As I sit at my computer listening to the rain hammering the window, I am reminded of an identical view from a train window two weeks earlier as I travelled across the Pennines to Carlisle. At the time I was scanning the landscape for signs of flooding. Unfortunately it had been the worst June weather on record and there was little to be seen other than cloud and rain. What glimpses could be seen of the swollen and torrential rivers were rather unnerving and after careful consideration I decided ignorance was bliss and averted my gaze.

I was travelling over on the Friday in order to register and stay overnight in the town centre before the 7 am start on Saturday morning. The Wall Run was a new Ultramarathon along Hadrian's wall organised by the Rat Race team. This was the Inaugural event which had apparently been two years in the making. It started in Carlisle castle, finished over the Millennium Bridge in Gateshead, and involved 70 miles of grass, trail, roads and tarmac cycleway. (It is advertised as 69 miles, but with route diversions due to flooding it became 70 miles. A minor point, but by 69 miles, the extra mile is like a half marathon!)

The race has three options. For individuals there is the 2 day 'Challenger' option where runners camp overnight at Vindolanda Roman fort, and the 1 day 'Expert' option for a continuous run. There is also the option to run a relay team. I had decided to enter the continuous 1 day race. Having seen the weather conditions as I passed through the overnight camp ground, I think I took the easier option!

The course took in some amazing scenery and remnants of Hadrian’s wall were often in evidence. Unfortunately as the race progressed and my mind succumbed quicker than my legs, I became more focussed on running, and less aware that what I was seeing around me were parts of the original wall. The course marking and organisation was very thorough, particularly given the distances covered. The only part where things became sketchy was towards the outskirts of Newcastle, where there had apparently been a bike race the day before, with many of their signs still left out. This was also coincidental with an apparent change in our own signage from yellow arrows to red and white tape. In fact time showed that the tape merely supplemented the yellow arrows which were still there (albeit with one or two removed), and the remainder probably only appeared so far apart because running pace had dropped so significantly that it seemed like hours passed between signs! Spotting a yellow arrow was like finding the Holy Grail, and each sighting produced its own surge of joy and relief!

The course terrain was not too challenging, the greatest challenge coming from the effects of the elements (where grass became bog and trail became stream) and the overall distance. The overall
ascent was around 1510m and there was only one hill which sticks in my memory as a killer climb (just after Vindolanda pit stop).

Most of the pit stops and check points were very well organised. One exception would be the slight confusion at the half way pit stop where it took some time to find out from race officials how the drop bags had been organised, and whether there were any directions from the half way point as had been intimated at the race briefing. It was purely by chance that I did pick up an instruction sheet which was sitting in an unobtrusive pile in the corner of the bag tent, and I was comforted by the presence of my own maps which I had brought with me.

The first 15 miles stage took us from a mass start at Carlisle castle to Lanercost Priory, with 250m of ascent. The start was delayed for 30 minutes or so whilst the route was double checked for flooding, and to give those who had parked nearby a chance to move before the river submerged the car park. Runners were lead out of Carlisle behind a bike which negotiated a route through the park land. Unfortunately, despite much creativity, there was no way to circumnavigate the water that had flooded the park, and so after grim acceptance of wet feet for the next 15 – 24 hours, we all gave up and started wading.

A brief check point at Irthington allowed us to grab water and some jellies about half way through stage 1. An hour and half later I arrived at Lanercost priory and after a quick stop to check in, re fuel from a sumptuous spread, and refill the camel back, it was on to stage 2.

Stage 2 stretched 17 miles from Lanercost priory to Vindolanda Roman fort, with 520m of ascent. Brief checkpoints at Birdoswald fort and Walltown quarry broke the stage up. This was the stretch with the most ascent, but was for me one of the most enjoyable. The deluge had subsided to a mere heavy rain storm, and I still had the mental abilities to take in my surroundings. I loved being part of the long trail of runners stretching out to the horizon, all moving relentlessly forward as silent comrades or in sporadic conversation with a neighbour for the random duration that you ran at the same pace.

A welcome break came at Vindolanda. At this point I had been running for 6 and a quarter hours in sodden trail shoes and clothes. We had all had the opportunity to leave a drop bag at the start for transportation to the half way point. I had elected to stash food supplies, more sport drink powder, road trainers and leggings in anticipation of cooler temperatures as night fell later on. I was keen not to spend too long at this pit stop. Although close, it was not actually at the half way point, and I knew the longer I stayed, the stiffer I would become and the more motivation I would need to start running.
again. In fact I ended up employing the same strategy at each pit stop and never actually sat down for the entirety of the event, which I believe helped me greatly in the later stages when all my will power was required to keep moving.

