

**Cassie's Challenge – Saturday 19 June 2021  
Moire O'Sullivan and Paul Mahon**

There's nothing like a good reason to run around the Mourne Mountains. Cassie's Challenge is indeed the perfect excuse to visit fifty of its peaks. Covid restrictions, and the hiatus in racing, have also brought rounds like Cassie's Challenge to the fore. With no designated date, no mass starts, it is the perfectly socially distanced event.

Earlier this year I asked my Mourne Mountain Marathon partner, Wicklow-based Paul Mahon if he'd like a go at it. With no end in sight to the lockdown, it was at least something to aim and train for. Being locally based, I promised to do the recces and research. All he had to do was show up when the days were at their longest and the weather forecast looked fine.

We are fortunate to have a mutual friend living not five hundred metres from the start. Paul and I seconded Susanna Gaynor, her van and her home for the weekend, allowing us to drop cars and gear with her as she chauffeured us to Annalong Harbour for our 3am run.



*Paul and I at start, Annalong Harbour, 3am*

We were not half an hour into our run, head torches donned, jogging up Quarter Road towards Round Seefin than a car pulled up beside us.

'Are you doing Cassie's Challenge?' the driver asked. Why else would we be running along this road in the dark, I thought. When we nodded in the affirmative, they sped off, meeting us at the road corner before the forest entrance. Out of the car stepped Harry Teggarty, Stewart Cunningham and Alex McAtee, the formidable founders and force behind Cassie's Challenge. Harry's dog, God rest her soul, is the route's namesake. These three men had hauled themselves

out of bed at this godforsaken hour to wish us well and take pictures. It was a very touching send off.

With a half moon in the sky, despite dawn still set to arrive, the mountains were clearly visible. Our lamps were only needed to see where to place our feet. By the time we summited our third peak, Rocky Mountain, it was safe to stuff them away in our bags.

The air was still and hinting at the heat that was to come later. And as we touched Chimney Rock cairn, the dawn came, lighting the mountains in a bright orange glow.

'I wish I had brought my camera,' Paul said, bemoaning his lightweight gear strategy. I had my phone in my bag but I didn't want to take it out. Sometimes you just want a view that is yours, and yours alone. Right then, I didn't want to share this spectacular view with anyone else on Instagram. Let them come up here at dawn and see it for themselves, is what I thought.

Coming to the end of section one, the crossing at Bloody Bridge River, we took our time to drink deeply. We knew that the day ahead could be warm and did not want to become dehydrated. I also knew that there had been little rain in the preceding weeks. The main rivers still had water flowing, but the dribbles from random bogs had long dried up.

We continued on our way over Crossone, Leganabruchan, Millstone and Thomas Mountain. This is the part of the Mourne that had been devastated by recent fires. Though new growth was visible, the heather had been destroyed, conveniently removing this ankle-tripping, shin-skin-stripping obstacle. The lack of recent rain also meant it was dry and fast to cross.

As we started our ascent of Slieve Donard, we saw the first of many people we would encounter that day. A Cancer Focus seven sevens event was on, with people already well into their climb of Northern Ireland's highest mountain. Even though it wasn't even 7 am, much to our surprise, we were not alone on this summit.

Paul and I continued on our journey along the Cassie's Challenge course. From Commedagh, we travelled to the lesser-known northerly peaks of Slievenamaddy, Slievenabrock and Luke's Mountain where paths are non-existent. We weren't pushing the pace, trying to keep everything nice and steady, knowing we had a long day out. I was silently happy though when we managed to get the big climbs of Slieve Beg, Cove and Lamagan out of the way.

Descending to Ben Crom dam, we had the pleasant surprise of some friendly, familiar faces. Ian Cummins from 26Extreme was out course marking for the Cancer Focus hikers and gave us a bit of encouragement. Then Aideen Hanna, a Mourne Mountain participant and relay runner from Jog Lisburn, was there with a big cheer and a massive box of well appreciated banana cake that she let us raid.

