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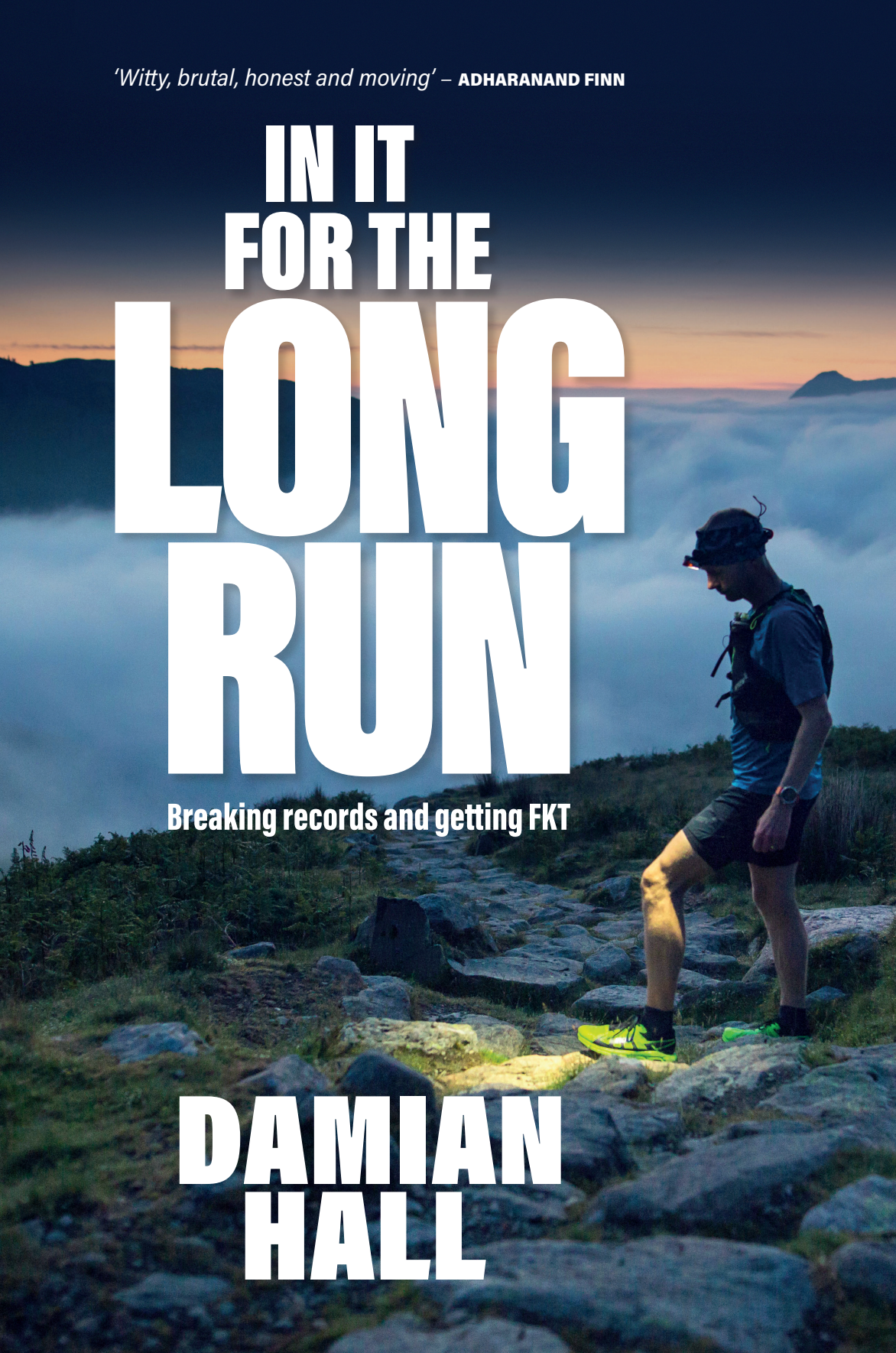
IN IT FOR THE LONG RUN

Breaking records and getting FKT



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Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield
www.v-publishing.co.uk

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For Barbara Hall and Mark Townsend.
Thank you.

CONTENTS

1 CHALLENGING TIMES

'His legs swelled prodigiously.'