After reloading my back pack and returning my drop bag, I left the fort and returned to the trail for the 13 mile stage 3, with 335m of ascent and 480m descent in store. My risky decision to remain in wet trail shoes and fore go the dry road shoes was vindicated almost immediately when a steady descent took me down to an extensively flooded ford over the road. After wading through this the heart rate rose swiftly as I began a steep and slippery ascent up the heather strewn hillside of Barcombe Hill overlooking Vindolanda and Stangate roman road, which we then rejoined and followed east. This again was an enjoyable stage for me. The road stretched out endlessly in front but rather than appearing daunting, it was a luxury to have firmer footing and settle in to an easy rhythm. I was surprised how quickly this stage seemed to pass and how good I felt, but I was by now becoming aware of the way that my mind and body had settled in to a regular pattern. I took in sports drink regularly, and in addition took a gel on the hour and a small chunk of power bar or a few jelly babies on the half hour. About 5-10 minutes after the energy boost I was feeling content and running strong, by 20 minutes I was dragging my feet and finding the situation grudgingly acceptable, and by 30 minutes I was in a foul mood and fighting the temptation to walk. I do remember becoming irrationally angry with farmers for installing gates so stiff and heavy that I just couldn’t open them. In reality I suspect they were no different to the gates encountered at the beginning of the race which of course gave me no problem, and that I was in fact just simply out of energy. I became adept at predicting when the half hour was up without the alarm beep of my watch, purely by my shuffle and the picky tone of my inner voice! On through a few more villages, some farmland, a skittish dance around a field or two of cows and across a bridge. I arrived, somewhat weary, at the Hexham pit stop at 45 miles and nine and three quarters of an hours’ running.

The next stage was 17 miles long, with more descent than ascent (280 & 250m respectively). Again there were 2 check points en route at 51 (east of Corbridge) and 56 miles (Low Prudhoe). Passing through Corbridge was pretty and brought a smile to my face as I overheard a passer by asking one of the runners if they had come far. The route followed the 72 cycleway alongside the Tyne river which had by now settled to less of a torrent. I was still mentally with it enough to note George Stephenson’s cottage outside Wylam, but by the time I arrived at the Newburn pit stop at 62 miles, I had gone to an altogether different place. By now I had heard from my husband who had texted from the finish line that the route was in fact 70 miles. I seemed to switch suddenly from enjoying myself to just wanting it all to be over. I anticipated the next 10 miles in darkness, with a cold dread. I know my decision making becomes erratic with extreme fatigue and that this is made worse when energy intake is low. My ability to take in fuel without ‘gastric compromise’ (to put it politely) was by now minimal (there were some advantages to the darkness after all) and I dreaded taking the wrong turn and adding even an extra metre to the remaining distance.
Leaving the last pit stop I quickly became aware that my head torch had somehow got switched on in my back pack and my front light was very dim, somewhere between pathetic and glow worm. I was aware that I had spare batteries buried in my pack, but fried as my mind was I couldn’t think where exactly. Faced with the choice of stopping to search for them on the deserted wooded path (runners were by now well spaced out, in every sense!), or continuing with little light and possibly missing my directions, I opted for the latter. In retrospect possibly a bad decision, it’s a difficult call, but at the time a decision of any kind was a result, and I wasn’t going to question it.

There were a few dodgy moments when the trail appeared to dry up, but eventually I found myself down at the quayside. A kind jogger attempted to encourage me with a shout of ‘only another 10 minutes and you’re there’ as he appeared to sprint in the opposite direction. I knew he was trying to help but the reality was that 10 minutes for him was another 20 for me at my pace, and I so desperately wanted to stop. I have never known a 14 minute mile pace to be so hard. As I approached the bridges of Newcastle, some joker kept moving them further away. Why was I getting nowhere? Eventually the Millennium bridge came in to focus, followed by the faces of my kids and husband, waiting patiently as I approached in slow motion…..not for dramatic effect, but because I approached in slow motion.

Across the bridge and finally over the finish line, with the words “don’t ever let me sign up to something like this again” My only recollection is the feeling of immense relief. I couldn’t even muster a feeling of satisfaction. I felt terrible for those runners still out there in the darkness. At the time I thought there were only one or two still out there but in retrospect realise that nearly half the Expert field were still battling it out. The finish area was cheerful & warm, and I felt as comfortable as you can after 70 miles of sweat, rain and gastric mischief. Hot and cold food was available, as was massage and a sleeping area for anyone requiring overnight shelter (a fact I hadn’t been aware of in the planning stages and which would have saved my family a v late night). Unfortunately I was minutes outside the deadline for showers so I sat as far away from everyone else as politely possible and tried to take in some food. This was a failed venture as my taste buds were shot after so many hours of sticky sweet energy products, and I eventually gave up. After a quick finisher’s photo and collection of a Goody bag, we set off home.