From the dam, we made light work of Ben Crom and the bog across to Bernagh thanks to previous recces. The dry ground and low growth were also really helping us cover ground quickly. When I emerged from the mass of tors at the top of Slieve Bernagh, I had a lovely surprise to bump into Cathy and Petra from Wild Mountain NI. They were busy guiding a group to its formidable summit. I had met Cathy and Petra while doing our Mountain Leader Assessment in 2019, before all the covid craziness, and our lives hadn't crossed since.

'We were wondering if we going to bump into you today,' Cathy said, before snapping a few shots. Little did I know that Cathy and Petra were not the only people we'd bump into during our day's run. The trackers strapped to our bags meant that we could be easily traced in the mountains.



*Cathy Reavy from Wild Mountain NI and Paul on the top of Slieve Bernagh.*

Descending Meelmore, I suddenly heard a shout. The relay team, Physio & Co., had finally caught up with us. Granted, we had had a one-hour head start, but Stephen Cassidy was making light work of the descent and glided past us with a couple of words of encouragement or light-hearted abuse or just some innocent banter, I really couldn't make out.



*The Physio & Co. relay team who also ran on Saturday.*

Though it was inevitable that we would cross paths with the relay team, it was a total fluke that, as we descended Loughshannagh to head towards Doan, the conceiver of Cassie's Challenge, Harry Teggarty would be contouring around Loughshannagh towards Ott stile. I wondered if he had gone back to bed after our 3am encounter. He was accompanied by other mountain runners including Irene Finnegan, someone who I have run together many times with, and who is currently checking out the Denis Rankin Round route. It was lovely to see her again. A quick shout, a brief snap and we were on our way to Doan for the out and back.

With the time close to midday, the mountains were now alive with people. Doan was full of families out for a leisurely weekend walk, a lovely way to introduce their kids to the mountains with the sun shining and I'm sure lots of nice bribery treats.



*Heading towards Doan. Thanks to Irene for the picture!*

We journeyed swiftly back to the wall, only stopping momentarily to help a dog that was stuck on the stile. I had told our supporter Susanna that it would take us ten hours to journey to Ott car park, our first designated stop. With nine hours forty on the clock, we had caught her off guard. A couple of dangerous manoeuvres and breaches of the Head Road's speed limit allowed her, however, to arrive just in the nick of time. With the help of Clive Coffey and Helen Cassidy, the first woman to complete Cassie's Challenge, she found a parking space in the minuscule car park and feigned that she'd been waiting around for hours.

Despite a couple of aches, pains, rub marks and tummy complaints, Paul and I were in generally good spirits. We knew we were half way round, we had completed the biggest mountains by now, and so, with rucksacks full of water and food, we made our way up Slievenamuck. Less than half an hour later, as we set out from Spelga to jog out to Spaltha, who did we see jogging in our direction but Billy Reed? Fresh from his incredible anti-clockwise Denis Rankin Round completion, and just back from an attempt on the Scottish Charlie Ramsay Round, he asked if he could come and run with us. We happily agreed.

Neither of us had seen Billy in a while, so we were glad to catch up. Our banter was only briefly broken to allow a pleasant chat with mountain runner Judith Robinson who had jogged up Cock Mountain to check on us and wish us well. The last time I had seen Judith was on the side of Binnian in the midst of some booby-trapped boulder field last September as we searched for a MMM control. I was glad to see she had made it out alive.

Even though it was mid-afternoon when we crossed Rocky River, the day's heat had caught up with us. The sun was beating down and this was the last place we could get water for the next two to three hours, so we made the most of this last water source. The long trudge up Rocky Mountain's grassy savannah slopes was rewarded on the other side as we met Denis Rankin rounders running towards us from the opposite direction. First spotted was 100-mile specialist

Aaron Shimmons, who was supporting Colm Kelly on his run. Further along Tornamrock we met Stephen Morgan, who was putting his first unsuccessful May attempt to bed as he jogged comfortably towards a 23 hour 40 minute finish later that night.

Coming off Eagle Mountain, I knew I had told Susanna to expect us at Deer's Meadow between 6pm and 7pm. I looked at my watch and saw our ETA looked more like 4.30pm.

