

Race Across Scotland (RAS) – Matthew Holt

This event follows the Southern Upland Way (SUW), from Portpatrick on the west coast to Cockburnspath on the east coast. In total it's approximately 225 miles long, with checkpoints dotted along the route. You have 100 hours to complete the race.

I was supported by fellow Ripon Runners Stephen Reilly (who drove me to the start line), and Lena and Billy Conlin, who were going to be my support for the first 48 hours. They would hand over to Jill on the Monday afternoon. That was the plan! What is it they say? "Man plans, and God laughs".

Stephen did his job perfectly, getting me to the start line in time to collect my tracker, and ready for the 6am start. Looking back, that 40 minutes before the start, I didn't feel any nerves or any excitement. Those are the usual feelings, but I felt like I was going for a steady parkrun.



The route starts by climbing up along the coastline, and following the rugged cliffs for a couple of miles. As a big fan of Grand Designs, I unexpectedly got to run past one of my favourite builds on this section. A cliff top house with uninterrupted views across the Irish Sea.

The views were certainly stunning, especially as the sun was already shining, and the temperature was starting to rise under beautiful blue skies.

The first checkpoint came and went, before the course went through the picturesque Castle Kennedy. The first 45 miles are a bit of a blur, an impromptu support point set up by a wonderful lady offering fruit and water, roads, trails, checkpoints, more road, more trails, more checkpoints. One the major checkpoints, number 3, was supposed to be 45 miles in. I had just run out of fluids, but was only 1 mile away, so not worried. But it turned out to be nearer 3 miles away. And under the ever-increasing heat it felt a lot further. I was eating and drinking well so felt ok, but those 3 miles started to mark a turning point for me.

Lena and Billy met me for the first time, about a mile before CP3. I topped up my water bottles, had a good drink, then walked / jogged up to the CP3, only to turn around and come all the way back to Billy and Lena. That's why the SUW is 215 miles long, but RAS is nearer 225 miles, you have a few out and backs to CP's due to the remoteness of the course.

I set off at about 6.30pm for the next 22-mile section, when I would next see Lena and Billy at CP4. I estimated about 6 hours, but hoped for being at CP4 nearer to midnight. I was already looking forward to a sleep. The first 13 miles went well, and I was on schedule time wise.

The wide forest track was easy to follow. Soon after that section though, the headtorch went on, and the fun (????) really started. I had noticed the GPX file we were given was giving more straight-lines, as opposed to actually following the path. This meant, even when you were clearly on the correct path, it looked like you'd gone off course, only to rejoin it a few hundred yards later. It could have been my new Garmin watch up playing up too? So when it went dark, and you left the wide vehicle tracks for the overgrown off road sections, the gpx file was pretty useless. You could be 1m to the left or right of the actual route, and have no idea where it really was. This left you open to suddenly falling down little becks and gullies - I know, I fell 6 times in the space of 3 minutes.

After hauling myself up for the 6th time, I suddenly realised I was cold, and very tired. The legs felt heavy. I wasn't in a good place physically or mentally. I slowly walked, even on the downhill tarmac sections, to CP4. I was done, worst still, I knew it. BTW, the dark night skies gave a wonderful display of the stars. With zero light pollution, I took a minute to turn off the headtorch and just stare up at the fantastic sight. A delightful moment during a very low point.

I arrived at 1.15am, a full hour behind my schedule, that hour was lost in the last 8 miles. No wonder I was cold. Lena and Billy did everything right. Everything I would do as support to another. They talked me through and helped me in eating, drinking, and changing out of sweaty, wet and horrible kit. They assured me I'd feel better after a couple of hours sleep. I'd be OK!

The alarm went off at 4am. I awoke and felt terrible. They dragged me out of the van, and into the village hall, brought me coffee and soup, and tried to get me ready for the next 22 miles. Even saying they could intercept me only 8 miles later. Just get going, come on, you'll be fine. Bless them. If I'd run half as well as they had supported, I would have made it. But I was still gone.

Maybe the heat had got to more than I thought? Maybe that missing nervousness at the start was indication 'I wasn't up for it?' Either way, they helped me up, I handed in my tracker, and we were soon heading south to Yorkshire as the sun started to rise on day 2 of RAS. The early finish meant Jill didn't need the mountain of support equipment already packed for the Monday handover.

I could have submitted this report while the race was still going on. That would have been a bit too weird though! All in all, I learnt the following:

1. My support crew were brilliant, thank you Stephen, Lena and Billy. And thank you, Jill, even though you didn't have to leave home, I knew you were ready to do so.
2. You don't have to enter a 225 mile race to see one of your favourite Grand Designs. Just drive to Portpatrick and walk one mile North up the coast. It's a lot quicker and cheaper!
3. Nerves are good. It fires you up, gives you that edge that you need to feel.
4. I have no regrets about the DNF. I wasn't good enough. Back home now, I've started on a back-to-basics routine. Even though only a week into it, it's been about gentle runs, but more importantly, reintroduced regular core strength workouts. Here's to the next one.