

Spine Challenger 'Fun Run'

Preface: This race was tough, certainly the toughest I've done. I am however acutely aware that it wasn't even the toughest race on the Pennine Way that week. That doesn't in any way lessen the sense of achievement I have gotten from finishing it, but it does provide some very immediate perspective when thinking, and writing, about the challenges of my journey. This is especially so when you're dot-watching your own clubmate finish the tougher race long after you've returned to normal life. Alan is an impressive human being, of that there is no doubt.

Not a Stage Race

My last race report was about the Pyrenees Stage Run from September 2019. I entered it having found 'luxurious' stage racing to be a really fun race format, especially compared to many ultras I'd done that I'd endured rather than enjoyed. The PSR did not disappoint and has become the highlight of my ultra 'career' to date, the benchmark by which all other races will be judged.

What I conveniently failed to mention in that report was that I had by then already entered this little race called the Spine Challenger. It's broadly similar to the PSR but you swap sunshine, beautiful scenery and a bed each night for wind & rain, darkness and naps in public toilets. What's not to like? On paper it's not a race I would expect to enjoy much and I frequently questioned why I'd entered it, but it never occurred to me I wouldn't be on the start line. And so at 8am on the 11th January I set off, on a journey of the first 108 miles of the Pennine Way, with more than a little self-discovery along the way. So



Goggles and poles – just the skis missing

how does the Spine Challenger experience compare to the PSR one? Read on to find out.

If covering 100+ miles isn't already a pretty big undertaking, there are a number of other factors that add to the challenge. All the kit I was carrying – most of it just to meet the minimum requirements – weighed over 7kg before any water. The mid-January timing means 15+ hours of darkness per day and some type of inclement weather, the nature of which varies year to year. The course covers a mixture of terrain that includes hills but also significant sections with tricky underfoot conditions. Support and checkpoints are minimal while course marking is non-existent so careful navigation is required; it is really intended as an event where self-sufficiency is key. To view it as an ultra race is to underestimate it, it's much more like an expedition.



All the gear and no idea

46 hours. That's how long it took me to go from Edale to Hawes. As you'd expect, a lot happens over a race that takes so long, which provides plenty fodder for a race report like this. I did start writing a blow-by-blow account of the race, but on reflection I decided it actually wasn't that interesting, especially as even I was having to look at the map to refresh my memory of where I'd been. I've therefore opted for a slightly different approach to detailing the key moments from the race, as can be seen on the next page.

Spine Challenger 2020 – Colin Russell

Cam Road – misty but feeling good on home stretch

Horton – so close to end but two hours sleep taken for mental reset

Checkpoint 1.5 – more blister treatment

Pitstop at Gargrave Co-op – panic purchase of boiled eggs and pain au chocolat, I still ate them though

Lothersdale support point – welcome hot drink

Working hard to stay with a small group – manage for two hours before fading

Darkness and horizontal heavy rain arrive together – authentic Spine conditions unleashed

Start. Dry and mild but very windy on tops

Finish. Dark and wet but in good spirits

Pen Y Ghent descent – agonisingly slow – 6793rd out of 6871 on Strava

Ascending Fountains Fell just before dusk

I thought the checkpoint was at Malham Cove – morale very low when I find I still have two miles still to go

Long section of muddy fields and tarmac – no respite for tired body and tender feet

Dawn arrives, along with heavy rain

Moving well in mild conditions - just a base layer needed

Checkpoint 1 – one hour's sleep, food and blister treatment. And oh, is my knee supposed to look like that?

Moving well but run out of water so risked a dodgy low-level stream

Knee and rock make contact. Ouch.

Kinder Downfall – falling upwards today





Kinder Upfall/Downfall

Sliding Doors

As the previous page hopefully illustrates, this race proved challenging. Not that I can complain about that as you know exactly what you're signing up for when you enter it. Reflecting back on the race, it's clear that while all my previous experience was a huge factor in finishing it, I'm not naïve enough to believe I would always have reached Hawes.

I have wondered whether I would have quit the race had some things, many of them outside of my control, happened slightly differently. For example, I was fortunate enough to leave both Checkpoint 1 and 1.5 in good weather, but perhaps I wouldn't have been quite so keen had the weather been bad. More worryingly, when the rain arrived late on day one I hesitated more than I should have in putting on my waterproof trousers, almost forgetting staying warm and dry trumps everything in this sort of race.

During the race itself I did wonder at times whether I would finish. It wasn't that I was close to saying 'I quit', more just that the finish seemed so far away and I was so exhausted and fed up of the race at some points. By far the best 'opportunity' I had to quit the race was when I arrived at Hebden Bridge and saw the size of my knee. The medics eventually decided there was minimal risk to me continuing as long as I wasn't in pain, but if I had quit who wouldn't understand why when they saw that picture? For a split second I considered it, but I do give myself credit for not taking the easy option when it was there.

Descending Pen Y Ghent was another low point as my feet were so sore at that point that progress was interminably slow, as my Strava segment confirms. But the reality is in those situations you can sit down if you want but it doesn't actually solve anything, so you have to keep going no matter how slow it is. When I arrived at Horton, even with just 14 miles to go the finish still felt so far away. I have to give credit, and huge thanks to the fantastic messages of support I got through at that time, which gave me a much-needed morale boost. I did make the sound decision to get a couple of hours of sleep there, which made the last section fairly enjoyable in the context of the whole race. I should probably note that despite earlier suggestions I didn't actually nap in any public toilets. Strangely I feel like I've missed out on a part of the authentic Spine experience by not sleeping anywhere unusual.