I've never wanted anything so badly. Nothing in the whole world is more appealing right now than the simple but elusive pleasure of ceasing forward motion – ceasing all motion – and crumpling to the ground, to lie in that seductively soft and invitingly squishy, that irresistibly luxurious, bog.

Oh to allow my leaden eyelids to close, to be vertical and limp in that peaty swamp. As I shuffle pathetically through the dark, I gaze longingly at the dirty, wet ground, willing it to hoover me up. Even just for a fleeting moment. Oh, please let me sleep. Beautiful, lovely, not-being-awake sleep.

It's about 4 a.m. and I've been on my feet for two days and one and a half nights and have run 180 miles. I'm trying to break a record for running 261 miles on the Pennine Way. Everything was brill. But now everything is less brill.

My legs are disobedient lumps of mahogany. My feet abandoned me in the last bog. My backside growls at me (not like that – well, actually, like that too). My … I'm too tired to list my other ailments. There's a heavy monster on my shoulders, pressing me ever downwards. The powerful urge to flick the switch to off is overriding everything. Something we do every day without thinking has been banned, and has therefore become so despairingly appealing. I'll never neglect you again, sleep! I've always loved you! Honestly, I've always thought you were wittier and more attractive than boring old, criminally overrated wakefulness.

But a very little part of my very little mind knows that if I snooze, I may well lose. Plus Nicky Spinks said I can't.

Who knew running 261 miles would be a little bit difficult?

* * *

I was obsessed with football (in particular Arsenal Football Club). I was obsessed with the Heroic Age of Polar Exploration (in particular Captain Robert Falcon Scott). I was obsessed with 1990s Aussie popstress Natalie Imbruglia (I can't go into that for legal reasons). And I'm obsessed with running. In particular, long distances in lumpy places – bimbles, if you will.

Only one of those obsessions has led me to routinely rub Vaseline all over my bathing-suit area (yes, *all* over), repeatedly bonk in woods in the middle of the night (significantly less pleasurable than it may sound to the lay-ear), and eat alarming amounts of custard for breakfast.

But I truly feel sorry for people who've never done those things. I also feel sorry for people who've never face-planted into a bog or had a power sob, for people who have a full set of civilised-looking toenails. I feel sorry for people who don't have alarms stored for 5 a.m. and 4 a.m., for people who can't use the words 'disappointed' or 'happy' without placing the brilliantly versatile adjective 'super' in front. I feel sorry for people who don't know the difference between a DNF, a DNS and the MdS (is this getting TDS?), or what FKT stands for. I feel sorry for people who don't run.

This is my horribly self-indulgent story about my often misguided but ultimately life-changing midlife-crisis adventures in ultramarathon running, where I went from completing a first marathon dressed as a toilet to a Great Britain international trail runner (at forty) in four years. And semi-accidentally broke a few records too.

This book is about the glorious if occasionally hurty joy of running long distances in lumpy places (and bogs), and the attraction of doing so outside of organised events. Running challenges, speed records and fastest known times (FKTs) may look like they offer the same thing, but can actually offer something very different. But why do so many people repeatedly bash themselves up doing impossible-sounding endurance

challenges? It must be more than masochism, social media humblebrags and the chance to knock back double rations of Tunnock's bars. *Mustn't it?*

'Ultramarathon' is an American word accredited to ultrarunning pioneer Ted Corbitt in 1957, to describe footraces longer than the classic marathon distance of 26.2 miles. Technically an ultra can be 26.3 miles (though the shortest are usually 50k), all the way up to the Sri Chinmoy Self-Transcendence 3,100-Mile Race (the distance isn't even the main insanity; runners go repeatedly around the same block in New York). A few are timed events, such as twenty-four-hour races where you see how many miles you can run around a track. A few are on roads (yuk). Some are in deserts, in jungles, in the Arctic. But the very best ones, I've found, are around 100 miles and they take place in mountains (aka lumpy places). But this book should come with a warning, because this stuff is seriously addictive. I was warned too! But I didn't listen.

It's a niche sport, but lots of people do this stuff, and have been doing it for a very long time. Ultra-distance challenges are inherently testing, but they aren't as difficult as they sound (you can hike lots, eat lots and chat to lots of like-minded loons). And despite – no, partly *because of* – the distances involved, it seems to make people inexplicably happy. But the best news is that you don't necessarily need to sign up for an event. You can pick a place and time, grab a mate and have a DIY adventure. And that's primarily what these things are: safe adventures. And they can be life-changingly meaningful.

