

Mandy's Spine Race Adventure

The 2020 Montane Spine Race started promptly at 8am. After a fond farewell to eldest son Jamie, his girlfriend Beth & kind friend Andy Bailey from the sheep sanctuary I set off leaving Edale



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behind. I trotted along with 146 others & we were soon tackling Jacobs Ladder and Kinder Scout. All was good despite the wind & rain and I was excited to at last be on my way. Trotting over the flagstones towards Snake Pass I wished I had started in my waterproof trousers as it was cold & raining hard now. I figured if I kept moving, I would be warm enough which was my first mistake. Heading over Bleaklow where the path disappeared & navigation became more difficult, I slowed a lot & was soon frozen cold and shivering. I found a sheltered bank out of the wind, put on my waterproof trousers and swapped from gloves to mitts. I got myself moving again & quickly warmed up which was a relief. We crossed various rivers one of which I fell in and got quite a soaking. Later as the weather improved, I decided I was warm enough to stop & don my first fancy dress prop, an Anna wig from the Disney film 'Frozen'. After a quick selfie with my new friend Olaf to the amusement of other Spine competitors I carried on. It was nice to see John

Figiel at this point for a friendly hello. Crossing the Road at Torside I received a welcome cup of tea from the Mountain Rescue team, they were fabulous throughout the event. Then it was over Wessenden Moor and past more reservoirs & river crossings. Going over a major road I was excited to see my friend Steve Willis from the Thames Ring Race & good buddy Matt Harris from my two Norfolk Clubs. Matt was on the Spine media team & Steve lived close by the Pennine Way. I remember seeing the lights of Manchester as we crossed over the M62 & slowly worked our way north. I fell over 4 times in the mud on that first day, but it was nothing compared with what was to come. I reached checkpoint 1 at Hebden Bridge just after midnight & feeling very tired I chose to have two hours sleep & lots to eat before setting off again. Leaving the checkpoint, I saw my friend Jody just arriving & I was sad to see her looking very exhausted, she is such a lovely lady. I knew she would be well looked after though. It was soon daylight and a lovely morning. Out on Wadsworth Moor I took a few minutes to continue with my 'Frozen' theme and turned into Olaf requesting warm hugs. Next it was on over Clough Head & Ickornshaw Moor where I was very sick, due to the excessive exertion I think. My spirits were still high though, and I was really embracing the experience despite the wet, cold and strong winds. On one of the diversions I met a French chap called Thomas & he asked me to use his phone to call HQ as he was unsure if we were going the right way. We were and we continued through lowland meadows & paths past some funny Spine Race signs and onto another friendly pop-up random checkpoint which I called the Smurf Tent as it was blue inside & we all looked like little Smurfs. I had my first nosebleed & helped a chap who was struggling with his navigation, he later dropped out in Gargrave saying he was not enjoying the experience. I called into the shop in Gargrave & bought a sandwich before headed out again this time with a group towards Malham. On reaching Malham the group I was with were stopping again to rest but I was still full of beans, I think I had been eating so well it really helped me to keep going, so I continued on & caught up another chap & we tackled the big Malham climb up to the limestone pavement together. Soon we were at Malham Tarn & I was treated to cuppa from the kind and friendly checkpoint volunteers, they really were great throughout the event. The next challenge was Fountains Fell & on the approach, as I climbed over a stile, I fell off the wall but thankfully landed in a soft bog. Hurrah for bogs I thought, that mindset was to change later in the week. The rest of Monday night was spent scrambling over Fountains Fell & slithering down the other side. The wind was very strong, so we were not allowed over Pen-Y-Ghent & instead had to follow a diversion to Horton in Ribblesdale. Now I was suddenly feeling very tired & my ankles & feet were getting sore. I was relieved when we reached the old school & told we could sleep inside on the floor. I took a welcome hours & a half's sleep before tackling the Cam High Road & the last 12 miles to Hawes. At checkpoint 2 Lindley Chambers gave me a hug, he was positive every time I saw him about my ability to finish, & this always gave me a boost. I also had the pleasure of meeting Alan Rumbles a lovely & funny guy whose name I'd seen a lot in the ultra-community. I left Hawes alone & plodded on with sore ankles resigned now to this being a long-distance hike rather than a run (I had managed to run

quite a few bits on day 1 & 2). Heading up to the fells again I decided it was time to go live on Facebook & sing my Elsa song before the weather turned for the worse.