Even with those doubts about how close I came to not finishing, I know that I showed good mental fortitude to get to the end and take confidence from that. Everyone will have their own method of dealing with the rough patches that inevitably occur in an event of this type. For me in this race, the most effective tactic was thinking about the people I care about, even though I know they wouldn't think less of me had I not finished.

Hindsight Bias

Another part of this report that I wrote and have since deleted was about my race preparation. I realised that what I was writing was hugely



Malhalm Cove – no checkpoint here :-{

influenced by me having finished the race, almost saying that I was successful because of how I did X & Y in the build-up. As I've already acknowledged the race didn't go so smoothly that I was always going to get round. No doubt my preparation was a factor in getting to the end, but that's not to say I couldn't have done more. I've therefore tried to write a more honest account of this side of it.

I would split the preparation for this type of race into four categories; physical fitness, mental readiness, race strategy & kit preparation. I did little on the physical fitness side specifically for this race as I figured, correctly as it turns out, that I was already in good enough shape and it would be the mental side that would matter the most. I'm fortunate enough that without being incredibly fast I don't usually have to worry much about cut-offs on these types of races, but I appreciate not everyone will be in that position.

By far my biggest concern going into the race was whether I had the mental reserves to get round, knowing that there would likely be extended periods where it wasn't exactly enjoyable (I was right about that!). Leading up to the race I wasn't pretending to anyone I was particularly looking forward to it, instead I was happy to share my concerns. Perhaps that approach was actually effective, as opposed to pretending I thought it would be straightforward.

Race strategy is one area I could have done more in. My general approach was that you have to adapt in a race like this so there's no point overthinking it, but I could have benefited slightly from knowing



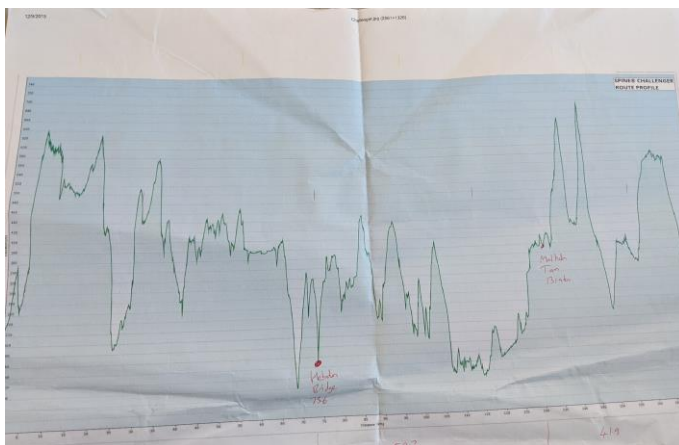
Bedtime at Horton

more about the course, such as where I'd get access to hot drinks and shops, and even exactly where CP 1.5 was (not at Malham Cove it turns out). One obvious way to do that is to recce it, but even a bit more studying of the map would have helped me. I had actually run the last 10 miles of the route, but that was only because it was the easiest part of the course to see. I benefitted far more from that recce than I expected as being able to visualise what was to come at the end made the last stretch seem much less daunting, but that was more through luck than judgement.

I did put significant effort into my kit preparation because I realised having the right equipment would be a big factor in the winter weather. Even simple things like ensuring you have enough batteries to power your headtorch and GPS took some thought, so I definitely benefitted from the time I spent there.

Spine Family

I've perhaps painted an overly negative picture of my race experience, focusing as I have on all the aspects that made it tough. I was certainly far less concerned with my position or time than I normally might be as simply finishing was the only goal for the last third. The lack of photos I took is also evidence of how my frame of mind wasn't always positive! But there are enough highlights that I already look back fondly on the whole experience and am really pleased I did it. There are a few reasons for that, including the



Course homework – looks hilly



Smiling at the finish

sense of achievement at finishing and the fact that I enjoyed the last few hours and finished in good spirits. The biggest factor though is the feeling of community, and family, that the race has. There was good camaraderie amongst the competitors, but more impressive was the attitude of all the people at the checkpoints who were delighted to see you and happy to help you. From a week spent dot-watching after my race it seems like the family aspect is even more of a factor in the full Spine race.

To go back to the question I posed at the start of this, how does the Spine Challenger compare to the PSR? As would be expected, they are about as different as two ultras can be and so comparisons are almost pointless. There is one important area where they are very much aligned however, and that is this amazing sense of community you get

during the event. I've come to realise that is probably the most valuable commodity a race can have but is also one that can only be created organically. Both races do it in different ways but it makes you savour the memories and want to come back for more. I hope I'm lucky enough to have similar experiences in future races I do.

Epilogue: It is three weeks since the race and two big things have happened today. Firstly, the swelling on my knee took far longer to go down than I'd expected, so much so that I got a precautionary X-ray on it 10 days ago. After getting increasingly frustrated with it I have finally managed my first run today.

Secondly, entries for the Spine race in 2021 opened today and the full race filled up in under 5 hours. There was a risk I'd put an entry in but now its full I don't have to worry about, for 2021 at least....



Your average knobby (and swollen) knee