

Cassie's Challenge – AUGUST 2020

Helen Cassidy and Clive Coffey (Completed round in 23 hours and 09 minutes)



Back in June four of us (Helen Cassidy, Stephen Cassidy, Jonny Hobson and I) undertook to complete Cassie's Challenge. Finding a weekend that suits everyone is never easy, and it happened that the last weekend of the month was the only one that would work. Unfortunately, as the weekend approached the forecast was particularly poor, but not being free for some weeks after, we took the decision to go ahead with our attempt anyway. We endured pretty awful conditions for most of the round; rain, wind and hill fog, meaning we spent too much time following a compass needle. Although we gave it our best, the 24-hour time limit expired in driving rain whilst trying to find our way off our last top, the summit tors of Binnian at 3am in the morning.

Reflecting afterwards, I think we experienced the full spectrum of feelings, on one hand sensing what we had achieved completing the round in such conditions, and humbled by the support we received from those who had watched the progress of our dots on the [primal tracking website](#); but on the other hand, massive disappointment at having given so much effort to our attempt and yet been timed out. We knew we did well given the weather we experienced, but we also knew with better conditions we would surely have got round within the 24 hours, and though it took a few days for the suggestion to surface, it was inevitable it remained an uncompleted goal for us, and therefore we would have to give it another go.

The next difficulty of course was trying to find a weekend that would suit all. This proved to be the biggest challenge of all, and finished up the end of August and with only Helen and I able to start.

With the hindsight of having felt what it was like to be timed out, it turned this attempt into a much more daunting prospect than first time round. We went over our June attempt at length. Though we knew we lost minutes here and there as a result of the weather and having to follow a compass, we also knew we had pushed hard throughout, and really weren't sure how much faster we could cover the distance involved. Like most of us who run in the hills, we know our own pace and ability fairly

well, and we knew a sub-20 hour target for us was unrealistic. We hadn't had consistent running training in the intervening weeks, and now, two months later, we had almost ten hours of darkness to contend with rather than five. There would surely be a time cost as a result of that.

Our first decision therefore was to re-consider our target completion time, and then sub-divide this into target splits for each of the fifty tops. We aimed for 23 hours back in June and we decided there was no good reason to change this. To target faster would only put further pressure on our pace over the ground, and to opt for slower would have left us with no margin for error or slowing. With better weather and visibility we hoped to move faster during daylight, but it was also fair to assume we could not move as fast during the extended period of darkness.

Next was our start time. In June we started at 3am and only ran the first hour before we had daylight. However, a similar start this time would mean nearer three hours of darkness taking us over some very rough ground from Spences up to Millstone. Having opted to use most of the 24 hours available to us to complete the challenge, we did not have the luxury of reducing the amount of time we would run in darkness, so we looked at which part of the course offered us the best combination of familiarity and terrain underfoot, with the aim of covering that section during the dark hours. That meant looking at our splits and deciding where to drop in that 9-hour block. Not losing time between the summits of Lamagan and Ben Crom was an issue, but we decided the section from Donard to Butter was the best section. Darkness on Donard by 9pm and about four hours to there, so we settled on a very civilised 5pm start.

We chose first time around to run unsupported and decided not to change that. We know our way around the Mourne fairly well and therefore felt we had little to gain from other people's local knowledge. We also had split times for every top, and if they weren't enough, each other to pace ourselves, and therefore we felt further pacing wasn't necessary. Perhaps most threatening of all, should we be timed out again, we didn't want to risk letting down all those who would have tried to get us round successfully!

The final proviso we put on this attempt was a satisfactory weather forecast. Having been undone to a greater extent by awful weather on our first attempt, we were both firmly agreed that we would not start this time if the forecast did not at least indicate the likelihood of cloud free summits during our night section. We hoped also to benefit from the moon though it was closer to the following weekend before it would be a full one. As it played out, for days beforehand, the 14-day Met forecast for the Mourne had the following weekend looking the better of the two, then on the Thursday before, it was all change: the weekend coming gave a clear Saturday, if a cold and windy night, with the following weekend much less settled. And so on the Thursday evening, after numerous hesitations and changes, we finally decided it was go on the coming Saturday at 5pm.

Little sleep was had those last couple of nights. Helen was putting in very long hours trying to meet a critical work deadline for the Friday, whereas I was going over and over every detail of the course in my head in the small hours – would we find Slievenamaddy in the dark, or our line off Lamagan, which was the best ascent line up Ben Crom, which top of Wee Binnian was the summit? And in those early hours the doubts sneak in.