Hoping for snow had its effect very quickly as two hours later I was up on Great Shunner Fell navigating my way through snow and ice and regularly going splat as I fell over. It was exciting, cold & occasionally a little unreal as I was hallucinating all sorts of things including seeing Olaf everywhere 🤖😂. As I moved on through the night over various hills & fells my nosebleeds started again badly. I had a really low moment when my headtorch died & I was pouring blood again, thankfully another competitor, I think his name was Paul, stopped & stayed with me whilst I sorted myself out & then we marched together onto Stonesdale Moor & towards Tan Hill. It was cold & wet with a strong head wind, I was exhausted & planned to sleep for a couple of hours at Tan Hill. As I saw the lights ahead, I wondered if I was hallucinating again but no it was real, I had reached the highest pub in England just after midnight. In the large back room, there was a fire & bodies everywhere. I began to relax until a kind chap called Dan said that statistics showed that racers needed to leave Tan Hill by 1.30am to avoid a DNF (did not finish). My mind went crazy, I was not here to DNF & I said straight away "I want to finish" "I must do this". I dragged my exhausted mind away from the comforting thoughts of sleep & threw my kit back on as Dan said I could leave with all of them. Then my nose started pouring blood again, big time. I grabbed as much heavy-duty roll as I could to stop it and with bloody towel still in my hand I went out into the cold night with Dan & the others. Over the hill now the wind eased but I realised in my haste I had forgotten to fill up my water bottle. Dan knew the area & showed me a river high up where I could refill my bottle. It was the nicest water I have ever tasted. Then it was a wet, slippery march over Cotherstone Moor. For much of the Pennine Way there is no obvious path & we just had to pick the best route through the long grass tufts & bogs aiming in the right direction. We called into a welcome Bunk House where I made myself a cup of tea for the caffeine to help me stay awake, popping a £1 into the honesty box. An even larger group of us left together, the others had slept there, and their pace was now fast as they were refreshed. I kept up almost to the next checkpoint & then let them go on ahead reaching Middleton In Teesdale just after 8.30am on Wednesday morning. My ankles were very sore & the medics checked me over and gave me painkillers to help. I never once considered giving up though, I was 100% determined to carry on, pretty much everyone had tendonitis by this stage. After an hours sleep I prepared to leave, another chap asked if he could go with me so we departed together.

Sadly, after a mile my new friend suddenly said he couldn't do it anymore as he was in too much pain, I encouraged him to ask for help & give it some more thought as he turned back to the checkpoint. I carried on alone & was soon making my way along a beautiful river valley towards Cauldron Snout waterfall. The terrain was crazy for part of the route, having to climb & scramble over huge rocks right next to the river for about a mile. I was relieved to leave that bit behind & move on up over Great Dun Fell. I really enjoyed navigating this part & was getting more confident in my abilities although the top part was very tricky with river & waterfall crossings and steep

drops which I had to avoid in the dark. Approaching Dufton a couple of other Spinners caught me up & told

me about the all-night cafe where I was able to call in & buy a large fried veggie roll, it tasted amazing 😊. I took an hour's rest at Dufton but only slept for about 10 minutes of this before preparing for Cross Fell. We had another kit check, were warned about what lay ahead and advised to take care. I left in good spirits; I had hoped for snow but was soon to discover that sometimes you have to be careful what you wish for. As I climbed higher & higher the ground became covered in snow, deep in parts where it had drifted. The wind was exceedingly strong, and it was bitterly cold. Suddenly the ground disappeared from underneath me & I was in a deep icy water filled bog hole. I

