

Challenge Accepted – Challenge Delivered

In January 2021 as the idea of a Cassie's Challenge team event started to evolve, from an idea Sam Heron had (great call Sam), none of us imagined that mid-May would bring (I want to say crap weather, but I am way too polite, so we'll go with inclement) such inclement weather. However, despite the forecast the team were 'pumped', sections selected, recced, timed and trained to the nth degree. And...Ready.

What's the worst that come?

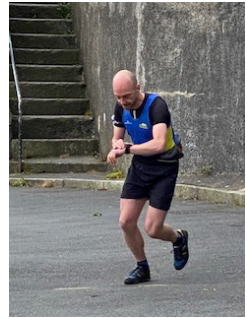
Rain? Pfhh!

Hail, sleet, snow? Nah! Never in May :O

Low cloud/ fog? Never!!!

Well no hail, nor sleet nor snow but the rest came and like the highly trained athletes they are in Mourne Runners (I may be displaying some of my bias here but go with me on this – It's my blog ;)).

As I was saying like the highly trained, and dedicated athletes, we have in Mourne Runners all the guys (yes just guys this time out – more to come later) stood ready at the starting line 7AM, Saturday 15th May 2021 for the first ever Cassie's Challenge Team Event (first of many I expect) to support and cheers on star mountain runner, no stranger to the podium, Jonny Scott and he left the harbour as if on wings (but not of course as the rules forbid it).



A perfect start to what would be a glorious event.

A few minutes later Patricia and I drove up Quarter Road to catch a glimpse of the opening road section, but probably not too surprisingly he was gone, into the mountains and heading for Long Seefin, and as all you Dot Watchers can attest to the dots at times were shifting across you screen, faster than the pixels could take to refresh

('Bias' alert! And computer nerds no technical corrections please ☺).

Anyway, on with the story. Our intrepid Chairman not satisfied with the early start to witness the off, set off himself on foot to meet the guys at the first change over point. And while I know he has been hard at work with his own speed and endurance training over the winter/ spring period he was no match for Jonny so the meet up arrangement changed, but hey you always have to make your adjustments, so while missing the baton transfer between Adam and Jonny he set course for Slievenamaddy to changeover two (if this is starting to sound like a movie plot for a remake of The Hobbit just stop yourselves from starting to cast the characters). So, at Slievenamaddy, The Chairman caught up with the guys (but he doesn't use Strava so no route spoilers) in time to welcome Adam from his completed round (and rumour has it to cadge a lift back to his car – just a rumour! But if anyone can substantiate it...).



Anyway, at that point Ricky Hanna and Garth McGimpsy took over the reins and realising the depth of the challenge, Runners one and two were acing it they had to keep the momentum up and despite the low pressure weather the pressure on these gentlemen was much higher.

Meanwhile down in Donard Car Park Adam was concerned that he could have done better. A testament to the true spirit of athletics. No matter how brilliantly you have just done something inside of you feels there was more that could have been done. We all have those feelings – it's what keeps pushing us farther and hopefully faster over those mountains.

OK next stop Ben Crom dam where the ever-youthful Clive Bailey took up the baton and blazed a trail all the way over Ben Crom, across Bearnagh, the Meels, Loughshannagh, Doan – you know the route – you watched the dots but did you know that on top of dishing out 3 of the Seven 7s: Bang! Bang! Bang! This section throws in a wee trip out to Doan just for good measure. Everyone. All together now. "Thank you, Harry". And so, as we all tried hard to get signal at Ott Car Park wondering where on earth he was but were not too concerned as there was plenty of time (Well when I say not concerned there was the Team Captain – Sam) who ran up and down to Fofanny Dam so many times warming up we worried for the road surface – Nah! Not really) but Sam was a coiled spring. Time to calm down...



"Sam how about a quick photograph. The Team flag is up."

"Did anyone mention photos?" And as if by magic Ricky Cowan appeared ;) fresh from his recce of leg 5 (getting ready for a Mourne Runners V55 (average) relay attempt – but more on that later – right Ricky, David, Dale, Denise, me? and with those 5 on the team we can squeeze in a couple of 40-year-olds). Anyway, I digress.

Clive came into Ott car Park in time for us all to witness the fastest, smoothest baton hand over in the world.



If there was a prize for baton handovers then this would be the one. Sam, no pressure you are the team captain we believe in you, see you at the weir below Rocky. But boy there was barely time to get around there. Quick photo-op with Gary and his personal No.1 fan and up the Hen track we dandered – rather quickly as it happens.

As Sam descended Hen and Gary eyed up the boulders for which Rocky is rather famous, Patricia, Beverly, Denise and I watched as he danced back and forth across the river to get his best line and best start, for as mountain runners familiar with this part of the route know well that start up Rocky is a bugger (a technical term everyone – don't be alarmed), which could shave 9 seconds of your time if you don't get it right.

But as it turned out nothing to worry about, for as Gary had reced his route at below 1:40 and his Team Captain was pushing for a 1:30 Gary decided that nothing greater than 1:22 would do and so as we reached the final leg our Ace was warming up, running the route over and over in his head ready for the off.

As Timmy described it; "he was the final player in a penalty shoot-out. All his teammates had scored magnificently and now the final shot – the one that would win the game was all on him"



A great analogy and one that sums up the dedication and determination of this team. Not just to perform at their best, for their own self pride and worth, but knowing that a standard was being set today, not necessarily one that could never be beaten but one that would be extremely hard to beat (anyone old enough to remember when they thought the 4-minute mile could never be breeched).

Last call of the day as Timmy headed off, more accurately raced off up Slievemuck, disappearing into the mist to set yet another ground breaking pace. Sam and I mused at that point about the 2:10 target – a long and tough section (not that the others are easy), but we thought based on his opening performance and his steely determination that 2:05 was just possible. Turns out it was 2:04 finish, bring the whole team home in 10 hours and 37 minutes. 3 minutes under the predicted 'best case' time.

Just a passing note as we draw this to a close: It is fair to say that a great crowd had gathered at Carrick Little carpark to cheer Timmy on as he came of the mountain and took on the final assault on the 3-mile road run to the finish. "Boy!" we thought, "he'll be so pleased to see us." But I am pretty sure that man was so in the zone we were just a blur on the side of the road. We all tell ourselves that as we don't wish to think he just ignored us all, after all our effort.



Even Lily came all the way from Kilkeel for this and not even a wave...We are just messing with Timmy!

Who wouldn't ignore a crowd of people shouting your name? I'm sure your parents warned you about staying away from 'strange ers' ;)

Before signing off a quick mention and thank you to all the friends and family who came out a various stage throughout the day to support the team and a special thank you from the team and all of Mourne Runners to Edna who laid on a great spread of food. It was very welcome after all the calory burn today and well appreciated by us all.

Finally, we are all so pleased for Sam and the team, Jonny, Adam, Ricky, Garth, Clive, Sam, Gary and Timmy. You gentlemen have set a standard that 'kicks starts' this new challenge. And despite some poor weather there are many great stories to be savoured and to be told over the coming days, months and years. To paraphrase a former UK Prime Minister:

On 15th May 2021 "This is not a time for soundbites. We've left them at home. [Mourne Runners] feel the hand of history upon our shoulders..."

Here's a few pictures. Bye for now...

