a secret course, up, down and across the highest mountains in the district, working out your own route along rough, untracked ground for up to 20 miles - no matter what the weather. Last week's jubilee trial was staged in and around the beautiful dale of Buttermere in excellent weather - after a morning of low cloud on the fells. Previous trials based on Buttermere in 1978 and 1994 had appalling conditions of driving rain, high winds and thick cloud but no trial has ever been cancelled. In 1962 when the trial started from a cold, drenched Glenridding hidden in mist, only one man, wisely covered in a plastic sheet, finished out of scores of shivering competitors. These mountain men - the oldest last week was 74 - are a breed apart. And women, every bit as tough as the men, take part too. The fitness of all these super athletes leaves one speechless with admiration.

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