Saturday afternoon arrived and approaching 5pm, we were as ready as ever we were going to be, along with Harry and Edna, Ciaran and Patricia, Stevie and Helen's friend, Paul to cheer us off from Annalong Harbour. If Harry's encouragement, best wishes and confidence in us could have got us round, there is no doubt we would have broken all records. As it was, it was more a mix of nervousness, determination and excitement we felt toeing Harry's yellow line. There's always a danger of overthinking things, and having lined up here only two months previous, I had to work hard not to let the weight of what lay ahead overwhelm us.

Right from our first strides towards the slip with our backs to the hills, the pressure of the clock weighed so heavily on us. It was a near perfect late summer evening, the tops clear and what cloud there was giving way to a bright evening sky, with a cool northerly breeze to stop us overheating. We had a very simple plan. We knew we had to push hard from the off and fly those first four hours of daylight, if possible, getting ahead of our splits so that we might build up a cushion of time then to fall back on during the inevitable slowing of speed during the night. There was no let-up therefore. Nerves and adrenalin almost out of control, we were breathing deeply right from the first climb up the Seefins, then Rocky, Chimney and Spences before swinging north. To anyone dot-watching, we appeared to be, and indeed we were flying, making the most of those daylight hours and getting to the top of Donard over an hour faster than our June attempt. Yet on the ground it felt anything but. The urgency was all-consuming those first hours, always feeling we needed to move faster, yet all too aware of the danger of starting too hard and paying a price then long before the end, and in blunt reality, unable to move any faster. Silently and separately in our own heads we had our own doubts and fears: if this is what it feels like now, how on earth will we keep going to the end? There was an invisible rubber band joining us, one pulling the other on, yet all the time knowing to pull too hard might break it. Our good progress continued and we were descending off the summit plateau of Commedagh before the last of the orange hues disappeared below the western horizon and twilight gave way to dark.

It was a magical night, no better a night could you wish for to be out in the hills. The biting north wind eased as the hours passed, leaving us with a white frost on the grass on the lower sheltered slopes of Carn and Ott by dawn. We did have a moon but it stayed very low in the southern sky, hiding below the skyline much of the time and leaving the northern slopes shrouded in darkness, but all the time gave us enough light to be able to accurately identify the skyline all night long. This made the navigation so much easier than first time around, only having to take the compass out a couple of times, and even then only to confirm what we were sure of. We had recce'd the night section over the previous two Saturdays and that paid dividends – the poor lines we took then we didn't repeat, saving valuable minutes here and there throughout the night.

Our descent to Slievenamaddy came good! After numerous previous near misses, we went straight to it on race night. For the first time since the start some five hours before, as we traversed over to Slievenabrock, I felt we had finally settled into the controls of Cassie's Challenge. We were now at ease with it, working with it rather than against, and for the first time I began to think completion within the 24 hours was doable. None the less, Helen absolutely did not want to hear this, quashing any comment that had anything to do with finishing so early on.

The first part of our plan had come good. We were 33 minutes up on our target time on Slievenamaddy, and pretty much held onto this level of gain heading west then to Luke's, only losing

a minute or two as we continued on the long drag up to Slievenaglogh and east from there to Corragh. From there we turned south and maintained a steady pace to Lamagan, constantly underlining to each other the need to remain focussed if we started to let the conversation drift from anything other than our route, our splits and how we were feeling. "Focus on the detail and maintain the pace", and just maybe it would banish my Achilles heel - my need to sleep?

We had decided the dogleg round the south side and then up to the summit of Ben Crom would be awful ground in the dark, and chose therefore to head straight up the east flank through the boulder field, using the dam as a back bearing. Recce'd the week before, we arrived up at exactly the same place at the foot of the 15 metre wall, and scrambled up the same corner onto the last easy slope to the summit. Unfortunately at this point the sleepmonster caught up with me. I dropped into the heather and could so easily have fallen asleep, except I saw Helen disappearing off in front of me. Unwillingly I gathered myself up and crawled to the top, and to another comment about our pace! I led the pad down then to the river north of Crom, and as the ground levelled out and swung round west to follow the river, I slowed up to a walk.. "Come on, keep the bounce going Clive!" Had the direct line up Crom been quicker? Who knows. We lost a number of minutes there and some more ascending Binnian with my tiredness undoubtedly costing us some time. Helen as always on these types of events, does not experience tiredness.

I managed to shake off my monster and we progressed well over numerous more tops to pass through Ott car-park 7 minutes up on our target time at 5:04am. I had expected to be trailing behind our target time at this stage, and this not being the case, I was buzzing – it was brilliant to be up rather than behind and still to have a small cushion of minutes rather than having to chase, and was more than delighted with how the night had gone. However Helen was still not entertaining any conversation about finishing with up to 12 hours still to go. Dawn broke as we crossed over Slievenamuck and on to Spelga. We maintained our pace across the Butter tops, and crossed the road still with a few minutes in hand, and Stevie there to cheer us on.