quickly scrambled out although it had felt lovely & cool on my sore ankles. I was ok & plodded on then my Garmin watch failed, due to the cold I guessed, so I pulled out my Garmin handheld to navigate with this. Thankfully this was fine otherwise it would have been a maps & compass job which is not so easy in the wind. I continued uphill, often following the footprints in the snow until I reached the summit & then the strength of the wind hit me so hard that I was literally blown off my feet again and again. The winds must have been 70 – 80 mph & even with my poles I could not stay upright. It was a desperate few minutes and I even thought about my SOS button, glad it was there just in case. However, I was determined to find a way & not let this beat me, so I crawled & rolled my way along part of the ridge until it dropped down ever so slightly from the wind. I then managed to stagger on a bit, but I still kept being blown over & was making very little progress. Two other competitors caught me up & I realised I'd been stupid & not put my yaktrax on. Geoff & Matt kindly stayed with me while I pulled them on, they made a huge difference giving me better grip in the snow. I then literally hurled myself across the mountain for the next mile, determined to keep these two guys in sight, it was easier navigating as I just followed them & Geoff knew the area well. My tendons were screaming but I just concentrated on staying upright as we eventually began to descend Cross Fell to the refuge that was Greg's Hut. I was so excited to at last be in the famous Greg's Hut & was treated to the most wonderful hot chilli noodles ever. Then as it was almost daylight it was back out into the cold to finish the descent & make my way to Alston where I arrived soon after noon on Thursday. I slept again at Alston but only for about three quarters of an hour due to the pain in my feet & ankles. Slightly refreshed though I set off again as dark was falling & after a few miles met up with Matt again. We decided to stick together as our pace was similar. My nosebleeds had lessened but my poor nose & lips were very sore. I had a lip salve with me & had started poking it up my nostrils to try & ease the soreness. I did wonder at times what I would do if it broke & got stuck up there. Would that have been a good reason to use my SOS button, to say my lipstick was stuck up my nose 🚒👁️😂. That night we wandered like bog covered, zombies in the pouring rain over endless low-lying fields and squelchy marshes. We were feeling broken but of a similar mind, determined to finish. Geoff caught us up and the three of us stayed together with Matt & Geoff mainly leading the way. Geoff

was clearly struggling with the sleep deprivation & suddenly announced he could not carry on anymore. We stopped at a random car on a road where a kind person was giving food & drink to Spine racers. We all took a break so that Geoff could properly assess whether he really could continue or not but sadly the answer was no he could not. Both Matt & I were really upset for him, he had been so strong & had helped us over Cross Fell, it was daunting also to see another capable runner have to retire & a humbling reminder that anything can happen on a race like this. The two of us continued on & after an hour or two came across an animal shelter where another Spine racer was taking refuge. We quickly made the decision to rest for a few hours as we were both pretty much dead on our feet. After texting Spine HQ & having got bivi set up I climbed in with my wet muddy shoes still on my feet but popped my legs into a bin liner first. I only slept for about an hour as my feet were twitching in pain but I rested for two whole hours & that was enough to refresh me & my pal as we set off again once more north towards Hadrian's wall. The Spine cough had really set in now & emerged regularly as a rough, frog like noise in the damp cold atmosphere reminding me that I was still alive. At Greenhead we took shelter for a short while in the toilets and slept for 10 minutes, Matt also cooked some noodles on his stove which we shared. Daylight now & we were making our way up & down along Hadrian's Wall. Suddenly Matt said "look over there, do you see what I see" I replied "giraffe", Matt said "yes giraffe". We were losing it, hallucinating in daylight 🤪. As we moved closer the giraffe turned into a wooden sign & then we saw a pony. We waited for the pony to turn into a sign, but it was real & we patted it as we went past. Soon we turned off Hadrian's Wall & could see the forest which lay ahead. We even managed a little bit of running here down the tracks. I decided to abandon my plans to don my final 'Frozen' themed fancy-dress costume as we were both sore & tired, worried about cut-offs & desperate to keep moving. If I had asked Matt to stop whilst I got my Sven reindeer outfit on and help me blow up my inflatable antlers, I think the second word might have been "off" 🤪.

The forest was beautiful & soon we reached the next checkpoint at Bellingham. It was very busy here, we planned to sleep for an hour & then get away as soon as possible. Although I tried, I did not sleep at all as I was just too sore. I ate lots though & we were excited to be through the last major checkpoint. Saying goodbye to the kind and helpful volunteers we headed into what for me seemed like a journey into hell. The sleep monsters soon set in as night fell on that Friday evening & we once more picked our way through low lying bogs & fells. I was almost falling asleep on my feet & it was so cold. At times I did wonder if I was still alive, the pain in my ankles & feet told me I was. I used various tricks to stay awake, taking sips of ice-cold water, bites of food, listening to music & looking around me, although there was not much to see in the dark. Eventually I just talked gibberish to Matt as a last resort to stop myself literally dropping onto the ground & falling asleep. At a road crossing a kind chap revived me with a large mug of hot soup which did help for a while. At some point on this part of the journey I also lost my goggles which had been on my head, I have no idea how but think they may have caught on a tree as we were going up a hill. The sleepless nightmare continued, and we passed more competitors calling Spine HQ for help. I

