

Wasdale 2016 Race Review Report -2nd draft 7th Sept. 2016

Statistics

The Wasdale fell Race has been established since 1972. The course omprises 21 miles with around 9,000ft of ascent or 440ft per mile. Field limit of 250. Designated under FRA as :-

AL A grade long PM - course partially marked (valley crossing only), LK - Local Knowledge - required but not mandatory, PE - Previous Experience - required, mandatory, NS - Navigational Skills - required, mandatory

On this 2016 race day 9th July :-

Pre-race entries	140	
Turn-ups	103	(drop-out of about 20% normal, 30% common for championship)
Entries on the day	30	(much higher than normal, usually only 5 or so on day)
Starters	133	(good for non-championship race & poor weather forecast)
Finished	94	
Retired	39	(30% drop-out/time out, similar but less than 32% in 2013's heat wave)

Logistics

All tents & equipment shared with car parking in the same field (73 cars paid to park, others from helpers). Toilets & showers available in Wasdale Head campsite close by (many runners camped). One registration tent, one catering tent, 2 event shelters & generator (plus spare available) for hot drinks.

Paramedic at the registration area.

2 radio networks, CB base set & mobiles & FRA Motorola system.

Registration - runners have their details in surname alphabetical order in pre-entry forms folder.

Runners are issued with race number & 9 plastic brad bag closure tallies, one for each of 7 checkpoints, 1 for Greendale road crossing & 1 for finish.

Runners are tracked by manual tally system, with a tally board at finish & by summit marshals writing race numbers/times on aluminium boards.

The Finish tally board has face up tallies for finishers, reversed for retirees (see image included below). Runners' numbers are removed at the finish & impaled on spike at finish in finish order plus retirees as they arrived (also shown below).

Note :- For championship status races an e-card system is employed in addition to tallies/manual recording.

On display at registration:-

Route map, rules, weather forecast (MWIS), kit requirements, checkpoint closing times, environmental protection.

Checkpoints (7-off, Whin Rigg/Seatallan/Pillar/Great Gable/Esk Hause/Scafell Pike/Lingmell Nose)

Checkpoint marshals all possess in addition to the two radio networks a sheet aluminium writing board & pencil (can be used underwater), a laminated race number tick sheet, paper tick sheet, weatherproof writing cover, magic marker & biro, first aid kit & double survival bag.

Checkpoint opening times are based on being 15min ahead of Billy Bland's record time of 3hr 25min in 1982.

The first 4 checkpoints (Whin Rigg/Seatallan/Pillar/Great Gable) have closing times based on a projected finish time for gents of 6hrs 30min & for ladies 7hrs 5min using several fastest/slowest runners' profiles (see graph below) & using the same cut-off time of 4hrs 30min at Great Gable.

The bad weather at this race increased the normal lapsed time of roughly 3hrs from Great Gable to the finish for the slowest runners by about 10% or 20min, so the slowest gent should have finished in about 7hrs, the slowest lady by about 7hrs 30min.

The logic of not having closing times further on in the race than Great Gable is that it is almost as far to continue on to the finish as it is to return - once the runner has passed Esk Hause.

Also, to retire from Gable to the finish to check in is a relatively short leg for a retiree.

For a race finish time of 7hrs the average speed is only roughly 3mph i.e. running a 20min mile. This is roughly equivalent to a Bob Graham pace. To advocate allowing up to 8hrs or longer is unfair on 2 counts, first to the level of exposure to the runners (evidenced by this year's Lyndon Ashley being out for about 8hrs before becoming hypothermic & needing assistance, also for the checkpoint marshals, e.g. Scafell Pike opening at 13.50 would be exposed for over 5hrs at above 3000ft. We have in the past considered splitting the Scafell Pike checkpoint & Great Gable (due to additional radio relay time covering Esk Hause) into 2 'shifts' of say 2hrs each.

The race control radio control operator is experienced. There are known problems with getting satisfactory radio signals, particularly with Whin Rigg, even in perfect weather but they were not evident this year.

Great Gable marshals have a longer stake-out as they need to relay messages from Esk Hause until the last runner not cut-off at Great Gable has reached Esk Hause. This can generate a duration of up to 4 hrs, unlike Esk Hause cross walls, which does have shelter whichever direction the wind blows.

Radios - we are still evaluating the two networks of CB sets & the Motorola FRA sets. The Motorola sets appear to work better & are much more weather protected, but they either work very well or not at all whereas the CB sets can send/receive with squelch suppression reduced, i.e. with very low signal strength.

Procedural details.

Registration.

Runners who have pre-entered have their forms held in surname alphabetical order at registration. All they need to do is to sign to confirm their details have not changed & the registration number of whichever car they are in (or share) so we can confirm they have not left the field if they go missing. They should provide an emergency contact telephone number, but this is not compulsory unless a junior (none at Wasdale but can be at Scafell Pike).

