

Shooting stars...

CASSIES CHALLENGE on 14TH August 2021 – Stephen Cassidy & Jonny Hobson

In June 2020 I set out with my wife Helen, and friends Clive Coffey and Jonny Hobson, to attempt Cassie's Challenge. In the lead up to the attempt, I had been struggling with my running, and any enthusiasm for it, due to a painful Plantar Fasciitis injury. However, I had decided to give it a go, as much to avail of Helen and Clive's navigational skills and give myself the physical and mental stress of endurance only. But my foot injury had other ideas and I had to pull out, although it turned out that despite a valiant effort by the other three, no-one was to be successful on that date. The weather conditions had deteriorated to such an extent that it made an already difficult challenge even tougher on the day. Helen and Clive made a second and successful attempt a couple of months later, but Jonny and I had been unable to join them that day. Now the pressure was on for both myself and Jonny to complete the challenge and so, the task for us was to set about in making a second attempt.



Thanks to a set of orthotics and no small amount of patience, I started to enjoy the mountains again. Jonny and I began our planning. This time though, there was a little bit of extra pressure as the bulk of the navigating would probably fall to me. At the same time, I had told myself that I would get greater satisfaction if I was successful from having to take this on and we set a date of Saturday 14th August. Admittedly, this was later in the year than we had planned as the short nights of June are ideal for a 24hr round. We studied the times of Helen and Clive and benched off our recent Physio & Co team challenge event (completed on 19th June 2021) and set ourselves a time of 21hrs to complete it. The plan would give us a 3hr window at the end for whatever eventualities may come up. Having set an overall time, we then set our start time at 4.30am to start on road and track and have the last leg from Deer's Meadow in darkness. At that stage we would have quite a few handrails (the Mourne Wall) and Jonny was very familiar with the last leg particular, having practised it for our team relay. If we were working to our planned 21hr time, then we would have about 4.5hrs for the last leg plus the 3hr cushion. Also from experience I know I don't run fast in the dark due to having poor ankles so on the last leg I could rely on Jonny's lead when placing my feet. We then set the times for each leg, deliberately front loading the challenge by setting stiffer times to achieve. Every time sequence was calculated as accurately as possible from all our stats from training runs and our colleagues.

Our aim was to hit the end of leg times with not too much emphasis on the intermediate points - if we were + or – 5mins it wouldn't be critical.

Leg 1	Annalong to Bloody bridge track crossing (350m)	04.30 – 06.50
Leg 2	Blood bridge track to Slievenamaddy	06.50 - 09.00
Leg 3	Slievenamaddy to Ben Crom Reservoir	09.00 – 11.50
Leg 4	Ben Crom Reservoir to Ott car Pk	11.50 – 15.20
Leg 5	Ott Car Pk. To Hen track	15.20 – 17.40
Leg 6	Hen track to Deer's Meadow	17.40 – 21.00
Leg 7	Deer's Meadow to Annalong	21.00 – 01.30 (Sun)

And so, the only unknown, uncontrollable factor was the weather. We had been following the reports all week but decided that unless the weather was going to be all out rain and wind, then we would make the attempt.

Leg 1: Annalong to Bloody Bridge track crossing

Moments prior to the challenge start time, Harry Teggarty, who as usual had stayed up to see the runners off on his challenge, was talking to Helen and Jonny at the harbour. I sat on a bench seat and looked up at the sky and just at that moment a shooting star went zooming overhead heading in a northerly direction. I took this to be a good sign. The weather was dry and there was little or no wind. We got a great start and headed along the coast away from the harbour and watched the moonlit water, we turned then and headed up the road to O'Rourke's Park, where we would start onto the open hillside. Moving along, steadily conscious not to go out too fast but still maintaining good speed, we got to Rocky and on to Chimney where we watched a beautiful sunrise. There was no mist and we ticked off the points and reached the Bloody Bridge track on our calculated time. Both of us felt fresh and in a rhythm. Leg 1 done.

Leg 2: Bloody Bridge track to Slievenamaddy

We continued to move well, keeping up with our planned pace and times ticking off the points and reached the top of Donard to be greeted by competitors on the 77s walking challenge. We dropped down to the saddle, up Commedagh and dropped off for Shanslieve and Slievenamaddy. At this point we both felt we were flagging on energy a bit and agreed to take a minute or two to grab something to eat. We were up 10mins on our planned time at completion of Leg 2. This was great but we decided to pull the food out and eat on the hoof. *No time for picnics today.* I looked at the map and set the compass for the first point of Leg 3.