Now we moved onto the western tops of the round. What these tops lack in height, they more than make up for in terms of steep gradients up and down, and whole hillsides of pig-awful man-eating tussock-grass. For tired legs, the gradients coming off Cock, Hen, and all the others induce upper leg cramp on every downhill section, and the tussock-grass up Rocky destroys any forward rhythm you try desperately to hold onto. We did well all the same, fuelled by a heady mix of Lucozade, gels and salt tablets, getting over my nemesis, Rocky, and Helen's nemesis, the ascent of Shanlieve. Despite both of us balancing the threat of cramp on a knife edge, the 4 minutes we lost coming off Cock and Hen and getting up Rocky, we made up again over the Hill and Dale route to Shanlieve. It seemed we were buzzing again. Until Eagle. Only beginning to descend, Helen let a yelp of pain and before I even looked around, I knew she had gone over on an ankle. In those moments you want to stop the clock and pause for a moment, but you can't. Seconds turned to a minute, then two as she tried to blank out the pain and put her foot to the ground. Worse still, she began to feel dizzy. There is absolutely nothing that can be said in those situations: nothing I or Helen could say to lessen the injury or the time ticking away. We simply had to take a few minutes and let the dizziness pass, and then see if she could put weight on it. Thankfully she gathered herself up and we were soon moving as though it hadn't happened. Not a tablet taken, adrenalin with a good dose of determination the best medication

of all. Our cushion was chopped to only 1 minute on the top of Moughanmore, but we found our wings again and managed to stop for a moment and exchange a few words and pose for a photo on Pigeon where Paul was there to speed us on. We flew, and raced down to the Deer's Meadow 8 minutes ahead of time.

We had already noted to ourselves one of the easiest ways to make up time is reducing the time spent at the road crossings, meaning we weren't going to lose any unnecessary time here. We had a very vocal support crew cheering us on down the hill; my wife, Nina and the kids, Freya and Ruairi, Stevie, Harry, and Marty McMullan and his family. Our spirits were good, but it really does lift one further to be surrounded with that support and encouragement when the bodies are weary. The fatigue was forgotten in those moments, their wishes giving us something extra for the final section then to the finish.



Dropping off Pigeon, the presence of Muck loomed heavy on Helen at this stage, and once we started the climb, took all of her resolve and single-mindedness to get to the top. But we did it, and focussed we remained. The whole of the race – because it was a race against the clock, was about counting minutes lost and gained. We lost 7 minutes ascending Muck, but we kept to our task and pulled 2 back to the summit of Slievenaglogh. However our thighs were now screaming, so we lost some more descending from there over to Slievenagore. From here we possibly made our one poor route choice of the challenge, swinging south of a smaller top rather than north, and down to the Silent Valley. Crossing the embankment, Marty, Susan and family were there to cheer us on again, and this time Marty brought up the subject of the finish-line, to which he got a very firm “Many’s a slip ‘twixt the cup and the lip - don’t mention the finish yet!!”

We were 1 minute down on our target time leaving the embankment with one final beast of a climb over Moolieve, Wee Binnian and finally, on to the top of Binnian. Back in June we spent 20 minutes on top of one of the tors at 3am, not able to find a way off in the worst of weather conditions. This time we were up onto it and off again in less than a minute. What a difference weather and visibility can make. Only as we began to descend off Binnian with 2hrs 8min still to 5pm, did Helen finally begin to verbalise at least, that we just might make it back to Annalong with time to spare!



We arrived out at the Carrick Little car park still with 1hr 23min go, so it was a slow and weary, but very gratifying run along the road section into Annalong. Ruairí ran the road section with us, and Freya joining in for the second half. And so 23hrs 9min after we left, we rounded the corner by the harbour and ran up to the finish in front of Harry's house, where Harry and Edna, Ciaran and Patricia, along with Nina and Stevie were there to cheer us back. What a wonderful feeling that was. With the realisation we were completing the circle, every ounce of effort, pain and determination we put into getting round, fused together and morphed into pure delight and happiness and made it all so worthwhile. Our cups were overflowing. Only for Covid and all of the awful restrictions that have come with it, I would have given Harry a gigantic hug! What a wonderfully challenging and rewarding loop he has put together, and a privilege to get to know every part of it.

By challenging ourselves to the very edge of our limits we delve further into ourselves; our strength of body, but also our strength of mind and resolve, and be so thankful for our health and well-being.

Thank-you Mourne Runners and particularly Ciaran for over-seeing the Challenge, but especially to Harry for your foresight, love of the hills and enthusiasm in turning your days in the hills with your dog Cassie, into such an inspiring and rewarding challenge, and for putting those smiles firmly on our faces as we crossed the line – Life is always worthwhile if you just smile!

Clive Coffey