Entries on the day (EOD) have to complete a full registration form. We had a surprisingly high number of EODs & actually ran out of forms so had to use blank paper, not ideal, but adequate.

The idea of using a pre-entry system & not having runners completing a full form at registration is to save time & rushing. Rushing produces mistakes & poor handwriting under stress & in the wet can render documents subject to misinterpretation/errors.

The satisfying of all of the LK/PE/NS requirements is assumed because of the race information published widely. There has been & is no intention for us to attempt to verify the competence of the runners. It is required simply to complete the course so in a sense self-evident. However, a runner who cannot navigate well can slip through any system.

Start

Runners are called to the start field about 10 minutes early for a random kit check of approx 10% of runners with 3 marshals calling out runners' numbers at random.

We do not do a 100% kit check as it would be onerous for the marshals, time consuming & possibly subject to cheating.

A pre-race brief is given, this includes stressing that each runner must identify his/her number to the

marshals. Perhaps controversially I do not insist on the runners' numbers being always on the outside of their clothing (here either a vest/thermal top or waterproof top) on bad weather days. On the ascents the runners would be divested, on the approach to the checkpoints they would need to be covered & unzipping at each checkpoint only if requested to do so by the marshal would seem pragmatic. There was no number recognition problem reported this year by any marshals.

Secondly & most importantly the depositing of the runners' tallies at all checkpoints including Greendale & at the finish. The runners are reminded of the emergency contact telephone number (Wasdale Head Campsite) & obeying the marshals if they are timed out before or at Gable.

Runners asked to tell all checkpoint marshals the number of starters in case of radio comms failure.

Runners are instructed to respect the country code, close all gates & not drop litter.

Start time 11.00 but was delayed by 3.5min as one runner failed to bring tallies to the start so we waited for him. As a consequence all checkpoints were therefore asked to add 5min to all the closing times.

Weather reports & decision to go ahead with the full race course.

Myself, Will Spain & Colin Dulson all checked several weather reports on the lead-up to race day. I usually print off & display the MWIS version at registration.

The forecast was indeed bad for the race day. High winds from the S/SW at 900m, though figures varied from gusting up to 50mph down to 35mph, the speed tending to reduce the closer the forecast to the day itself. Rain was to be heavy but limited to a roughly 3hr window from about midday to 3pm, thereafter moderating & the conditions clearing progressively during the afternoon.

The fog was predicted to reach effectively down to the valley floor until late in the day.

Temperatures were given as 17C in the valleys falling to between 10-12C at 900m.

We discussed the possibility of running either a shorter course (first 3 checkpoints to Pillar then come off at Black Sail with an additional leg up & back from the Sty Head stretcher box) or of totally abandoning the event.

In the end we agreed on the morning of the race to go ahead with the complete course based mainly on the temperatures being sufficiently high, although the rain/winds would be challenging of course.

The checkpoint marshals did report extremely difficult conditions, but not impossible for the runners.

At the finish most runners told us that though definitely challenging the course conditions were quite tolerable.

Actual weather conditions, injury & the last runner astray.

I personally escorted the 2 Scafell Pike marshals to the summit & stayed with them for the first 30min or so. We were all dressed in only thermal tops climbing in very warm conditions with high humidity until donning waterproofs at about 2,500ft when the wind became stronger. I then descended to the valley.

A runner was reported to have suffered head injuries after a fall among rocks on the approach to the Pillar check point. It turned out to be Fiona Lynch & was escorted down by Luigi Salzano, Eddie Lesniak & Paul Hindle who graciously abandoned the race & accompanied her. She was then attended to by our paramedic. She eventually needed some stitches but otherwise has fully recovered.

Fiona has since sent me a very complimentary e-mail including praising our insistence on using full body cover, which became most important once she was stopped, then moving slowly.

I then later went up to assist Manhar Patel with the Lingmell Nose checkpoint for over 1hr from before 6pm to 7pm waiting for the missing runner to return.

I saw the penultimate finisher Andy Pritchard come through as I was approaching the stile, at about 5.50pm. Then I saw a second runner so would have been Lyndon, but he appeared to run off to one side on passing me so I called out to him to stay on the apex of the grass so he could find the indistinct trod marks at that point.

Final finisher Jim Londesborough actually missed that checkpoint but reported in to the finish at

6.50pm having taken about 1hr 20min to descend from Scafell Pike, so also must have been well astray. I have counted him in as a finisher, even though he did not visit Lingmell Nose, also Harry Lord on account of firstly Lingmell Nose functions as a 'mopping up' checkpoint & there is no advantage gained bypassing it, in fact runners would lose time descending Brown Tongue & most importantly the adverse conditions on the day.

