

When Ian and I first did the KIMM a few years ago we got chatting to a couple of guys over Wilf's chilli the evening before the race.

"So have you done the KIMM before?" they asked in a do-you-come-here-often kind of way.

"No" we confessed, "but we've done a few Saunders".

"Oh yes" came the reply, "that's the summer event isn't it? I think you'll find this a lot tougher."

And so it is, normally. But 2004 was a strange year and a very tough Saunders.

There were two decisions we made at the 2004 Saunders that I'm really pleased about. Both were made the night before the race, after reading the dire weather forecast. The first decision was to drop down from the Scafell to the Bowfell class. We'd done the Bowfell a few times and had thought to step up. However, these were not the conditions for it, and besides, we weren't fit enough, again. The second decision was to buy some new over-trousers from Pete Bland. These were not only lighter than my previous pair, but had the added advantage of being windproof and waterproof, both properties lacking in my old pair. The third crucial decision, namely to stay in bed, I later regretted not making.

The day starts reasonable enough after a wet and windy night. We congratulate ourselves on having brought the van. This means we can get ready and eat in the warm and dry. I suspect that if anyone were to ever investigate what vehicle was driven by people retiring from races, it would very rarely be a campervan; starting warm and dry is 90% of the battle. The start is a good distance from the registration and we allow plenty of time for a leisurely walk, there's no point in getting worn out too early.

In the queue for the start at Miners Bridge the heavens open and then, almost immediately, we are off, grabbing the control list and trying to find some shelter to mark our maps. The only problem is that there is no shelter from this downpour and the maps, and us, are getting soaked. After marking the first three controls I suggest we get going, "we can mark the rest later when the rain has stopped". If only we'd known we'd nearly be at the overnight camp before that happened.

The first part of the course takes us up through some mine workings and past a rotting sheep carcass to Crook Beck. From here we leave the track and head over some boggy ground before dropping down to the first control above White Gill; so far, so good. We retrace our steps to Crook Beck and then contour NNE before dropping down into the valley below Low Wether Crag. Here we meet lots of other courses coming straight up the valley. The way ahead is up the steep hillside ahead to a control just over the ridge. After a quiet start everyone is going our way now. I select a low gear and begin the grind that is all too familiar from previous mountain marathons, cursing the rucksack and wishing this was a normal fell race. Being on shared ground with other courses has only one real benefit and that is you feel good that other people are going even slower than yourself.

Eventually I reach the top of the steep ground and look back. Ian has dropped behind and I have a minute or two to read the map before he catches up. Bearings set, it's upwards and onwards, finding the control easily before contouring round to the col between Black Sails and Prison Band. A lot of teams are heading up here, but we drop down and out of the cloud and into the little valley that leads down to Greenburn Beck. Apart from a few rocky sections this is good terrain and we make steady progress to a rapid decent to Three Shire Stone. The wind is ripping through here and another squally shower hits us so we decide to press on despite only having one more control marked on the map. We take the Red Tarn track for a way, heads down away from the driving rain and hail. Hang on a minute! Hail? This is the Saunders, you know, "the summer event", what on earth is going on? Thankfully this doesn't last long and we turn into the wind and head across country towards Cold Pike, which we can't see because it's buried in cloud. The sensible option is to stop now and mark the map with the remaining controls. We do this, but it's cold and we're soon shivering. We don't stop to double check our marking but push on towards the cloud. For the second time today we see some marshals at a control, but once again we're just passing by and it's not ours. Onwards and upwards.

We leave the main track and hit the fence that bisects this hill, unbeknown to most of the walkers who religiously follow the path. From here we head straight for where we think the control should be. The list says "knoll" and that's where we are, but no control. The mist clears momentarily to reveal another knoll 30 meters away, so we head that way, but still no control. Time to study the map again, but it's no good. The best plan we have is to head to the summit and take a bearing from there. At the top we're both feeling the cold. This has stopped being fun and it has turned into a battle to get round the course in one piece. Ian says it's time for those new over-trousers to do their business and we each eat a

couple of tracker bars to fight the onset of hypothermia. The difference is striking and we head off down the slope in search of that elusive control. As we drop past the knolls we notice some other people on a lower knoll away to our left. Damn! We were so close, but about 40m too high, maybe I should get an altimeter before the next race?

