

## London to Brighton

**Sunday, 5th October 2008**

Four intrepid or completely mad (it depends on your outlook) Collingwood members took on the challenge of the new 56 miles (if you did not get lost – see below) race from Greenwich Park to the Royal Pavilion in Brighton.

Mel Johnstone, Andy Stalley, Steve Cooney and Allan Rumbles were the four members who, when faced with an extremely bleak and wet weather forecast decided to start at a very damp 7am with 118 other runners.

The route was a mixture of road, fields, footpaths, bridleways and woodland tracks, over an undulating route following the Vanguard Way in part. The route included a footpath climb up Ditchling Beacon after 49 miles.

There were only five checkpoints on route, each about nine to ten miles apart. They provided just water, some fruit, soggy biscuits and cold potato wedges! Runners were meant to be largely self-sufficient or followed by their own handler. Mel had Richard following her, Allan his Gill, Andy his Gill and Steve was supported by Nicola.

What would have been a challenge in good weather, proved to be a proper challenge in the very wet conditions. All four runners were hugely grateful for their support on the road, along with the text messages and phone calls from many other members.

### Steve's Story

"A few days before this run I bought a compass since one was needed. At the start I realised that I had left it in my bag with the rest of my stuff which was in a van heading for Brighton. Not a very good start!

80 of the registered starters did not turn up on the day leaving 120 runners attempting this utterly mad event. Everybody started together but by the time we got to Bromley had split into a few groups which got smaller and smaller. The map was very unclear and several runners interpreted the directions differently.



Soon I decided that we should head for Biggin Hill since that was where the checkpoint was. Only one other runner agreed with me and we turned off. Mel and Allan carried on with the rest and were heading for Orpington as far as I could see. And this was meant to be the easiest part of the course to navigate!

After Biggin Hill the road turned to track and conditions took a turn for the worse. I saw Nicky Dicks a few miles later (not a coincidence since she agreed to provide support) and decided to change my road trainers to off road shoes. This was probably the best decision I made all day since the weather and conditions got worse.

The map reading was extremely hard and everybody "did a Ross" (marathon rhyming slang for got completely lost) at least once and most a lot more.

We continued through ploughed fields then ditches full of water. This washed off all the mud but then meant our feet were soaking wet. I saw Nicky on a few other occasions who provided much needed support as well as carbo gels, drinks, spare tee shirt and of course Jelly Babies!

At about 30 miles I passed a horse that kicked out as me as I ran by. The runner behind said that he had missed me by a whisker.

My Garmin showed a mileage of 36 miles. According to my calculations, I had travelled 32 miles due to my detours so had 24 miles to go. Another runner then announced that we had run 40 miles. When I checked my Garmin I realised that I had accidentally stopped it. This meant that we only had 16 miles to go instead of 24. That was the fastest 8 miles I had ever run!

We took the wrong path on Ditchling Beacon and ended up running around it instead of up it. Since it was still light we decided it would be better to climb it instead of going back again. We climbed it on our hands and knees then had to negotiate a barbed wire fence at the top. This was quite hard after 50 miles of running. This particular mile took 29 minutes and was probably where Allan recovered some of the time.

Not long after Ditchling Beacon it was more or less downhill all the way to Brighton. I felt great coming into Brighton considering the fact that I had only done 33 miles before. The finishing time was 12 hours 48 minutes.

I would like to thank Nicky who spent the whole day providing support and also to Martin who appeared later on in the day."

## Andy's Story

"Like Steve I had Garmin trouble, with my Garmin deciding to die on Saturday night. So I ran with my old Polar, which sadly drowned and died after a couple of hours! Third choice was using Gill's Polar which she had with her.



I gave up on running a fast time as it was raining at the start and the forecast was for rain all day. So a steady start to Bromley where everyone in front of me decided to continue on a main road and not to take the side turning marked on the map. I had prepared the route and worked out all the turnings, so knew I was on the right road. A group of a dozen following me clearly laughed at me on my own as they too disappeared in the wrong direction.

Soon after Keston I failed to see a mud coloured rock in the mud and went on a flying somersault into a thankfully soft bush. I then took my first detour off the official route (of eight in total) in a wood! I needed my compass to get myself to the other side of the trees,

only to find myself behind all the runners who went wrong in Bromley. I also was on the wrong side of a nasty and tall barbwire fence, which I only just managed to get over without any damage.