Quite extraordinarily Lyndon Ashley had actually passed through Lingmell Nose but did not make it to the finish. I believe this is a first instance as the checkpoint is only about 1000ft above the finish field & runners usually only take 5-7min to reach the finish from there.

We knew who was missing as the tally system & the checkpoint records had him leaving Scafell Pike at 5hrs 52min race time (4.55pm) about 10-15 places ahead of the last runner, but like Jim, obviously had gone wrong on the descent dropping to last place at Lingmell close behind Andy Pritchard, so had been descending for about 1hr, passing Lingmell Nose just before 6pm then was missing at the finish.

His car was the only one left in the field apart from 3 of our cars & the paramedic who agreed to stay on until the situation was resolved.

We came down from Lingmell Nose at about 7.30pm & waited a short while then Will Spain reported in that we had a runner missing at about 8pm.

Soon after a NW ambulance appeared with Lyndon Ashley recovering from hypothermia but otherwise unharmed. He had a dry change of clothes in his car & came over to talk with us before driving off.

Lyndon completed the Wasdale successfully in 2015 finishing in 5hrs 23min so was a quite competent fell runner & had local knowledge as well as the other attributes necessary. His comments on the FRA Forum were very interesting, the onset of hypothermia taking him completely by surprise with its rapidity. We eventually left the field at about 9pm.

Summary

Pre-race decision on allowing the race to proceed.

This was taken collectively. Will Spain & I co-organised the Wasdale this year & we both believed the conditions were indeed a close call but the deciding feature was the temperature forecast on the day.

With 17C in the valleys & 10-12C at the summits, we thought that it was feasible to go ahead. We consulted with Colin Dulson, organiser of the Ennerdale & he concurred.

We all checked multiple forecast systems & there was a solid consensus between us. The final decision whether or not to invoke a cancellation, short course or full course was taken on arrival in the registration field shortly after 8am.

Registration.

The only problem was the surprisingly high number of entries on the day. We ran out of entry forms & were reduced to using spare sheets of paper so the quality of records was less than usual in a handful of cases. I had expected say 5 EODs, so I printed off 20 blanks in preparation but we had 30 EODs. In future I will print off many more than was needed here, but I do not like a high proportion of EODs for the reasons below.

This was a non-championship event. 2017's race will be a championship race & normally I restrict it to pre-entries only as there is a tendency among runners to over-subscribe, then produce a close to 30% drop-out at the event.

The agreement with the National Trust licence to hold the race limits the field to 250 runners.

We register the race as pre-entry only in order to manage the catering requirements, prize values & to avoid rushing/poor handwriting etc. on the day & also a time-consuming registration procedure.

With a field of say 150 runners a procedure time increase of only 10 seconds each rapidly multiplies to an additional 25 min & can increase pressure on the registration team, & mistakes multiply with the application of pressure.

There is another aspect that needs consideration. With pre-entry forms posted (or e-mailed to me as

scanned forms) I have the luxury of being able to enter all of the runners' details onto a database & print off a pre-entered list with emergency contact numbers already available. Crucially, if I find difficulty in reading hand-written details, telephone contact numbers etc. I have the time to ring up runners & correct any discrepancies. This is impossible with on the day entries.

Pre-race brief.

This included a random kit check of about 10% of the field of runners. There were no reported cases where any runner suffered because of insufficient kit carried, indeed most kit that I personally check had more than the minimum of emergency food.

The only thing that cannot be checked is the ability of runners to navigate! Carrying a map & compass is one thing, being able to use it is another. Local knowledge of the course is not a requirement, just advised but on a day like that makes all the difference.

I believe only 2 runners actually lost their tallies during the race. The radio network kept up with this though & their numbers were relayed round to all of the checkpoint marshals.

Checkpoint marshals.

Obviously they had a torrid time because of the weather conditions, particularly the last 4 checkpoints (Gable through Lingmell).

We try to ensure that there are always 2 marshals on each checkpoint.

Any one person can make a mistake with an error frequency of about 1 in 100. If 2 people work together, cross-checking e.g. a tally count the errors multiply downward, dropping to 1 in 10,000, which when considering a field size of a couple of hundred means it is almost impossible to miss a runner.

Given that there are 9 checking systems operating at Wasdale (7 checkpoints, Greendale & the finish (also has a number stacking system as well)) that error shrinks much further. On the other hand, given that we are dealing with human lives, any event like this cannot afford to do less.

No marshal reported any difficulties with identifying runners' numbers even though many would have been obscured by use of full body cover at the summits. In such extreme conditions I have always left it to the discretion of marshals whether or not to request a runner show them a concealed number.

Without exception all runners were courteous, helpful & grateful to the marshals all round the course. The radio network held up particularly well, actually working better than 2013, the year of the heat wave (exceeded only by 1983's Wasdale – see CFRA's archived results at <http://www.cfra.co.uk/results/Wasdale83.pdf>).

