

Helene Diamantides gives her account of the Welsh Dragon's Back Race

A Busy Holiday in Wales

ROUND about,
and ROUND about,
and ROUND about I go:

I think I am a traveller escaping from a bear.

I think I am an elephant,
Behind another elephant,
Behind ANOTHER elephant, who isn't really there...

(*'Busy'*. A. A. Milne)

Well, most of you know how nice it is to have a week away running in the hills. Now imagine that someone feeds you, moves your dry clothes to all the places you want them and also puts up your tent at the end of the day. Not bad eh?, and all for a tenner.

I'd been training for the Dragon's Back race for most of the year and by September felt really unfit and desperately afraid of what I'd entered. The only answer lay in getting a partner who was even less prepared than I, and daft enough to want to do it! Martin Stone said 'Yes!'.

The 220 mile event was organised by Ian Waddell to raise funds for the Amanda Bevan rehabilitation centre. Heavy sponsorship by Jet and heavy paratroopers made the event a long distance dream. Can you imagine hot showers after a wet day in the hills? or a choice of 3 pasta and potato main courses? and the sight of lots of men in uniform. A race, definitely for women!

Day one was the hilliest. We traversed the Carneddau, Glyders and Snowdon, in mist. Map reading tended to weed out the opposition and the finishing times for the day varied from 8-15 hours.

In the true spirit of international co-operation we spent the second day also trying to lose the American and Swedish opposition in the mist. Did you know that Nike Airs can't come down rocky gulleys as fast as fell shoes? Shame isn't it? - they'd have kept up with us otherwise! And it's just as well they didn't find the lovely grass. As it is they now think the Moelwyns are even rockier than Tryfan! After doing this vanishing act we and two other teams settled down to some proper running: Mark McDermott had teamed up with Adrian Belton but had problems through lack of receiving the course; Phil Clarke and Mike Walford were Kendal runners which naturally made THEM slower.

Day 3 saw us visiting Cadair Idris and Pumlumon via all the scenic country in between. This was potentially one of the hardest days with a combination of rough terrain, long distances and high hills. As it was, the skies were clear, the weather kind and we even saw Red Kites.



The Moment of Victory!
Photo: Rob Howard

Day 4: Famous terrain to all S.A.S. members...the dreaded Elan Valley. Tussock grass, and still more tussock grass proved to be the last straw for me. As I keeled over into a bog and didn't get up again, Martin force-fed me chocolate, took my rucsac and spoke very roughly indeed! It worked, and I continued to move forwards. But not very fast. And certainly not with a rucsac. However, the Dragon's Back is all about teamwork and I was able to repay the favour the following day.

Day 5: Tour de whats-left-of-Wales (well almost). Home via Fan Hir and the Black Mountain. Actually the longest day of the whole lot and an apallingly stiff climb to the finish at Carreg Cennen Castle.

Guidelines to success in the race.

1. Prepare for it and train, train, train. This maximises the chances of shin-splints BEFORE the start. Then you can cancel your entry and not lose face.
2. Day 1 (and days two to five). Eat a lot

early on. It's worth trying to overcome nerves and eating more than just the odd chocolate bar I forced down.

3. Don't win the first day. Especially if you're female this enrages the opposition and spurs them on. It also upsets the paras who set up the showers (I thought they were SUPPOSED to be mixed?)

4. Day 2. I know it's not easy at 5.30 am, but breakfast is essential. It also pays to have reccied the Rhinogs in mist.

5. Days 3 and 4. Don't assume the valleys are the easy bits. Irate farmers who merely think you should be on a footpath, not a bridleway, are less fearsome than those who move the footpaths to suit themselves.

6. Day 5. This is the longest and roughest underfoot just near the very end. Tanky's Trog or Edale Skyline in gloopy conditions would be the perfect preparation.

7. At the finish. Smile even if you don't feel like it: the cameras will have a field day if you don't!



Stone gives laid-back post-race interview.
Photo: Rob Howard