I continued at a steady pace, walking where it was just too slippery through halfway in just under five hours. It had not stopped raining by then and I was glad of Gill's support, who saw me a total of nine times on the route, handing me my energy gels and re-hydration drinks.

The weather improved in the second half, but conditions under foot became increasingly wet, including one section where the path turned into a stream! The map book provided by the organisers proved to be difficult to follow on the country paths and I repeatedly ended up in the wrong place, as did virtually everyone else. Luckily, I was never actually lost, just always in the wrong place and able to get back to the route. I think I did at least three extra miles, maybe more, but I lost a lot of time working out where I was, probably 45 to 50 minutes in total lost on my detours.

I took it steady up Ditchling Beacon and was still feeling fine at the top; my steady pace, food and drink strategy were really going well. It was still good to see Gill, Nicola, Martin and Richard at the top of the hill. Knowing that it was now flat or downhill for most of the way to the finish, I was able to run most of the last six miles across the top of the South Downs and down into Brighton.



I managed a sprint finish to outpace four other runners in the last 400 metres, to finish in 11 hours and 27 minutes. Gill was there with my brother, his fiancée and my mum.

London to Brighton has been an ambition for ten years, so I was delighted to finish and delighted to get through it feeling so well. And I was really happy to still be able to walk on Monday morning. Hopefully the weather will be better next year!"

## **Mel's Story**

The day had arrived, London to Brighton!! Seemed like a good idea all those months ago when Allan first suggested it, of course I'll do it I said. At that time I felt it was something that I really wanted to achieve so signed up along with Steve, Andy and Allan. Several months passed and still was looking forward to it.

A week before the race reality hit home. Whilst looking at the map very confused I was starting to get worried, very worried in fact! Whose idea was it again!

Anyway too late now, I woke very early that morning and felt nervous, I checked and checked my kit and headed off to meet the others and then onto the start. We congregated in Greenwich Park ready for the off, started well and felt ok about the run. The map was concerning me. Richard had given me

lessons on how to use the compass the night before (but always getting my right and left muddled up what hope had I?).

The first 6 or so miles went by and all was well following on behind the leaders, so far so good. At the end of Bromley High Street some went one way and some another. I decided to stick with Steve and Allan, until another point where Steve went one way and Allan another. Oh what do I do now? I looked at my map, I thought we should have gone right, so waited a bit and Allan came running back, then we continued.

The middle bit leading up to Ditchling beacon wasn't too bad, ran along with some others, Allan went ahead. We got lost a couple of times but nothing major. Then we did get lost adding on about 4 miles I think, but by this time dusk was dawning, and I thought we still have a long way to go... am I going to make it? We reached the bottom of the Beacon in the pitch black. There was I, three men who I didn't know and one torch (some girls would say this sounds like fun) but it wasn't. Anyway we scrambled our way to the top somehow but it seemed to take forever to get there.

When at the top Richard and Martin were there and said you'd better run down the road as it is very dark and dangerous now, so I did. Richard tied glow sticks to me so the cars would see me. And when I saw the lights of Brighton there was no stopping me. I ran and ran and ran, just wanting to get there. The men that were with me kept saying slow down we can't keep up and as they stayed with me on the Beacon, I slowed down for them. Andy appeared in his car looking for me as no one could reach me as my phone was so wet it didn't work anymore. He handed me a torch and said it's all down hill now. That made my run even faster. When I turned that final corner and saw the end I couldn't believe it, I had done it, ok a bit late but hey we'll put that down to my map reading and the conditions .....



All the support from Martin, Nicky, Richard, Andy, Gill, Allan's Gill, Allan and Steve, my friends Catherine & Alec was greatly appreciated, so thank you. Would I do it again, not sure? If I can learn to read a map then maybe!

## Allan's Story

The London to Brighton started for me in 2005, several days after completing my first marathon & still on a high; I was browsing the internet for races when I came across the London to Brighton road race, organised by the R.R.C. Right I thought, that's the one for me, so I joined the R.R.C. with all my thoughts focused on the London to Brighton.

I waited for the applications to be released for the race and when I didn't get one I phoned Ian Champion – the race director. You can imagine how I felt when he told me that the race was cancelled due to safety issues!

Forward on three years and again I'm browsing the internet when I stumble across extremerrunning.org, an ultra running website advertising the return of London to Brighton. However this race was slightly different; it was cross country and it involved some map and compass reading – not too bad I thought, I can read a map and compass. Little did I know what was to come!