I’m glad to say that after a good night’s sleep my emotions resumed normal service and I was blown over by my result, finishing 122nd overall (from an initial field of 268 experts), and 15th female with a time of 16 hours 25 mins. I can even report that days later I was thinking over the possibilities of returning to the Wall next year!

Challenges

On reflection, the major challenges, which were largely personal to me and might not have caused the same irritation to others were:

- Duration of the event rather than the frequency or gradient of hills
- Running solo in the dark
- Anxiety associated with traversing fields of cows, particularly when the route took me between cow and calves.
- The surface water and its effect on the terrain
- Large concrete obstacles placed just inside the door of portaloos at Vindolanda Roman Fort! An inspired piece of torture, probably designed to weigh them down in the wind, but to the knackered, mentally blunted and vertically challenged, a clear indication that we were not to enter therein and avail of the services. After 5 minutes of opening and shutting doors it finally dawned on me why someone appeared to have concreted up the entrance, and after a few carefully chosen expletives I literally climbed on hands and knees in to the remaining minuscule space to deliver my offering to the Roman Gods.
- Keeping a steady pace and avoiding going out too fast or too hard on hills.

**Mistakes**

- The sport ident ‘bracelet’ which was in the event on a neck lanyard and not worn on the wrist: I have to wear a similar item at work and the clasp frequently irritates my neck. I therefore attached the lanyard to my pack and carried the ident in the pocket of my waist strap. A good solution initially, but retrieving it at the checkpoints required increasingly greater concentration and dexterity than I was capable of as the race progressed!
- Map reading at Carlisle station upon arrival on the Friday! The first mistake was to underestimate the effect of excessive rainfall on a home printed map and Google directions (think Papermache)! The second was to completely ignore all experience to date about pace and distance estimates, thus walking miles in the wrong direction. A 5 minute walk was transformed into 30 and my feet, clothes, and complete kit for the run were soaked. I even developed blisters; perhaps I should have taped my feet for the Friday too! It wasn’t a confidence-inspiring display of navigation skills.
- Not double checking head torch batteries and allowing the torch to become turned on in my pack. On reflection I will probably put a tiny bit of tape over the switch next time.
- Carrying too much food and kit, although it is difficult to hone it down when you are aware of the weather and the amount of time you will realistically be out on the course. There is a mandatory kit list, longer for the Expert runners who are likely to be out in darkness hours.
- Thinking the weather could only get better!

**Good decisions**

- Taping my feet. The only blisters I succumbed to were from the Friday!
- Taking my own maps and compass: The GPS wouldn’t have lasted long enough or been reliable enough to navigate by. It was particularly reassuring to have the maps after dark and where the route became a little vague towards Newcastle. By keeping constant awareness of map position, it was possible to retain an encouraging sense of progress at all times (at least until the latter stages when both progress and awareness became a challenge!)
- Not bothering with my rain jacket. After about three rounds of putting the jacket on, overheating, and removing it when the rain briefly eased only to have the downpour resume within minutes, I eventually made the decision that I was drenched anyway and the jacket was doing nothing for me. I decided to leave it off until such a time that wind chill required it for
warmth rather than waterproofing (it remained off thereafter) and this saved much time and irritation.

- Calf guards, I am a definite fan. One pair used throughout the race, and a pair of TED stockings (usually used for DVT prevention) for the 48hrs post race. I had less leg swelling following the race than I remember after my first marathon, and surprisingly little stiffness.
- Avoiding the millionaire’s shortbread! Delicious, and usually my treat of choice, but they looked heavy going and on sampling one at the finish it was a good decision.
- Keep trudging at all costs. The overwhelming desire was to walk for long periods and I found the desire stronger the longer I walked. An immense amount of will power was used to return to running each time, and I found the only way to do it was to set myself limits and count steps walked before returning to running.
- Not changing shoes at the ½ way point.
- Not stopping to take photos: although a shame not to have any keepsakes, I have already drowned one mobile phone on the fells in my time, and the video tells the story better anyway!

I have included a link below to the video posted by one of the Challenger participants. Although the waterlogging had improved by day 2, it still gives a good flavour of the experience. I would definitely recommend the event to others, particularly those who have done Marathons or beyond and are looking for a structured event to push their distances up without demanding navigation.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LTY4g9KkEw