* * *

When you next overhear someone in a pub say 'We're just not designed to run marathons', feel free to tell them that they couldn't be more wrong. Also feel free to ignore them and just sit there smugly in the knowledge that you know the opposite is true. (That's probably what I'd do.)

You see, running literally made us who we are today. It made us human. Only eating, sleeping and indulging in consensual team push-ups are more quintessential human activities than running.

Around seven million years ago our ape ancestors started coming down from the trees and turning into bipeds. But why did they give up speed,

upper-body power and greater safety in the trees, in exchange for what on the surface looked like becoming slow and wimpy? Also, why do we have such little hair compared to other primates? In the whole history of vertebrates (good name for a book publisher, that), we're the only running biped that's tail-less. We have ninety-five per cent of the same DNA as chimps. Yet noticeably we have an Achilles tendon and they don't. And a comparatively huge gluteus maximus (even if physios are forever decrying their weakness). Our feet are arched, while chimps' are flat. Chimps don't have a nuchal ligament, which helps hold the head up high. Humans possess an extraordinary number of eccrine glands – between two and five million – that can produce up to twelve litres of sweat a day.

Even if you haven't read the *Fever Pitch* of running, Christopher McDougall's *Born to Run*, you've likely guessed where this is going. All these idiosyncratic parts of our contemporary anatomy evolved to our advantage and that advantage allows us to run a long way.

The ability to run long distances to obtain food, via persistence hunting antelopes on the African savannah, enabled us to thrive as a species, to outlast the Neanderthals and other creatures with bigger claws and fangs, argue American biologist Dennis Bramble and anthropologist Daniel Lieberman. Antelopes were faster, but after a while they needed to cool down, so they slowed or stopped. We weren't as fast, but because of world-class temperature regulation, we could keep going, following an antelope for hours. Finally the inadequate sweater (sounds like something you get for Christmas) would overheat, we would catch up and tuck in our serviettes …

We're the world's best sweaters. It's our secret weapon. (Explain that to any non-runners in your household who complain about the honk of your freshly discarded running kit. Actually, don't bother. It doesn't get you off the hook.) Travelling on two limbs instead of four helps optimise oxygen supply. Over time, we lost almost all of our fur, to sweat even more effectively. The new supply of protein enabled our brains to expand, until they were seven times larger than any other mammal's. We evolved as a species, to be able to run. And running helped us evolve as a species.

Until the evil chair (beware the chair) got invented. Then things went mostly downhill.

Originally all humans would have been runners. It wasn't a hobby our ancestors picked up in their mid-thirties then started getting on everyone else's nerves going on about how amazing it is. It was how we got food, transportation and a survival aid. Ten thousand years ago, though, agriculture blossomed and there was less need to run for our supper. Running instead became the act of the messenger (a prestigious job in many cultures), the soldier, the sportsperson and the, er, king.

Rameses II (1303–1213 BC), pharaoh of Ancient Egypt, had to run alone in front of huge crowds before his coronation to prove himself worthy of the throne, then repeat the feat thirty years later (and every few years after that) to clarify he was still 'fit' for the job. But that was nothing compared to fellow Egyptian king Shulgi. A hymn from the time alludes to him running between holy feasts in Nippur and Ur and back again, an estimated 200 miles in twenty-seven hours. Which seems a little too fast to be believable (if it's not on Strava …), but it might just be the original fastest known time (FKT).

Running was central to Greek mythology, with gods Atalanta and Achilles both heralded for their athletic prowess. The Greeks of course gave us the Olympics, and one ancient race (although not ultra-distance) had full armour and large shields as mandatory kit, so heavy they could barely run. So in that respect very much a precursor for the Spine Race.

The early foot races clearly weren't testing enough for some. Ageus of Argos won the 4.6-kilometre Olympic Dolichos race in 328 BC and afterwards ran sixty miles home to tell his folks. In a display of shonky one-upmanship, the likes of which we didn't see again till 2020 in the Pennines, Drymos of Epidauros also ran home after a win, notching up some eighty miles.