We turned up at about 6:15am for registration at Greenwich Park in the pitch black and terrible weather; the weather didn't improve all day. Following some general banter from my fellow Collingwood runners, about persuading them to enter the race, I set about preparing myself for the day ahead. Mostly this involved telling myself I was an idiot for even thinking I could run that far.

7am and we were off straight through the gates of Greenwich Park and onwards to Brighton. After we left the Park we had to rely on our maps & compasses & that's where it all started to go wrong. I managed to stay roughly on the right path up to Hayes Common, with only a couple of hundred yards detour. The real trouble started at West Kent Golf Club when I got so lost that I ended up in the middle of Biggin Hill Airport!! (Don't ask me how I got there). After trying to find my way out for about 30 minutes, I found a security guard who told me that I shouldn't be there. (No s\*\*t Sherlock). Anyway, I told him what I was doing and that I was a bit lost. He kindly pointed me in the right direction, and then followed me in his van to make sure that I didn't stray off the road & into the path of a Lear jet or two.

Coming out of Biggin Hill I managed to get back on track for about the next 20 minutes or so, when I got lost again in Aperfield / Tatsfield. It took about 45 minutes & the help of 2 locals (I knocked at their door & got them out of bed) to get me back on course. I made it to checkpoint 2 with only 2 minutes to spare before the cut-off!



“Head down” I thought, I really need to get going or I won't be finishing this! I managed to negotiate the next 10 miles without getting lost, bumping into Nicky on the way who was driving round in support of the Collingwood runners. I also managed to catch up with Mel about a mile away from checkpoint 3 & we ran up the hill together.

I met my wife at the checkpoint, where she filled up my raidlight, fed me & helped change my socks & re-Vaseline my feet.

On we go again, although we had a bit of leeway now as due to the bad maps & terrible weather the organisers had decided to increase the cut-off times & the race closure time. EXCELLENT!!!!

I ran some of this leg with Mel & David from Billericay, but as I was feeling strong I left them after about 5 miles. Bad move, LOST AGAIN. I couldn't find the indicated path & ended up going a couple of miles out of my way on a road to get me to the checkpoint 4. Distance to this checkpoint was 35 miles, total distance I'd travelled up to then was 42 miles, “BUGGER”. An extra 7 miles travelled & still 21 miles to go. To say I was angry at this point is a slight understatement, telling the marshals that I wanted to get hold of the bloke

who wrote the directions! I saw Martin at this point who strangely had a very calming influence on me. I can't remember if he said anything or if it was the sight of a friendly face but I regained control of my emotions.

I met up with Mel & David again & carried on running. I ran on with them again for a couple of miles before leaving them again. I found checkpoint 5 with only a very slight detour, then pressed on to Brighton with only some hill called Ditchling Beacon in the way. "NO PROBLEM" I thought.

I found my way to Ditchling Beacon after another slight detour through the wrong field. Never mind, once up this hill I can find Brighton with my eyes closed. I went up the right path & saw some other runners to my right so I followed them. "No path here" I thought, so I started climbing. I gave myself 10 minutes to get up this bit but I made it in only 4.

I reached the top, then ran through to the car park where Mel's Richard gave me a drink of coke & offered me the use of a torch as it was getting a bit dark now. I didn't think I needed it so I didn't take him up on the offer. I then bumped into Nicky & Martin again who told me that Steve was only a couple of minutes ahead of me. Good target I thought, so I chased him down & we ran together for about 5 minutes or so. By now the light was fading fast so we left the track for fear of breaking an ankle & ran on the road where we nearly got killed by a car. He just didn't see our group of about 8 or so runners, a couple of whom had hi-viz vests on & carrying torches. We had to jump onto the verge to get away!

Never mind, "Carry on". Steve managed to pull away from me on the downhill stretch, but I wasn't concerned. The finish wasn't far away & I had started to smile. Running into Brighton itself, I was feeling ecstatic! Despite the conditions & the maps I had made it, nothing would stop me now!!! The map went back into the map case as I knew roughly where I had to run to. I was feeling better & better towards the finish & was grinning like a Cheshire Cat when I crossed the line in 12 hours 50 minutes.

Race length 56 miles, distance I travelled according to my Garmin 64 miles.

My wife asked me how I felt at the end. "Me" I said "I'm King of the World".

Thanks to everyone who supported us on the day in extremely bad weather conditions, without them I wouldn't have finished.