Leg 3: Slievenamaddy to Ben Crom Reservoir

It was at this point that I had a lapse in concentration and the bearing I had set on the map was taking us further northeast heading for Newcastle. Munching on a sandwich I suddenly had the realisation that I had taken the wrong direction. *I blame the hunger.* I copped on and re-aligned our direction, but we lost 10mins. I told Jonny to question every call I made going forward – we couldn't afford to make silly mistakes; it was going to be a tough enough day! And so we were back on the right path again. I never liked the traverse across to Slievenabrock, not good for dodgy ankles. But we made good ground, eventually pulling back the 10 mins lost to get back on our schedule. We continued along to Slievenaglogh and followed the wall in the direction of Commedagh for Slieve Corragh. It was at this

point on my previous attempt that I had to pull out. I had been in such pain from one hour into the challenge the first time around with my Plantar Fasciitis and despite trying to dig in, I was also weighing up that I was holding the others up. It had been a lonely walk back to Ott car park that day and it was on my mind on the second attempt. I made a quick quip to Jonny, *"Do you remember the last time here?"* Jonny was puzzled! Anyway, it was a positive step overcome for me. *Just one leg at a time Stephen*, I said to myself.

After a water stop at the Beg-Cove col, Jonny thought I didn't see him dashing back to the stream to retrieve his map and compass (thanks to the walker that shouted!) and we soldiered up Cove and Lamagan where we came upon the first of the leading competitors running the 77s. No sense to compare their speed over ground to ours - they were on the sprint course compared to our marathon! We arrived at Ben Crom bang on time and it was there we met volunteers for the 77s, including the supportive Kathleen Monteverde – no stranger to endurance challenges herself!

Leg 4: Ben Crom Reservoir to Ott carpark

This had been my leg on the team event and it had the most climbing, but I knew it reasonably well. I had done it in about 2hrs 45mins during the team event but it wasn't going to be anywhere near that time today. We made steady progress up to Ben Crom swinging round the south side and heading north and east up the side of it. We then made a line on Bearnagh heading west of north on a path before turning northeast. It was a bit of a slog and we were just telling ourselves to keep going. Jonny had been pulling strongly all day and it was almost a comfort to detect that maybe he was starting to get it tight! But for all that he was still hitting the top in front of me. Gingerly I dropped down to the col between Bearnagh and Meelmore, descending was getting to be the hardest thing.

We got up Meelmore and headed down the back and over the col to Meelbeg. Climbing Meelbeg was the 'wall' for me. I had to keep telling myself to *push through and take it point at a time*. I took a gel just to keep me going. *Don't be worrying about legs 5, 6 & 7* I kept telling myself. *Just get over this patch*. I had tried to stuff food into me but it was making me feel nauseous. I had been cramping up and thought I needed to take salt or electrolyte so I took one of Jonny's blackcurrant flavoured electrolytes in water at the wall back at Slievenagloagh. I should have known better not to take something new!

We summited Meelbeg, then Carn and headed to Doan. I was noting the speed over ground to Doan and it was nowhere near the speed that I had set on my leg of the group challenge. I definitely wouldn't have been passing Paul Mahon and Moire O'Sullivan today who had been race doing the full challenge on the day of our relay! Again, I had to tell myself *just focus on your own race and pace*. Jonny was still setting and pushing the pace. As we headed up to the Carn stile it was the first time that Jonny suggested he was flagging – he was none the wiser that I had hit the wall earlier. I told him to just keep marching for a while, although while he marched, I had to jog just to keep up with him. *'He's younger than me'*, I reckoned with myself, along with some other excuses. We finally made it to the Ott car park and were greeted by the cheering of children. It was Helen, Jonny's wife and kids (Joanne, Evie and Amelia) and their close friends (Karis and Lily). It was a great motivation to keep going. We were suffering but we knew it was never going to be easy. Mentally I had said to myself that *if we get to the end of stage 4 with no injuries, reasonable weather and on schedule, the pressure was off, and we should make it*.

Leg 5: Ott carpark to the Hen track

We headed off from Ott to the cheers of the kids. We were still bang on time with our schedule. We powered up the first ascent from Ott to Slievenamuck, dropped down the valley and up the other side to Spelga. The weather was starting to look and get a little murky. Jonny was again leading the way. We were on a relatively flat top to Spaltha but I was struggling with running. This should have been a straightforward easy jog but I trudged slowly, struggling to keep up with Jonny from Spaltha to Craigdoo. Our times were starting to fall back from our schedule but eventually we crossed over the Bann Road and headed up Slievenamiskan. It was a short steep blast. Jonny was pushing ahead but I'm sure I heard him talking to himself, trying to motivate and drive himself on. What a great partner! We steadily trudged over to Cock Mountain and dropped down a poor scree path towards Hen. We summited Hen and dropped off the tor at the top of Hen down the nice grassy path in the direction of Rocky and I was moving a little easier again. We kept our pace with our projected times, only being down time due to the slow start on Leg 5. Just 10mins off our projection and another leg done!