According to Edward S. Sears's excellent *Running Through the Ages*, Spartan runner Anystis and Alexander the Great's courier (or messenger, a full-time runner) Philonides, ran from Sicyon to Elis together in a day, some 148 miles.

The first great FKT controversy came from an ultramarathon. A mixture of myth, poetry and history tell how Athenian messenger Pheidippides

hot-footed it 140 miles from Athens to Sparta before the Battle of Marathon to ask for help. Over time, this version has been muddled with another story about a messenger running twenty-five miles from Athens to Marathon before possibly falling down dead (lack of electrolytes, surely), which inspired the birth of the marathon at the Modern Olympics in 1896. Edward S. Sears labels the Sparta version 'historically sound' (and it inspired the Spartathlon ultramarathon of the same route), adding that if the Olympics had paid attention to history rather than poetry, a 140-mile ultramarathon would have been included.

People have been running long distances ever since we came down from the trees. From Inca messengers up in the Andes to Chinese ultramarathon-running soldiers and Scotland's Highland Games (which date to the eleventh century and likely witnessed the birth of hill/fell running as we know it), everyone was at it. Organised events were probably a rarity rather than the norm.

Fast-forward to the late-seventeenth century and pedestrianism was a wondrously crackpot pastime of heroic lunacy and magnificent skulduggery. Modern ultramarathon running (and race walking) was born from running and walking contests that made front-page news. Professional 'peds' would run, walk or use a combination of the two (much like today's ultra 'runners') to attempt absurd feats (and end up with absurd feet) in organised contests. These might be outlandish individual wagers to travel on foot from, say, Paris to Moscow. Industrialisation brought leisure time and disposable income, and huge crowds gathered to watch, placed huge bets and helped turn these eccentric sportspeople into celebrities. Pedestrianism was both the first professional sport and the original international spectator sport.

Long before The Proclaimers sang about walking 500 miles and 500 more, fellow Scot Robert Barclay Allardyce (of the same Barclays who would build a fossil-fuel-supporting banking empire) did just that. In the summer of 1809 some 10,000 spectators gathered on Newmarket Heath to see if the 'Celebrated Pedestrian' could walk 1,000 miles in 1,000 hours, ticking off at least one an hour for forty-two days and nights. Total betting reached £40 million in today's money, including a wager by the Prince of Wales.

Barclay's sage strategy was to walk a mile at the end of each hour, then another one straight after, on loops of a half-mile course, allowing himself maximum rest before his next outing. Predictably the twenty-nine-year-old's pace decreased, from fifteen-minute miles to twenty-one-minute miles, and his weight dropped from eighty-five kilograms to seventy kilograms. As the days passed, Barclay become so lethargic supporters stuck needles in him to try and keep him alert, and fired pistols by his ears (which is exactly what I could have done with in the Pennines in July 2020). 'His legs swelled prodigiously,' reported a spectator. But remarkably, Barclay finished and won his bet (the equivalent of nearly £800,000 today), while his achievement spawned a competitive walking craze in Britain and later the US.

After losing a bet about who would win the 1860 US election, Edward Payson Weston's forfeit was to walk 478 miles from Boston to Washington DC, in time for the new president's inauguration. Twenty-one-year-old Weston, described as a man 'unencumbered with self-doubt', set off on his odyssey that would demand almost fifty miles per day for ten days. He was immediately hauled over by the police, who wanted to discuss the small matter of some debts he owed. But he sweet-talked his way out of a cell and was doing very well, till he became topographically embarrassed (to be fair, signage and maps were nothing like today) near Philadelphia and went twelve miles the wrong way, arriving in Washington four hours late for Abraham Lincoln's inauguration. However, the Wily Wobbler (as Weston would later be nicknamed due to his wobbly gait) did get to meet the new president, who, tickled by the tale, offered to pay his train fare home.

Weston realised walking for wagers could be a full-time living. He spent eight years touring Europe, controversially chewing coca leaves (the first known instance of doping?), and attempted to walk 2,000 miles around the shires of England within 1,000 hours – which he only narrowly missed. At the age of seventy, he speed-walked from San Francisco to New York, some 3,900 miles, in just over 100 days.

Weston lectured audiences on the great health benefits of exercise, warning that these new-fangled automobiles were making people lazy.

