

LDMT 2023, Planner's Report

I was approached by Andrew Bradley some time around the new year with regards to potentially planning the Mountain Trial. Whilst, by nature, I am not someone who seeks out this sort of high profile undertaking I decided to 'give it a go'. After all, how hard could it be...

I should open this report by highlighting the fact that I have no experience in planning any form of navigational event.

The venue was to be Eskdale Youth Hostel, a stunning location of which I am somewhat familiar but a considerable distance from my Kendal area base. My brief was to make it 'not an orienteering course' and to make use of the hostel grounds as a start/finish point. The previous 18 months had seen a number of major MM events taking part to the East, and you quickly run out of options to the south around Green Crag. Therefore, it was obvious the courses should head North and I liked the look of the Scafell massif for influencing route choices.

I tried to use 'obvious' features as control points with the emphasis on tough route choices as per my brief. This was largely achieved although the gully on Kirkfell proved a stretch as a location, and there were some issues with the clarity of supposedly large crags. In the future I would not encourage any planner to use crags as an obvious control site on these maps. Putting out controls went well – my thanks in particular to Alan for being so willing to put out so many.

The short is a tricky one to plan as the winning times vary considerably so I focused on meeting the suggested distance of 16km and the finishing times suggest that, whilst a touch longer than previous, the course was not excessive. That said, control 4 would have been easily omitted at no detriment to the course. Routegadget suggests the first couple of controls provided the greatest scope for route choice, with the course becoming more linear as it progressed. This is a product of squeezing the course into an area that doesn't offer a great deal of options.

The medium is a similar story. In my quest for route choices, control 6 was introduced and again, could have been omitted without detriment. The times were too long, seemingly on account of the rougher ground rather than the distance although the placement of control 3 could've been kinder in hindsight (and was on one of the ambiguous crags). The route choices on Routegadget do suggest the competitors enjoyed (if that's the right word) a number of options.

And so – the Classic. Firstly, to get this out of the way – yes, the classic was completely overcooked. Burnt to a crisp. As a former Classic course competitor, I make no apology that this course was the one that caught my imagination the most. An imagination that ran a little too riotous. Leg 6-7 was an early idea that I unnecessarily hung onto, particularly when I needed to use the 're-entrant' on Kirkfell as a CP to achieve this. Leg 2-3 was another favourite as I felt it offered a great deal of options. In short, the legs themselves I felt were good in that they offered multiple choices of which there was rarely an obvious 'best option', a feeling supported by the Routegadget routes and feedback from competitors.

The exception here was 5-6 where I assumed all competitors would pop over the top of Kirkfell and drop down to the control – a nice setup leg for the big choice around the Scafell massif. This did not materialise as planned as apparently there was an "inviting trod" contouring Kirkfell from Beck Head which culminated in a contouring scramble in a horrendous gully before vanishing into the hillside. I was horrified to hear the amount of people that were seduced by this option and their subsequent difficulties on dangerous ground. I am very relieved that no one was badly hurt.

After the 1st draft, I could see that the courses were a little longer than previous years, but I had no issue with pushing the times up a touch into the 4 ½ to 5 hour bracket. This was also communicated to me by other members of the organising team as 'a classic' and 'a tough year'. Pete Nelson's calculations suggested a winning time of 5.21, 39km and 2500m climb. Whilst this was longer than advertised, I was fairly comfortable that there were competitors present that would push under that. It appears I missed Alan Irvine's (Controller) calculations somehow, though he reached a similar EWT for the Classic he also predicted a slower time for the other two courses – Pete Nelson was correct for the Short with Alan much closer for the Medium. Alan's prediction for the classic was for 42km with 3400m of climb – an extortionate amount but as it turns out, absolutely on the money.

In my head, I'd likened it to a slightly rougher Wasdale Horseshoe. There were plenty of good running options and the course would get easier underfoot as it progressed. Unfortunately, the early ground was far tougher and slower than I'd allowed for which was further exacerbated by the cut-off time pressures. This became apparent during the day as I positioned myself at CP 4, a pond surrounded by unmapped bog and deep, wet holes. I was there for some time before Phil Rutter came through in a time far slower than anticipated (around 12.50/2.5 hours) and well clear of any other runners. He was the last starter, and they were barely halfway. Unfortunately, I had neither phone signal nor a radio so there was little I could do to intervene except guide competitors around the deep holes (not always successfully) in the middle of a thunderstorm (with only a couple of threats of violence directed at me along the way).

