

Mountain Trial

Come and have a go if you think you're hard enough!

Recently i was asked by the *Lake District Mountain Trial Association* (LDMTA) if i would write an article for *The Fellrunner*, explaining just what the mountain trial was all about and hopefully attracting a few more people to have a go. I said i would, but that it wouldn't be a list of places, dates and times as there's already a fantastic book out there that does all that.

The book is called *Fifty Years Running – A history of the Mountain Trial* and chronicles the first fifty years of the trial. Obviously, it's a fascinating book, full of tales from runners and accounts from every trial. I've no idea where you could get a copy though, maybe get in touch with the LDMTA. (*Editors note: check page XX for details on where to get the book*)

I said my account would be from my point of view, they said that's ok, so here goes!

It's not going to be to the standard of a Graham Breeze article though, as I ~~haven't got loads of time on my hands or nowt better to do~~ haven't got the journalistic skills or amazing attention to detail that he has.

The first trial was held back in the early fifties. I am sure most of you will have seen the picture of the guys running down the track from the Old Dungeon Ghyll, up Langdale, dressed in boots, baggy canvas shorts and anoraks! This was back in the days when they had to travel to races by public transport, often having set off early the previous day to get to the trial destination. This tradition is still kept up today

by Joe Blackett. Joe used to do this by choice, but now he has to, as none of his North Yorks NMoors mates will give him a lift following his switch to the North East fell running giant Dark Peak!

The first few trials involved a mass start with a series of checkpoints, usually on the summits of the fells, which had to be visited in order. I would imagine a few of the lads would navigate between the points and the rest would just follow – much the same as a fell race these days!!

After a few years competitors were set off at minute intervals. You would have to hope that you were set off near somebody who knew what they were doing, just as it is at the trial nowadays.

The second Sunday in September is the date for the trial and the venue is changed every year. The exact location is only divulged two weeks prior to the day. It is surprising though what can be let slip by a local farmer who had been asked if his fields could be used. I think the earliest I've known where a trial is located was in May – much to the annoyance of Michael Hind, who was long time entries secretary and who swore blind he didn't know until two weeks before.

The course itself is usually between 4-4.5 hours in length for the winner and a slightly shorter course for women as well as a short course of about two thirds the length of the

long course. This is a new innovation to try and encourage some younger competitors (young in mountain trial talk is 50 and under!) and also older trialists like Ken Ledward who compete well into their 80's!

The exact length of the course depends on three things: the weather, how good the winner is and perhaps most importantly the mood of the course planner when he decides where it is going to go. Good mood: four hours, bad mood: five hours! The course planner of the Wasdale Head trial in 1987 must have been in a particularly foul mood, as it was won by a very fit Mark Rigby in 5hrs 10mins. This was mainly due to the one but last checkpoint (after four hours of running for Mark) being the col between Scafell Pike and Lingmell and the last one being at the little tarn between the two summits of Kirk fell. Have a look at a map to see what i mean! Cruelty, absolute cruelty!! Billy Bland has even been forced into having a lie down and eating bleaberries on a mountain trial!

As i said before, you set off at a minute intervals and after about half a mile you are given a map with the checkpoints already marked on for you. The pre-marked map is a recent, welcome innovation as in the past you had to set off with your map, pen (which wouldn't write properly) and you were handed a piece of paper with the checkpoints written on. It was then up to you to mark up your own





map. Mistakes were often made.

The organisers supply the event map and this is usually fine, apart from Grasmere in 1999 when it was printed using invisible ink! No i'm not joking. Fortunately it was a nice day and everybody (nearly) seemed to manage.

One thing i have noticed over recent years to my disappointment is the lack of obvious checkpoints. Back in the good old days they used to be manned by people with big orange tents that you could see from the moon. The best of which springs to mind was one near Hart Crag (Ian Hodgson, leg 4) which could be seen from the other side of the Kirkstone road, Cauldale Moor area, probably four miles away. Now they tend to hide themselves away in green or brown bivi bags and the first you know is when you get a "well done mate, what's your number?" – most unfair!

My first trial was Grasmere in 1987 aged 19 – imagine that, 19 and doing a long fell race – it'll put me off for life! I think i came about 35th, about an hour behind Billy Bland who won in 3hrs 39mins. I was hooked!