In a cruel twist, he was injured by a New York City taxicab in 1927 and never walked again.

The first notable achievement of Norway's Mensen Ernst's twenty-five-year pedestrian career was in 1819 when he ran seventy-two miles from London to Portsmouth in nine hours. It was just a warm-up. Ernst's reputation mushroomed with a thirteen-day, 1,500-mile journey from Paris to Moscow in 1832. The following year he travelled 1,577 miles from Munich to Nauplion, carrying letters from the Bavarian king to his son Otto, King of Greece. Ernst claimed to have been robbed of his money and maps, arrested as a spy and imprisoned for two days, but still managed to complete his ultra-distance challenge in twenty-four days. Next he travelled from Constantinople to Calcutta and back. This time he was reportedly shot at, robbed, and bitten by a snake, as he covered the 5,000-mile round trip in fifty-nine days, averaging a very impressive eighty-five miles a day.

Wait! Eighty-five miles a day? And what was that earlier? The distance from Paris to Moscow, as the crow flies, is 1,500 miles, so that's … 107 miles a day. Not impossible. But very, very unlikely.

Norwegian author Bredo Berntsen found numerous flaws in claims made about Ernst in his biography *Des Stauermannes Mensen Ernst*. But some of it probably happened. And his claims weren't that unlike some of the ones we still hear today.

Sadly, the evolution of the bicycle from a penny farthing around the end of the nineteenth century led to the end of the pedestrianism era, as six-day bike races replaced six-day ped matches as a favoured spectator sport. 'The races went from three or four miles an hour, to ten or fifteen,' says Matthew Algeo, author of *Pedestrianism: When Watching People Walk Was America's Favorite Spectator Sport*. 'And the crashes were much more spectacular.' How could the Wily Wobbler compete with that? But the pedestrian spirit, the idea of attempting a ludicrously long self-powered challenge, outside of an organised event, most definitely endures (pun intended).

At least as far back as the 1860s, 'adventurous individuals, and sometimes groups, [were] testing themselves in the Lake District fells and

achieving ever more impressive "walking rounds",' writes fell-running historian Steve Chilton in *The Round*. An 1864 round (i.e. circuit) by Rev. J.M. Elliot of Cambridge included nine of the highest summits in eight and a half hours, the genesis of the twenty-four-hour concept (how many summits can be reached in that timescale). The criteria were established in 1904 and the Lake District's 24-Hour Fell Record is still going strong, with Kim Collison stretching the record to seventy-eight in 2020. There were and still are many other rounds too, but the twenty-four-hour version had the most appeal. It's the genesis of the Bob Graham Round and Britain's thriving long-distance off-road running culture.

In 1871 hiking brothers John and Robert Naylor completed the first recorded JOGLE (John o'Groats to Land's End: top to bottom of Britain), averaging twenty-five miles a day over nine weeks and 1,372 miles. There's always been natural crossover between walking and running. They're part of the same movement pattern, and both pedestrianism and contemporary race-walking authorities have struggled at times to define the difference. For the distance runner, a hike can be a deliberate preservation tactic, sometimes weariness or laziness, sometimes it's just too steep. Walking records have organically turned into running records. (And later when I'm humblebragging about running 100 miles, remember that I usually hiked a good chunk of it – the steeper the 'running' challenge, the more time spent not running.)

The first recorded twenty-four-hour traverse of the Welsh 3,000s (then thirteen, now fourteen, peaks above 3,000 feet) dates to 1919 or 1920, by members of the redoubtable Rucksack Club and the legendary Eustace Thomas. Other 'excursions' around that time included Derwent Watershed (37.5 miles in eleven hours and thirty-nine minutes) and Colne to Doveholes (fifty-one miles in seventeen hours and fifty-seven minutes, 'including wait for meals at various pubs of about two hours!', record old Rucksack Club journals). And in 1922, when Thomas was over fifty, he broke the Lake District 24-Hour Fell Record by covering 66.5 miles with 25,000 feet of ascent in twenty-two hours.

Thomas's time wasn't bettered until 1932. Keswick hotelier and mountain guide Bob Graham didn't look like a natural athlete. He was

short and stocky, but also teetotal and vegetarian, with excellent knowledge of Lakeland fells. The story goes that in 1932, to celebrate his forty-second birthday by extending the 24-Hour Fell Record, he ran and hiked a 140-mile circuit of forty-two fells in twenty-three hours and thirty-nine minutes, eating fruit pastilles and boiled eggs. And people didn't believe him.