From here we head off through the cloud and marsh, aiming for Little Stand. As we get there Ian slips on a wet rock and opens up a nasty gash on his palm. A bit of gritting teeth, some pressure, a splash of the over abundant water and we're off again. We get a good traverse line around Little Stand which saves the scramble over the top, but we drop too much height on the west side and this time we're 40m below the control. Less panic this time though and we find it after a short sweep search. As we get there I hear cries from above. We've been spotted and have led other teams to the control. I curse my bright clothing for a moment before realising my own hypocrisy, after all we've only just benefited from seeing others at the previous control. That's all part of the game on these events.

The next leg is long but obvious. We traverse the pleasant grassy hillside above Mosedale and drop out of the cloud and down to Lingrove Beck. This is probably normally a pleasant little stream, but today it's a raging torrent and we hold on to each other to get across. In the middle Ian misplaces his footing and pulls hard on my shoulder. Unfortunately this is the side I'm carrying the map and it gets a good dunking in the icy water. I should've stowed the map out of the way for the stream crossing, but it's too late now. We press on down to the River Esk, thankfully much more easily forded. We're now both pretty done in and we plod slowly through the tussock grass up the slope on the far side. It's at this point that I find out how bad the map is. When I try to refold it falls apart in my hands. On asking Ian for his map I get a shock. He'd been so cold when we'd stopped to mark the maps that he'd incorrectly marked the next two controls. My decision to press on at the start is coming back to haunt us. Worse still our only copy of the control details is in a soggy mush in my map bag. We're in trouble. Thankfully help is at hand in the form of another team catching us up. We move steadily and manage to keep them in sight as they go past us and head over the hill to the next control. After dibbing I carefully peel back the folds of my map to reveal the location of the next control. We'll use Ian's map for the most part and revert to mine for the short range navigation.

There's a gentle start to the next leg as we follow the track towards Esk Buttress, but the control is on the col far above and it's going to be another hard ascent, now well over 5 hours into the day. There are about four other teams making this climb and although one of them pulls away, we stay in front of the others, doing our battered egos some good. Another knoll mix up on the col ensues as we're over optimistic and just head for the first one we see. However, very little time is lost and we're soon heading down the short slope into the combe below Chambers Crag. This is one of those quiet corners of the Lakes that I've never ventured into before, despite being less than half a mile from the top of Scafell Pike. Even in this weather it's quite idyllic, but the climb out of the other side is brutal and rocky. Eventually we hit the main Scafell Pike track just south west of Broad Crag. We break into a sort of shuffle run which is quickly restricted to an uncomfortable wobble across some wet rocks.

Back on decent track again we stretch our legs and surprise a party of walkers as we head down to Ore Gap. Here we catch a couple of other teams checking their maps. No need for that, I know where we are now and we swing left and head towards Angle Tarn. The map readers overtake us but we catch them on the far side of the tarn as they look at their maps again. We're straight onto the traverse path that heads to Bowfell Buttress and we can see the location of the next control, another knoll! As we get there we see a number of teams coming straight down the scree from Bowfell.

"Was there another way?" asks a speed merchant with a big grin.

"Aye", I reply, "and our way was much better", but he's gone already and doesn't hear me.

The rest of the day is easy route finding, but painful running. Dropping down from the last control (another knoll!) into Mickleden, I'm reminded of our first SLMM here in 2000. The Saturday that year was scorching, but Sunday was thick with cloud and it was chucking it down with rain by the time we got to the finish at Stool End Farm. Today, as usual, Ian's finishing the stronger of the two of us and I try to manage as rapid a shuffle as my stiff legs will allow along the valley path and into the overnight camp.

It's been a long and arduous day and at just over eight and a quarter hours I'm certain we'll be just about last. We check the results board and are surprised to see only two teams listed, however, they did get in an hour before us. The other surprise is that there are no toilets, although we get some

entertainment as these are delivered an hour or so later. Al and Pete trot in a short while later full of the joys of spring (in July), well, that's what you get for working for the NHS (prescription drugs probably). After food, dry clothing and with the improving weather, we're feeling much more sociable. Our mood is further improved by the results board, which shows us in fifth place. It seems it wasn't just us who were inconvenienced by the weather!