The problem this year with radio messaging was the wind strength making for a lot of repeated statements to verify understanding, but with much patience & diligence all went acceptably well.

The race control radio operator keeps a note of all of the retirements radioed-in & logs the numbers of retirees, the whereabouts of their retirement/time out etc.

It might be further improved by a designed log sheet with columns etc., & possibly a set of sticker numbers to categorise runners.

The tracking & accounting for all of the runners worked extremely well. At no stage did we have any doubts about the number of runners finished/retired/timed out/outstanding.

Our system of writing in soft pencil on aluminium sheets still is the best solution. It can be done literally under water & will not rub off, in fact needs an abrasive cleaner to remove. It might be useful to check out other wet writing systems available but ours is particularly good.

Conclusion

I have read the comments on the FRA Forum & drew considerable comfort that they are most complimentary with respect to our race organisation in that the registration/start brief/kit check/checkpoint marshals (came in for particular praise)/catering (particularly high praise)/paramedic

skill/finish procedure & accounting for all of the runners all worked well under the most adverse conditions.

There are a few improvements that have been identified above with respect to registration & radio comms logging but in the main all operations ran extremely well. They were tested quite severely & held up.

The one accident could have happened anytime & the gallant & courteous behaviour of the accompanying runners was totally admirable. Thankfully the injury was not severe.

Lyndon Ashley, the lost runner suffering from hypothermia encountered that condition unexpectedly. He was previously a successful Wasdale finisher, was apparently fit, carried more than the minimum kit & had all of the necessary prerequisite skills.

And - this is only a personal view - I can only reflect Lyndon's thoughts about every runner facing such severe conditions needing to check on his/her physical condition assiduously, particularly in the latter stages of a race such as the Wasdale which has a particularly arduous finish (see the somewhat light-hearted description in the 2nd reference below), in order to pick up the very earliest signs of physical dysfunction. I remember before I did the BG round in '82, friends told me not to wait until I felt hungry to eat, because by then it was too late. Something like that philosophy might help, but it is a very difficult thing to inculcate.

All the runners are adults, responsible for their own well-being & safety & seeing the Wasdale for what it is & at this year's race in particular having very challenging conditions on top, just standing on the start line looking at the clag reaching down to the valley floor & imagining what confronts them (simply dwarfing say a road marathon into relative insignificance). This would impress the hardest competitor with the impending challenge, & would demand total respect for what is to come.

At the end of the day I do not believe that there was anything extra our organisation could have done to ensure that either runner above (who ended up as race casualties) could have successfully completed the race.

Recommendations for CFRA (arising both from above & from comments received from marshals & co-organisers)

- 1 A quicker system for race registration might be available using a touch pad on a tablet/laptop with the pre-entered runners' details already logged.
- 2 A pre-race meeting involving all marshals say 2 weeks prior to the race to check on the size of the race entry anticipated & to clarify all requirements & to aid commitment (this year we had 5 marshals drop out in the last week making for some hectic appeals for volunteers!)
- 3 Following on – to refine radio discipline as there was an excessive amount of traffic this year, perhaps understandably due to many repeats due to the adverse conditions but a bit of practice might help reduce this.
- 4 Removing runners' numbers & stacking them on a spike is a second useful physical check on accounting for competitors finished & retired.
- 5 Our decision when to initiate a call-out is about at 3hrs from the last recorded check-in at a summit or other checkpoint or exceptionally a confirmed sighting of a runner in good health.
- 6 Use sweepers to run sections of the course, possibly from the last closing time on Gable? Knowing the number of runners who have passed through might give reassurance to marshals further round the course, particularly if there are radio comms problems.
- 7 Informing local pub or obvious reporting-in point that there is a paramedic capability at the race with some mobility so an ambulance call-out might be avoided.

Recommendations for other clubs

- 1 Adopt a similar physical tally drop system for all checkpoints & finish.
- 2 Marshals to employ a fail-safe wet weather writing system similar to our aluminium boards.

- 3 Radio controller to keep a systematic written log of all runners retired/missing with times. This helps when the organiser needs to check on how the race is developing & most importantly to decide when to initiate a call-out.
- 4 Use of 'sweepers' as above.

Richard J Eastman
Chairman
Cumberland Fell Runners Association

References

- 1 CFRA Safety of Fell Races 1981 <http://www.cfra.co.uk/safetyfellraces.pdf>
- 2 Wasdale course description originally written by Andrew Schofield, modified by me (included here as an attachment, but I can create a link from the CFRA website if required)

Figure 1

Wasdale Fell Race Tally Board (runners' tallies are placed face up for finishers, reversed for retirees so appear as blanks) & shirt numbers are impaled on steel spike in finishing order plus retirees as & when they arrive.



Graph 1
Wasdale Fell Race Checkpoints :-
Closing Times & Projected Finish Times for Gents & Ladies