Leg 6: Hen track to Deer's Meadow

It was this leg that I expected would be the most mentally challenging and starting out on it we didn't really converse much. We didn't even acknowledge to each other that we had completed Leg 5 - we were on a mission and fully focused. Harry had mentioned a sort of a path going up Rocky from the weir crossing and I could see what looked like flattened vegetation trailing up in the general direction of Rocky. Jonny led the way again and I stayed with Jonny's pace. I could see in the distance that there were dark, heavy clouds coming towards us. We were walking in their direction, and it was the first really dirty, heavy rain that we encountered. When we reached the top, I stuck the outer shell on. Jonny reached for his sandwich, but I was struggling to swallow anything. Food just sat in my mouth and I was like a cow chewing the cud. Jonny marched off with a sandwich in his mouth, I shuffled behind, cursing the speed he was going, over the peaty trails to Pierce's Castle. Then we were heading south over to the wall leading up to Shanlieve and the marshy patch was zapping the legs. Going up Shanlieve, Jonny was chatting to himself again, but I wasn't minding the climbing so much now. I had put a fair amount of climbing training in on the lead up to this day while Jonny had more running miles in, but he was still out in front. Probably good he hadn't done more hillwork, I'd never have kept up! We reached the top of Shanlieve and set off over to the cairn to be sure of recording all the tops correctly. The rain continued but we had to plough on, point after point. It was getting darker but we were still only 10mins behind our scheduled time. Finally we climbed up Moughanmore and as we approached the top we were greeted with a clearing of the dark clouds and a beautiful red sunset. *It had to be a sign!* To have started with a shooting star, then seeing the beautiful sunrise and finally experiencing a stunning sunset on the same day was just special. We carefully jogged down to the Deer's Meadow to be greeted by Helen. End of Leg 6 with 7.5hrs left to do the final leg. It was going to be in darkness, but we always knew it would be.

Leg 7 Deer's Meadow to Annalong Harbour.

Head torches were on and we ate some food before starting off on our last leg. We were still only 10mins down on our scheduled time and I had projected 4.5hrs to complete Leg 7 to hit our target of 21hrs. It was doable and we had done a few training sessions where we did it reasonably comfortably in that time. Jonny knew this leg like the back of his hand. We made steady progress up Muck but the descent down was extremely wet and slippery, we were in full darkness. And we descended slowly. *Not the time to be wrecking ourselves.* It seemed a long slow descent but we got down. I started to question Jonny on the route, but although he knew it, I kept cross checking. *Now wasn't the time to screw up!* It would be mentally hard to take a wrong route choice at this stage but on we went ticking

off the points. Jonny then turned to me and said, *"I think we are going to be tight! We will need at least three hours up and down Binnian!"* We were definitely slowing but I knew if even we walked all the rest of the way we should still get to the finish on time. I tried to allay Jonny's rising panic and convince him we had plenty of time, to just focus on each point now. We got to the Silent Valley dam and headed for Moolieve.

The weather started to deteriorate again and as the rain chucked down as we climbed, we were getting hit sideways with the wind. Coats on and we worked our way up Wee Binnian and then started on Binnian. It was a long slow slog. I took out the special treat - Haribos - for a change of taste and we tramped on around the west side of the south tor. It was wet, windy and miserable and we could only see five yards in front of us. I scrambled up some slippery rock and while I was used to scrambling, Jonny wasn't so happy and took the longer route around. I waited. I shouted. I couldn't see him. I couldn't hear him. I couldn't see his head torch beam and I was getting cold standing still. No shelter here. Eventually we found each other and made it up to the top of the summit tor. It was difficult to see the route down and I had it in my head to go down in a certain direction, but my compass was telling me different. I checked and checked. Five times, in total! It was cold and Jonny was having feelings of *Deja-vu* from his last attempt here where he'd been close to hypothermic! And he was conscious of the time ticking away. I tried to keep us calm and followed the compass bearing down an awful bit of ground. I was wondering, *where's the wall?* I veered marginally right of my bearing to see if we would hit the wall and there it was. *Relief!* We settled down, made slow progress initially but eventually hit the rocky path and our progress was better, just avoiding any slips and falls. The thought hadn't passed, and I took a slip, luckily ending up with just a wet backside! *Focus Stephen!*

We made it down and onto the Carricklittle track. I was feeling pretty good again and suggested we run the final road section to Annalong. Jonny looked a little more tired than me, but he coasted along. We reflected on that road the whole way to the finish. Breaking points! Hitting 'the wall'! Niggles! Various thoughts going through our heads at certain points along the way! We had said nothing to each other at those moments when we wondered if we'd be successful. Jonny had been a great partner, taking enjoyment from the experience and no complaining even when he was suffering!



And so...

There was a great satisfaction going across the finish line as we patted each other on the back, being greeted by Harry and Helen. It was 03.00hrs. Not quite the 21hrs but 22.5hrs. But it was still a comfortable finish and we were definitely smiling inside while nudging Harry on the shoulder. It was a great feeling, a great challenge, and a great sense of achievement to be on a list of successful finishers including Harry Teggarty himself. It was even sweeter that I had done it with Jonny where we had to ensure we navigated the challenge ourselves, and that it was a successful 24hr challenge for Jonny who had so narrowly missed it on his first attempt.

Happy running Hill Runners! And thank you Harry!

Stephen Cassidy & Jonny Hobson