This was followed by the 1988 trial from Hartsop, which was won by 20-year-old Mike Fanning who did promptly retire for a year or ten but is now back keener than ever.

December 1988 saw me reach the tender age of 21 – yes, that means i am 40 this year – look out Holmesey! One of my presents was a winners tankard from an earlier trial, given to me by Billy Bland. Now some might say "the tight git" he could have bought something, but not me. I vowed to one day win my own tankard, something like that anyhow. This i've tried to do on 12 occasions and have i managed it? Have i sh**e!

Every year it seems to be the same. I do ok for the majority of the route but I always manage one big cockup, costing anything between 10-30 minutes. A good example of this is climbing out of Eskdale in the mist to what i thought was Foxes Tarn (on route to the ridge of Scafell) only to be stood next to an ambulance box at Mickeldore. It was then Broad Stand on a wet misty day or back down and try again. I opted for the latter.

A recent addition to the trials is the use of electronic timing (ok Martin, I'll admit it) which is a good one as it gives accurate split times between checkpoints, allowing everybody to see where their own and everybody else's cockups were made.

For me to win though, I think there must be a bit of luck involved. Things like arriving at a particular checkpoint at the same time as three or four other people, or, better still, arrive there at the same time as Steve Birkenshaw or Ifor Powell. One of the best feelings is to catch one of your main rivals who set off before you. You know then that all you need to do is follow them or run together, then you've beaten them. The reverse happened to me last year, when after three hours John Hunt caught me for about ten minutes and it was just a case of "well that's it then, there's always next year!"

To be honest, I think i've only ever come close to winning on two occasions. Once when

the venue was Buttermere when i was out-navigated by Brendan Bolland. The course was on the fells I train on all the time and i made the mistake of taking routes I would go on in training, not looking at the map more carefully. A lesson to everyone there.

The second time was a misty day in the Duddon Valley and i literally came within 50 yards of winning. I'd set off a few minutes behind Phil Clarke and after a couple of hours caught sight of him climbing back into the mist onto the Dow Crag ridge. I ran like hell to try and catch him, knowing that if I did, I could just follow him, much to my delight and his disgust. I just failed to do so though and he was out of sight never to be seen again. Phil went on to win and I came a distant third. Phil's view of this maybe different to that of mine!

It's not always been happy times though, as the Mountain Trial was also scene of my worst injuries incurred on the fells – and i've had a few. Descending into Grizedale from the col between Helvellyn and Nethermost, I stood at the top and thought it's a bit steep, but it should be alrighteeeeeee. I slipped on my arse on wet grass and started to gather speed – to say i s**t myself would be an accurate description. When I'd reached terminal velocity I came to a sudden halt when i hit a handily

Fifty Years of Running

- A history of the Mountain Trial

Costs £5 and can be bought from :

- Rathbones Book Shop in Keswick
- The LDMTA Secretary, Susan Clough. Send £6.00 (includes package and postage) to Elm Cottage, Scroggs Bridge, Staveley, Cumbria, LA8 9JG
- The registration table at the Mountain Trial

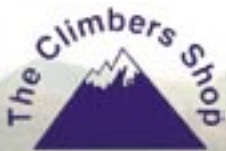


placed patch of boulders. I say handily placed, as had they not been there, I'd gone off a cliff and fell 20 metres, good night Vienna! Anyhow, a 90 minute walk back to the start (thanks Bob for the company) and a visit to Keswick hospital, where i received nearly 50 stitches in various cuts and gashes, I returned to the finish to tell everyone how i would have certainly won

as i was flying, had i not had a tumble, probably anyhow!

This incident happened on the very few occasions, maybe the only one, the trial has been shortened because of bad weather. Gavin Bland won that day on a course that was entirely on the fells he roams 365 days a year in his job as a shepherd. How fair is that?

