

The South Downs Relay, 6 June 2009: A personal account

The Race

A 100-mile relay along the South Downs Way from Beachy Head to Winchester. To be run by teams of 6, each runner to run 3 legs.

The B List (in order of appearance)

Tom Blaylock
Rob Wiggins
James Woodward
Terry Slade
Kevin Lockyear
Tony Cooley

The Big Day

It's 5.30 a.m. and I arrive bleary-eyed at Kevin's barn where we await the arrival of Tony and the rest of the team in the well-appointed limousine we have acquired for the day (Phil's Espace). We soon get under way and arrive at Beachy Head at about 7:15. There's a fresh breeze from the south-east.

At 8 a.m. I set off on the first leg and quickly lose ground on the other runners. Prior to getting the call from Tony to come and make up the numbers, I had done no running for 3 months. Going from zero mileage to the South Downs Relay in 12 days is a hell of a comeback and I was seriously worried about not being able to go the distance. The route passes over the quad-wrecking Seven Sisters so I mince carefully on the downhills to save my legs for later. I arrive at the Exceat changeover an undisclosed number of minutes after the rest of the group and hand over to Rob, who sets off on Leg 2 along the pleasantly wooded Cuckmere Valley before hitting the long uphill stretch east of Alfriston to Bo-Peep.

A cold wind is blowing as we wait for Rob to arrive but visibility is good with excellent views towards Seaford Head. Rob arrives in good order and hands over to James, who sets off strongly uphill towards Firle Beacon, before the mad dash downhill to Itford Farm.

Down in the Ouse Valley at Itford Farm, I look round the old farmstead and reminisce on younger, fitter times when this was a checkpoint on the old South Downs Way Run. 65 miles behind you, just 15 left, and a bowl of sugar-laden cornflakes gives you enough of a boost to get you to Eastbourne.

Back to the present, James sprints down the hill and over the new footbridge to hand over to Terry at the start of Leg 4. More memories, this time of the long struggle up Mill Hill, then on and on up the Yellow Brick Road, then eventually levelling off before the descent skirting the bowl of Cold Coombes. This leg is a major challenge for the average punter, not so for 67-year-old Terry Slade, showing little diminution of his powers as he heads off across the river and past the picturesque Southease Church before tackling the arduous ascent.

Leg 5 starts by the A27 west of Lewes. It's just about sea level here and Kevin grabs the baton and starts the long relentless grind up to Blackcap, then sharp left to finish eventually at Ditchling Beacon, a cool 813 feet above sea level.

Having felt pretty wrecked after Leg 1, I now realise I'll have to revive somehow before Tony completes Leg 6 and the cycle begins again. Kevin soon arrives and hands over to Tony, who sets off briskly up a short hill then begins the gradual descent to Pyecombe. Having enjoyed a long easy descent, he then faces a stiff climb over Newtimber Hill then down to Saddlescombe where I wait to start Leg 7. The marshals are having a discussion. "So let's see, just two more teams to come, Chichester and Ranelagh Harriers." So the position is clear. Having started at 8 a.m. with a slower team than we had expected, we now find ourselves at the back of the field. Tony is first to appear and I set off up the initially steep hill which eventually flattens to a gentle rise past Devil's Dyke, through a notch in the Downs at Edburton Hill, then over Truleigh Hill for the long descent to the river Adur. The Ranelagh runner passes me as I pass the youth hostel. That's it then, last! My untrained quads are aching so I run on the grass verge by the road for a bit of cushioning. On the final descent a group of marshals waits patiently for the straggler to come through.

At last, Leg 7 is over and Rob sets off over the footbridge, heading for yet another long climb, from precisely sea level to the dizzy heights of Chanctonbury Ring at 780 feet.

As we wait for Rob to arrive at Washington, a little mental arithmetic indicates that we could be in a tight spot. Although it is still some hours away, the 1845 cut-off at HMS Mercury could be slipping out of reach. A South Downs Relay dnf would go down in infamy, right up there with the notorious John Fisher wrong turn. But such thoughts are put to the back of the mind as Rob comes dashing down the chalky track and sets James off for a short sharp Leg 9 up Barnsfarm Hill, then fairly level to Springhead Hill.

We ride in the comfort of our limousine through Storrington then up the narrow winding lane to the car park on the ridge. James soon arrives and hands over to Terry for another climb, over a gentle rise, then steeply downhill and over the Arun to Houghton Lane. As we are about to leave a lady in a Fittleworth Flyers vest asks if we saw a campervan leaving. She has been left behind – one of a catalogue of "mishaps" to befall FF that day. We offer her a lift but she decides to jog off down the hill in the hope that her absence will be noticed and the team bus will retrieve her. As it turns out we catch her up at the bottom of the hill and she hitches a ride to Houghton. I muse aloud "what if they come back to rescue you now?" and right on cue the Fittleworth battle-wagon is seen coming the other way. Despite much flashing of headlights the bus continues on its way.