Next morning the weather is better and we're more optimistic about the day ahead. In the queue for the loo I bump into John Preston, my partner from the MNC. He's doing the Kirkfell class with a new partner, Heath. They had a really rough day on Saturday, eventually finishing after just over 10 hours.

There's no chasing start due to the small numbers of finishers, so we're all off en masse. Our first control is on Blake Rigg and there's a long line of runners heading straight up the hillside. This is the worst thing about the Saunders and I'm keen to avoid the game of follow-my-leader. Instead we stick to the lower level path just above the out of bounds area. All is going well until we hit a crag that drops away beneath our feet, blocking the way ahead. A quick scout around doesn't show an easy way round so I throw my sack down and climb down after it. Ian finds an easier way round higher up and we meet up again on the far side. We start running again only for me to be splashed by Lucazade Sport! Dropping my sack has forced the end off my drinks tube and there's now nothing to keep the juice in. I take off my sack and backtrack to locate the tube end, but to no avail. A few minutes later we're off again, me without any liquid, only to realise that I'd dropped our (now only) map.

Backtrack again and a quick search locates the map hiding in the bracken. I'm really annoyed with myself now and we set off again at a faster pace. However, we're soon slowed by the ascent of Blake Rigg and then by yet another knoll farce. This is soon sorted and we're off on the best part of the whole event, a super fast descent down to the Wrynose Pass road. Turn left then right across country to cross the Brathay and Greenburn Beck. There's a steady climb from here; Ian's wheels have come off and he's trailing badly. We've got a much bigger climb coming up so there's only one thing for it. We empty pretty much the entire contents of Ian's sack into mine and head up towards Wetherlam. Ian is still finding it hard, but probably better than he would with a full sack.

It's a bizarre aspect of the human psyche that you feel good about yourself if you can out perform someone else, even if, as in this case, it happens to be one's partner. I'm totally invigorated and almost bounce up to the plateau. Ian drags himself on valiantly but is now feeling sick. I'm worried about our slow progress, particularly as we've been caught up by John and Heath (who, as it happens, are having a much better day). We move on slowly heading down and round Grey Friar in a veritable procession. The herd sweeps on and I go with the flow until Ian points out a manned control about quarter of a mile to our right, "is that ours?"

"I don't think so", but I'm not sure and study the map a moment while Ian trots on. "Hang on, I think it might be!" We head for the control and I run ahead to save Ian the extra effort if I'm wrong after all. It is ours and I'm very pleased one of us was awake enough to see it. We're feeling pretty chuffed with ourselves as we head off towards Seathwaite Tarn and watch a number of other teams doubling back to pick up the same control, having missed it in the flow.

The run down to the dam is great and the dam itself makes good respite from the ups and downs. It doesn't last long though and we're soon climbing up towards Green How Top in another herd of teams. Many of these head left to another manned control.

"Is that ours?" asks Ian hopefully.

"Not this time mate, we've got to go quite a bit higher yet."

We plod on up, going higher than it looked from below until we eventually hit the control, exactly on bearing despite some indecision on the way. From here there's a choice I present to Ian, we can go round the Walna Scar Road, which means no more height gain, or we can head directly over the top of Coniston Old Man. Ian looks at the map and chooses the direct way. It's not too bad, although pretty chilly on the summit in the cloud, and we're soon heading down the tourist route with as much speed and grace as we can generate at the end of two hard days on the hills.

The last control is manned and I surprise the marshal by telling what a fantastic sight he is. "No one's ever said that before" he grins. But there's no time for pleasantries, we've got a time to record. A gate that won't open slows us only momentarily before we're pegging it down the last few hundred yards of track and back to Miners Bridge. Five hours twenty four minutes, about thirty minutes down on the

other teams around us overnight and we've dropped to ninth. Most of the time was lost on the first control of the day, plus some more on the climb to Wetherlam. Still, it's not a bad placing and we're just glad to get round when so many have dropped out. At the finish we hear of the true scale of the number of retirees, which only makes Wilf's food taste even better.

I can't say I enjoyed the Saunders in 2004, but we did it. The memory smarts right through the summer and I decide not to do the KIMM. I understand it was sunny in Wales in the last weekend of October, but then it would be, wouldn't it?