'She won't be there,' Paul said. 'You've gone too fast.' My heart sank. It wasn't so much that we really needed anything from the van, but I was really looking forward to seeing her friendly, cheery face, as well as having a chance at a luxurious superfluous change in shoes and socks. Running down Pidgeon Rock, however, I saw that Susanna had proved Paul wrong. How could he doubt Susanna's ability to read the tracker and see we were ahead of ourselves?



*Susanna's trusty van, perfect for our support stops.*

Seasoned orienteer, Sharon Dickenson, was also there to see if we were still in one piece and to shoot the breeze. She had been busy that day checking out the new Loughshannagh Horseshoe course, a tantalising sign that normality is slowly returning, with mountain races finally being scheduled. Hearing about another route proved a welcome break. I had been avoiding thinking about this last section ahead of us, had indeed refused to recce it in case it made me pull the plug on a Cassie's Challenge attempt.

Between Deer's Meadow and the finish lay a set of unpleasant obstacles. First up, a 300 metre climb up Slieve Muck with a steep descent on the other side. Then a network of paths and walls to negotiate between Slievenaglogh and Slievenagore. With Paul refusing to run around, as per the book's advice, we were planning to head straight down from Slievenagore towards Silent Valley dam through a minefield of rough ferns and gorse. Then a 600 metre ascent straight up the steep slopes of Slieve Binnian, with the speed bumps of Moolieve and Wee Binnian to contend

with in between. And then the finale, a five kilometre road run back to Annalong after the feet had become accustomed to eighty kilometres of soft mountain ground.

The only thing that got us out of Deer's Meadow was the allure of pints. With my estimate being that it would take us four hours to complete this stage, it meant that we could potentially reach the finish at Annalong Harbour Inn by 10pm, way before last orders. It was head down and go home time.

The obstacles were indeed as bad as I expected. Tired legs, tired head, tired feet didn't help either. Our only reprieve was the welcome sight of my friend Leona Farrell on Silent Valley dam. She had managed to sneak in before the park's gates shut to give us a cheer and a banana.

Words cannot describe how happy I was when I reached Slieve Binnian's highest tor after the craggy climb from hell. We knew the worst was over, so Paul and I paused for a brief celebratory hug. It was literally all downhill from here. As we finally said goodbye to the Mourne Wall at Slieve Binnian's feet, suddenly I saw Rachy Sinnamon pop out from nowhere. We had done loads of Quality Mountain Days together in 2019 as part of our Mountain Leader training, and she is soon off to Wales to become a distinguished instructor for Outward Bound. I told Paul all this as we approached her, but he still couldn't place her. It wasn't until I told her that she was 'Wedgy Girl' in my book that he knew exactly who Rachy was. She jogged along happily with us as we descended towards Carrick Little, before picking up her car and driving off at high speed to the finish at Annalong. I was so tempted to ask her for a lift.



*At the finish at Annalong Harbour with Stewart Cunningham, Harry Teggarty and Ciáran McAleenan.*

Half an hour later, we were back where we started 19 hours 6 minutes before. Rounding the corner leading towards the harbour, we were surprised by the welcoming home crowd. Susanna was there, together with Clive and Helen, fresh from their relay team run earlier in the day. Rachy had parked her car and was ready to clap and cheer. Harry, Ciáran and Stewart were also at the harbour, happy to see us back safe in one piece after instigating the whole thing. And most importantly, orienteer and friend Susan Lambe, was there, standing there with a bottle of Corona for me and a freshly drawn pint of Guinness for Paul.



*Paul got his finish-line pint!*

And so our Cassie's Challenge concludes. For me, it was less about the mountains, and more about all those people who we saw out there, walking, running, cheering, supporting, doing their own thing in the mountains and wishing us well on our own journey.

But what makes this run extra special is Harry and his team. I really felt that they wanted us, were willing us, were praying for us to finish. They were literally there at the beginning, middle and end. Such love for the mountains and for the people who run in them must indeed make Cassie's tail wag in doggie heaven.