was determined not to be one of them, my motivation to keep going was huge. We eventually reached the Keilder Forest and the monitoring point at Burness where we were allowed a half hour stop. They did another kit check here and to my dismay they asked to see my goggles. I said straight away that they had fallen off my head somewhere on the trail & for a few horrible minutes I wondered if my race were to end there in such a sad way. My only comfort was a kind look given to me by volunteer Peter-Pierre, who is a lovely guy. As they made the necessary phone calls to Spine HQ I resigned myself to being polite and accepting if they told me I could not carry on. Then despair turned to sheer joy when the chap in charge said ok to go as winds were only going to be 30 mph on the Cheviots & advised me to pull my hood tight to protect my eyes from the side wind. So incredibly happy at this reprieve I moved on & still exhausted Matt & I headed for a nearby church where Spine racers could sleep. It was freezing cold & again I just pushed my muddy wet feet, still in my shoes, into a bin bag before climbing into my sleeping bag for a couple of hours rest. I lay there in huge discomfort with my feet stinging in pain, but I knew we now had only 16 miles to go. After grabbing about half an hour actual sleep I quickly packed up & we set off again, this time climbing high up onto the Cheviot Hills as the sun rose on a beautiful but freezing cold day. We'd been warned about the bogs, but I still managed to find one in spectacular fashion and found myself completely stuck up to my hips. I called Matt who was shocked to see me nearly waist deep in mud & dragged me out although it was not easy. Two other Spine racers stopped too & checked me out medically that I was ok before urging me onto hut 1 so I could change out of my wet leggings before I got hypothermia. Several times I'd urged Matt to go ahead as he was now moving faster than me & I was glad to see he did choose his own path & steadily disappeared into the distance with the two other chaps. On my own now for the last part was hard but wonderful. I put on my yaktrax on which helped with grip on the ice. It was freezing cold and windy & the terrain was hard on my swollen feet & ankles but I suddenly realised the odds were at last in my favour of finishing in time. Emotions overwhelmed me at times as I smiled, cried & struggled my way over the beautiful Cheviot Hills. It was too cold for me to take my mitts off & use my phone except for one quick photo as the sun was setting. I could feel my body breaking down with the cold & exhaustion & was anxious to keep moving just to keep warm enough. I started to look forward to the finish & seeing my friend Andy Bailey who I knew would be there to help me, I had no idea at that time that my son Jamie and his girlfriend would also be in Kirk Yetholm. Reaching hut 2 felt fantastic, I had planned to eat the last of my chocolate but instead they kindly fed me a hot veggy rice mixture which was much nicer and refuelled me for the last six miles. One last climb up a hill & then the long uncomfortable decent into the valley below, going downhill is very painful when you have blistered feet & tendonitis. Approaching Kirk Yetholm another Spine Racer passed me, he was sleep deprived & weaving all over the place just like me. We exchanged a bit of supportive gibberish & I wished him a happy and good finish, I had nothing left in me other than to plod on at my own pace. As I saw the lights ahead of me my dream of finishing the Spine Race suddenly turned into reality. I was live streamed coming into the finish and so happy to see Andy had come out to greet me. Then, as I

ran towards the finish & the famous wall, my heart soared as I heard Jamie's voice calling out "come on mother" and cheering me in. I touched the wall, it was over, all the pain and tiredness suddenly melted away and I could not stop smiling. Andy Bailey presented me with me medal, I hugged Jamie & Beth ~ I had completed the Spine Race. Despite my huge determination I never took it for granted that I would finish until I touched that wall. Throughout the race strong people had been dropping like flies around me. It truly lived up to its name of being Britain's most Brutal & I am grateful beyond belief to have been one of the 63 finishers. Thank you all for your fantastic support ~ it has meant the world to me & the sheep sanctuary 🐏🐏❤️🐏🐏 x