The Fittleworth Flyers squad are eventually re-united at the Houghton Lane changeover, so we go back to worrying about our own problems. Terry soon comes on the scene, still running well, and hands over to Kevin for Leg 11. Once again there is a long uphill to be negotiated before cresting Westburton Hill and descending to Desolation Barn. There then follows another sharp climb to Toby's Stone, with the evocatively named Egg Bottom Coppice below to the North, then through the Bignor Hill car park.. Crossing the long sheep field after Stane Street there are splendid views

to the south, including what looks from this distance like Sydney Opera House but is actually Butlins at Bognor. The chalk track finally descends to Littleton Farm.

As we wait at Littleton Farm, sipping tea kindly supplied by the club, the lack of traffic seems unreal. We're not used to being this much adrift at the back, just us and Fittleworth Flyers who are having major navigation issues. Kevin finally arrives a few minutes after the FF runner and Tony sets off on Leg 12, up the hill over Littleton Down, past the summit where, 65 years ago, a Lancaster of 617 Squadron "Dam Busters" crashed into the hill in poor visibility, killing all on board. The trail continues past the curiously-named Stickingspit Bottom, through the luxuriant woodland of Graffham Down and Heyshott Down, then at last the mad hurtle down Hillbarn Lane.

By this time the situation is becoming clearer. Just before I set off on Leg 13, Rob shouts across "no pressure Tom, but if you don't get to Harting in under an hour, we won't make the cut-off". On any other day I would have felt insulted at the merest insinuation that this leg would take a whole hour, but in my current untrained state this is a major challenge. I set off up the trail to Cocking Down. Ten minutes later I'm still climbing, but at least the slope is easing as I press on past Linch Down. At the Didling turn the farmer has tied some gates across the track to drive some sheep over. My great hero, steeplechaser Moses Kiptanui, would have hurdled these without breaking stride. Instead, I stop and fumble with the catches, cursing as precious seconds are wasted. At last I carry on, through the woods past Monkton House with its customary wailing peacocks. I'm vaguely aware of the Devil's Jumps on the right. A couple of minutes later the Devil's Jumps are there, plain to see. The mind plays tricks when you're running flat-out, which is one very good reason to know the route. Why else would so many runners get lost on the best way-marked trail in England?

Without thinking I take the right turn at the crossroads. I glance at my watch and it's precisely 30 minutes gone. Can this be half-way? But I've got the worst hills to come, how can it be? I pass the Luftwaffe memorial, in memory of Hauptmann Josef Oestermann, the 25-year-old pilot who selflessly remained at the controls to allow the crew to bail out of his stricken Ju88, on the very first day of the Battle of Britain. Back to more mundane matters, I have to shift my stricken body over some nasty hills sharpish, to prevent my crew from bailing out of this race! After a fast downhill stretch to Buriton Farm, I pass Mount Sinai and wheeze my way up Pen Hill, then Beacon Hill, and finally Harting Down. Incredibly I am ahead of schedule and curse as I realise there's nobody to hold the gate open for me just before the changeover. I hand the baton to Rob: elapsed time 57:50 – yeahhhhh!!

[at this point the now crippled author is whisked away to a hot dinner date, while his teammates take up the charge to Winchester]

The team drives on to the car park just north of Fagg's Farm and waits for Rob. It's another short sharp leg, about 4 miles of gently undulating tracks. A mere 26 minutes later, Rob appears at a terrific pace and hands over to James. This is the final leg before the 1845 cut-off and James needs to pull something out of the fire to get over Butser Hill fast and on to HMS Mercury.

To tumultuous cheers from the waiting crowds, James arrives with 10 minutes to spare and hands over to Terry.

Although the team is now assured of a finish, the runners push on hard to salvage some respectability and possibly pick off some back markers. Terry hammers along the long downhill towards tree-covered Henwood Down, where the trail turns left, right and left again before the final steep climb south of Whitewool Hanger. There is no hiding place here as spectators have an excellent vantage point at the changeover to see whether any runner would dare slow to a walk in this exposed situation. But Terry still has enough energy for a storming finish to Leg 16 and sends Kevin on his way to the final changeover at Holding Farm.

Leg 17 is the longest on the course and additional detours have been added as the debate continues over what should be the definitive route of the Way's Hampshire section. The distance this year is allegedly 8.6 miles, giving enough scope for Kevin to pick off a couple of wayward runners, so that for the first time in 50-odd miles, we are not the tail-end Charlies!

Kevin hands over to Tony for the glory leg. Over the A272, sharp left past the John Fisher memorial plaque, then, despite the gathering gloom as nightfall approaches, it's pretty straightforward navigation back over the main road, through Chilcomb village, then through a gap in the hedge to the finishing line. The rest of the team lead the applause and cheering of the waiting crowds as he completes the final few yards of this epic run. Then he rouses himself from his reverie and the only sound he hears is the crickets chirping in the nearby hedgerow. James steps forward to congratulate him, while the others huddle in the bar to keep warm, with Terry nursing a badly-bruised shoulder after slipping in the toilets.

So that was that, we did it. Thanks to great team spirit, we worked through the bad times and made that extra effort when it mattered. OK we were never in the hunt for medals and finished nowhere, but in the circumstances we can look back on a fine achievement, with plenty of happenings to reminisce over in later years.