55TH LAKE DISTRICT MOUNTAIN TRIAL SUNDAY 9TH SEPTEMBER, 2007



First Mountain Orienteering Event ever held in the UK

3 Courses with approx. distance/climb:

Mens – 16m/7000',

Ladies – 12m/5000',

Short – 10m/3500'

Please enter online at www.ldmta.org.uk

Alternatively, send an SAE to request an entry form from **Simon Patton, 2 Sunnybank Cottages, Jaggars Lane, Hathersage, Hope Valley S32 1AZ**

Photograph courtesy of Peter Hartley

The prize giving is a well attended affair with numerous prizes awarded to first outward-bound member, first Girl Guide, first WI member and RAC member! One thing I do miss from the good old days is the beer tent. bring back the beer tent! To be honest, what everyone is waiting for at the prize giving is the draw for the prize of a weekend for two at the Wasdale Head Inn which is drawn out of a hat and can be won by anyone who has completed any of the courses that day. But you have to be there to claim it and you only have five seconds to make yourself known or it's drawn again. It's the UK's equivalent of the great La Plagne prize draw, which a few of you may have been present at _ though that is all in French and you have 3 seconds claiming time, une, deux, trois, au revoir!

So for anybody who hasn't seen the book mentioned earlier, there's been about 55 Mountain Trials. Joss has won 10 times, Billy 9 times. Sue Parkin has been the most successful woman with 9 wins and Miriam Rosen and Wendy Dodds have both done over 20. Me, myself, I've done 12 trials, no wins, but maybe this year will be lucky 13? I doubt it! I can live with that though as better mountain trialers than me have tried and failed. Peter Radcliffe and Pete Haines to

name only two. They did have Billy Bland at his best to try and beat though. I haven't got that as an excuse.

If you fancy a longish day out in the Lakeland hills or perhaps a slightly shorter one for you under 50's, second Sunday in September, the time, the place is not yet known, or is it? And if you think all that jogging about is not for me, it was good enough for Olympic gold medallist on the track on more than one occasion!

Printed below is the course from last year's trial, just to give you an idea of what it's all about. Use an Ordnance Survey Lakes NW or Harveys Lakeland West:

Map issue: Sour Milk Gill	233122
1 Westernfoot, Rocky Knoll	207132
Little Round How	
2 Between tarns	199128
3 Stream junction	214064
4 Col Gunson Knott/Shelter Crags	249053
5 Source Little Gill Head	254080
6 Knoll Wrist Knott	243115
7 Wall junction	239110
Follow tapes to finish	235122

Jonny Bland won in 3hrs 50mins ish.



The Mountain Trial

*A supplement to Scarffer's article.
Ali Bramall - Organiser*

If you love the mountains, and feel exhilarated when moving swiftly over varied terrain, the Mountain Trial is a different way of experiencing the Lakeland Fells.

It's an annual 'Long O' event that is held at different venues each year, on the second Sunday in September.

This is a fell race with a difference. As you decide on the optimum line between checkpoints, you'll visit bits of fell you've never been to before, maybe spotting deer, a hidden valley or a pleasing line to try out on another day. And whilst you will see other competitors, it's likely that you'll be spending much of the time out on your own.

Competitors start at one minute intervals from 08.30. After following a flagged route for a few minutes to the map issue point, you receive a pre-marked map and details of the checkpoints, which must be visited in the order given.

Unlike other fell races, you need to be self reliant. So, it's not just fitness that counts, but the ability to identify the best route choice between controls and ability on steep, rough ground that determines how long it is before you reappear at the finish, or in a different valley!

As the venue is not disclosed to the competitors until two weeks before the event, there is little chance to reccy the area.

Owing to the severity of the Men's and Women's courses, you need to show that you are competent in the mountains through previous participation in events such as mountain marathons, cycle navigation events, orienteering, mountaineering or class A fell races; and be aged 21 or over.

The Mountain Trial was started in 1952 and the Short Trial, was introduced six years ago to allow those who could no longer manage the full men's or women's course, to extend the number of years when they could still take part. This course, about 10 miles with 3500 feet of ascent, also serves the purpose of encouraging younger runners, (minimum age 18 years) and those who are rich in mountain experience (but not necessarily running), into the event.

The other aspect of the Mountain Trial is the post race experience, when you get the opportunity to discuss your route choices and blunders over the food and drink that is provided as part of the entry fee. Each year the prizes are awarded by a well known or inspirational runner or mountaineer. This year is the turn of Richard Askwith, author of Feet in the Clouds.

To enter go to www.ldmta.org.uk
On line entries will be available from May.
£15 per person includes a specially commissioned map and post race food and drink.