He did do it. But he was in fact forty-three, it wasn't his birthday and the round is nearer sixty-six miles, with 27,000 feet of ascent (Everest is 29,032 feet). The rest is true, even if the contemporary BG route is closer to a 1960 run by Alan Heaton, with four substitute summits after Graham's were deemed insufficient. In preparation, Graham is said to have walked each fell barefoot, to toughen up his skin and save his 'gym shoes' (this was before inov-8 or the barefoot running craze). On the big day he fuelled on bread and butter, strong tea, milk and fruit (nutrition hasn't advanced as much as Big Sports Nutrition would like us to think). He walked the uphills and ran the downhills 'with extraordinary speed', wearing shorts, 'tennis shoes' and a 'pyjama jacket' (again, judging by recent designs, neither has Big Sportswear). I like to think Bob really was wearing his Thomas the Tank Engine pyjamas.

There are reams of rounds, long-distance trails and established challenges for hikers and runners all over the UK. Naturally, some carry more weight than others. JOGLE/LEJOG is at least ten days of fighting smelly cars on dirty roads, which makes the record all the more impressive. The National Three Peaks Challenge (summiting the highest peaks in Scotland, Wales and England inside twenty-four hours) is something of a noisy fundraising jamboree, an entry point for outdoor challenges. It has rarely attracted top-level athletes, probably because you spend more time in a car than on a hill, though fell-running deity Joss Naylor did it in 1971.

The Bob Graham is many times tougher than the tri-country drive. It's the holy grail of Britain's running challenges, with around 2,500 completions by the end of 2020, and likely as many again unsuccessful attempts. The challenge is well known in wider running circles too. London Marathon creator, Olympian and Roger-Bannister-pacer Chris

Brasher attempted it thrice, all unsuccessfully. Ultragods Scott Jurek and Kilian Jornet have both completed a Bob. 'Quite possibly one of the most difficult courses I've done in my life,' said US star Jurek after his BG, which he accomplished with just sixteen minutes to spare in 2014. 'But so beautiful.' The Bob is the Big One.

A picture has sometimes been painted where non-race records/FKTs have only recently sprung out of the racing scene. But as you can see, if anything it's the other way around. The canon of UK long-distance running records is the JOGLE/LEJOG; the Big Three 24-hour rounds: the Bob Graham plus the Paddy Buckley and Charlie Ramsay Rounds (the Welsh and Scottish equivalents); the Lake District 24-Hour Fell Record, the two Munros records (the complete round of 282 and the 24-hour record); and the Wainwrights (a 325-mile, 214-peak challenge in the Lakes). Oh yeah, and the 261-mile Pennine Way, our oldest National Trail. It's open to debate. But to me they're the ones that matter. Though there are lots more. And if you don't like the look of any of them, you can just create your own.

Much as we like to think all runners are unwaveringly wholesome folk who'd sooner take up triathlon than tell a fib, this stuff does need some kind of policing. So are these Guinness World Records? The short answer is no – but they are records. The longer answer is that individual fell runners have rarely bothered getting their records verified by Guinness, though Fell Runners Association (FRA) long-distance-records custodian and serial fell-record-breaker himself Martin Stone used to submit some. It's a load of fussy paperwork, which is hardly foolproof, can take months to ratify and seems archaic now we have things like Strava. Plus the Bob Graham Club (BGC) and FRA are scene arbiters, making Guinness seem irrelevant to the average fell-botherer.

The BGC have a clear set of rules and verification criteria on their website, which include another person confirming they witnessed you reach each peak (hence why they don't publicly acknowledge solo attempts or records). Charlie Ramsay and Paddy Buckley maintain completion lists for their respective rounds (the rules do differ slightly and the Paddy has no website, other than the generic if useful *gofar.org.uk*).

For government-funded National Trails such as the Pennine Way and the South West Coast Path, each route's association is usually happy to play the de facto historian, but might struggle if they have to be the judge.