It was also made apparent to me by numerous competitors at this point, that there was little to no chance of them making it back before the course closed at 17.00. My CP closed at 14.00 and the vast majority of runners passed through between 13.00 and 14.00, with many choosing to head back already. The optimism of folk that they could make the Kirkfell cut-off was admirable, and I felt they deserved the chance to try, so took it upon myself to request the finish 'remain open' past the advertised closing time. The cut-off issues were not exclusive to the classic course. The biggest problem was knowing who had 'retired' at CP 6 and who had 'gone for it'. I have found since the event itself that I missed a group email from Pete Nelson with his concerns over the cut-off times – my apologies to PN for not responding to this email – I simply did not see it. I believe this is the key point where the issues could have been caught en masse.

I have no intention of 'pointing fingers' – I planned the courses and will take responsibility for their excessiveness. I had no involvement with cut-offs or marshal placement so I will leave the final reporting of these matters to those involved. I was surprised that we effectively ran my 'first draft' courses - given the experience of those in the team with me, I am surprised it wasn't reined in. I did request constructive criticism and didn't receive any negative feedback or meaningful course adjustments although in hindsight this was undoubtedly due.

Still, I am far from beyond reproach. I am guilty of 'arm-chair planning' – the Kirkfell control is prime evidence of this. I am guilty of over-optimism in expecting the runners to achieve the impossible times set in my head. I am guilty of being over relaxed in certain situations where it is possible, we could have caught some of the issues which arose on the day. I am guilty of not making the LDMT my priority until pressures demanded. There is more, but this is not meant to be a self-flagellation. I acknowledge my prominent part in the disappointing elements of the event and see it as a learning experience.

Going forward, I would suggest some sort of Help Document for Planners including advice, notes from previous years, lessons learnt, things to avoid, a checklist for how to sign off courses etc. My immediate feelings post event revolved around embarrassment and frustration and I would not like

any prospective planners to have to experience this. A rookie planner, like me, needs a lot more help and support than you may realise. Right at the start of the process, it needs to be absolutely crystal clear what is expected of the planner and what is not expected. There were a number of grey areas this year where I don't know whether I was expected to be involved or not. A job role description may help provide clarity here. A number of online planning meetings would be an ideal format to discuss the courses in greater depth in person rather than the email chain that was created, where some messages were lost or missed. I believe better communication would have caught most of the issues this year.

Overall, the planning side of the event could have been significantly better. The short course was about right, with longer courses getting progressively too long – excessively so in the case of the classic. I feel the cut-off times and lack of strategically placed marshals exacerbated the situation and I believe there would have been more finishers had cut-offs been more realistic. I do acknowledge however that it is something of a chicken/egg situation given the slow nature of the courses and I offer my apologies to competitors that felt it prudent to retire, were disappointed with the outlandish planning or simply felt cheated – it was not intentional.

The initial aftermath is that the ridiculousness of the event appears to have been taken in mostly good humour (or perhaps I just know a certain type of person?). I hear that a lot of people enjoyed the challenge, and quite liked the fact it was very, very hard. Despite this, I feel very disappointed with how it turned out.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Pete Nelson, Alan Irving and particularly Andrew Bradley for his organisational efforts, patience and overuse of the eyeroll emoji. Thanks to every marshal who gave up their time to sit through some variable conditions and collect controls. Thanks to the radio teams and Andrew from SI for their expertise. Thanks to the competitors I saw at the finish for your generous reviews and good humour. I also extend my thanks to the two timed-out Classic competitors that contacted me personally the following week – your positivity and direct communication meant a lot to me as I have received most feedback second or third hand. Lastly, I would also like to thank Janie Oates for continuing to live with me after I provided her with her first DNF.

I have little doubt that I will not be asked to plan a Mountain Trial again so thank you LDMTA for the opportunity and experience, and good luck with future Trials.