Record claims for LEJOG/JOGLE do tend to covet Guinness, though, as there's no other obvious arbitration body. So it is all a bit hotchpotch. And then there's that American phrase …

In the early 2000s, US ultrarunners Buzz Burrell and Pete Bakwin found themselves frustrated trying to find the fastest times for trails they were attempting to set speed records on. 'It was hard to figure out what the record actually was,' Pete says in Ally Beaven's quite-good-in-places *Broken*. 'Even when we got in touch with the person who probably held the record, he couldn't give us a straight answer. I didn't like the vagueness, and set up a simple website to record these types of speed records on trails, and to record the stories surrounding them.

'The phrase *fastest known time* was something I heard around. Buzz was using it back in the 1990s, as were a few other people. It seemed a natural fit because we didn't necessarily know what the *actual* fastest time was, only what we were able to find out about.' The FKT initialism gained traction in the US, then spread across the Atlantic. Even if you won't find anyone running a Bob Graham FKT (more anon).

Buzz and Pete co-founded *fastestknowntime.com*, which has increasingly become the authority on such things, both a database and rulebook for off-road running records and occasional arbiter of disputed claims, even if it's led to some Americanisation of British terms and rules, the most basic being: record your run on a GPS device.

'It's obviously a bit easier to set FKTs in the US,' says GB ultrarunner, coach and impudent controversialist Robbie Britton. 'Because in the UK we're got all these wonderful athletes from the seventies and eighties who set these great standards. But equally there's been a lot of improvements in the form of sports nutrition, training theory, kit and so on that might help the most recent generations. Take the Pennine Way: it's basically a tarmac path compared to when Mike Cudahy was first to run it under three days, right?'

There were no GPS watches or Strava when Mensen Ernst and

Pheidippides were making outlandish claims. There were in April 2016, though, when Shropshire man Mark Vaz claimed a new LEJOG record of seven days, eighteen hours and forty-five minutes, knocking a stunning thirty-one hours off the previous best. An incredible achievement (even if he didn't use a tracker). According to his social media posts, Vaz must have run the 156 miles from Edinburgh to Inverness in twenty-four hours and twenty minutes. Not technically impossible. But very, very improbable. And after a very short rest, he would have had to follow that up with a 119-mile run to John o'Groats in just under twenty hours. Again not impossible, but absolutely remarkable, especially coming at the end of multiple days of 100 miles and from an athlete we'd never heard of.

'For me it's simply unbelievable,' wrote respected ultrarunner Gary Kiernan on website *Run247.com*. 'If ratified, [the new record] would rival some of the greatest feats of human endurance ever seen. To say this is an unbelievable feat is something of an understatement … He is a middle of the pack social runner. Some of the best have come close to the world record but never beaten it. For him to do it is inconceivable.'

'It would have been close to beating the greatest runner ever, Yiannis Kouros, and that is not happening anytime soon. It just undermines the sport that we love,' Rob Young told the *Shropshire Star*. The *Marathon Man* author was looking to run across the US and break a record of his own (ahem).

After being hassled online, Vaz finally owned up to his skulduggery in a defiant, semi-coherent Facebook post. It felt like a seminal moment for FKT scrutiny and community policing. People had certainly cheated before, but because of the high profile of the record and his fibbing being so brutally exposed in the Social Media Age, it was big news in the UK ultrarunning community. The start of a new era for records/FKTs. And the creation of a limited-use new verb: to Vaz it.

In most cases, both pre- and post-Vaz, the running community has a decent idea whether an individual runner is capable of a claim they make. People don't just buy a pair of daps and break the Pennine Way record. But the Vaz moment felt like the end of an era of innocence. There used to be a lot more trust in the world. Maybe it was misplaced?

During Dan Lawson's two attempts at the JOGLE/LEJOG record, the previous best, set by Andi Rivett in 2002, came under scrutiny. 'It is, alone, his only world class performance in a career of pretty average ultrarunning,' reported *fastrunning.com* (a site, it should be noted, co-founded by Dan's good friend Robbie Britton; though I agree Rivett's run looks dodge). Though the 2002 record had been verified by Guinness, on very little proof, lots about it doesn't add up. Dan is world class at this stuff, European 24-Hour Champion, and he couldn't get close on two attempts. 'How can someone with no pedigree beat a record by eleven per cent at their first attempt and then retire back into obscurity?' asked *fastrunning.com*. Guinness have been petitioned to annul Rivett's 'record'.

When I first heard Rob Young's record attempt to run across America being questioned, I felt for him. I'd just finished running the South West Coast Path over eleven days and empathised with the horror of working yourself into the ground only to be fearful you might not be believed. Facebook was abuzz with rumours his tracker had been recording his support vehicle's progress (as he rested in it), rather than his. I was able to chat to Rob on the phone in New York for a magazine story, just after he stopped, apparently due to injury. Rob has a tragic backstory and a youthful enthusiasm it's hard not to fall for. Unlike Vaz, he was known as a solid ultrarunner. He had good answers to my questions, but verbally squirmed after each of the three times I asked that he share his GPS data to prove his innocence. Two independent academics later adjudged he had cheated. It felt really quite sad.

In July 2020, in an event that threatened to break our very small corner of the internet, Sabrina Verjee was ahead of Paul Tierney's record for the Wainwrights Round for four days. Until she developed a knee problem and struggled to descend the fells. She continued, but with physical assistance from supporters. Some happily helped her move downhill, but some wouldn't, on ethical grounds. Eventually her pace fell irretrievably behind the men's record, but impressively she still reached Moot Hall, six days, seventeen hours and fifty-one minutes after she started out, ostensibly as the first woman to complete the Wainwrights.

There was a good deal of media excitement and a new record was widely reported. Sabrina went on ITV talking about her run, saying of previous Wainwright record holder and fell omni-deity Joss Naylor, 'I think he was impressed that I beat his time.' However, senior fell-running figures explained that they didn't feel it appropriate for her to claim a record because of the significant physical assistance she benefitted from. Behind-the-scenes discussions continued and three days after arriving at Moot Hall, Sabrina unclaimed the record in a Facebook post that started, 'It's not a record' (her quotation marks), adding that she 'completed the Wainwrights round to my own satisfaction'.

'She completed the Wainwrights,' says Martin Stone. 'But not in a style that could be considered for a record.' In September 2020, Mel Steventon became the first woman to complete the Wainwrights in a continuous journey without physical assistance, in thirteen days and twelve hours. The Bob Graham Club, which archives Wainwright Round completions, lists Mel's run, but not Sabrina's. 'I have a lot of respect for Sabrina,' says Nicky Spinks. 'I think it's a shame the events happened as they did.'

'I never tried to conceal that I was being physically assisted,' Sabrina told me. 'I was not in a race and there were no written rules. I told media I wasn't claiming a record, but they didn't report that. My motivations are different to some people's. I've never been motivated to "take a record", really. For some, the record is the be all and end all, but for me it's a token gesture of recognition.'

In the October 2020 issue of *The Fellrunner*, an influential magazine that goes out to 8,000-plus FRA members, Martin clarified the guidelines: 'To be clear, record attempts by individuals should be without physical support provided by pacers while the contender is moving, unless the contender intends to retire.'

The sport of long-distance mountain/fell/hill/bog running, or ultra-distance FKTs if you insist, has no international governing body or universally agreed rules, though you could argue that a certain code of ethics is widely understood. But that Wild West feel is part of the appeal. It's an adventure. It'll make you happy, I promise.

As of January 2021, 7,600 global FKTs had been registered on *fastestknowntime.com*. There are many reasons why personal challenges/records/FKTs have mushroomed in popularity (not just because a virus stole our races in 2020), which is what this book's trying to explore.

Before we go on, another word from Martin. 'Call me an old fart,' he wrote in *The Fellrunner*, 'but I really dislike the [initialism] FKT with a vengeance. What happened to the good old mountain running record? I accept that FKT is quite a descriptive way of describing something you're not 100 per cent sure is correct or true, but if an achievement is clearly a record, then let's call it a record – not yet another term that we've adopted from the States. We have our own heritage, history, way of doing things and describing them. Brits have been chasing records in the mountains for more than 150 years. FKTs have only been around for maybe twenty years. End of rant!'

Perhaps this is British running's version of Britpop?

Indeed there was a horribly pregnant pause after I first used the word in conversation with Nicky Spinks … Most fell runners interviewed in this book don't like the initialism.

So should FKTs get FKTed? The problem is, some runner-writers rather enjoy using juvenile puns.