The Severn Challenge
23rd – 27th May 2019
220 miles

After injury in 2018 scuppered my plans to run from John O'Groats to Land's End, this was firmly put back on my calendar for 2019. The year started with a 6 day race in Athens to work out my running and sleeping strategy. The unseasonal stormy weather slowed me down but I still ended up with two British V55 records for 48 hours and 6 days. The date was then set for 21st July 2019, with the crew that had been put on hold since 2018. All that remained was for me to gather my fitness and boost my confidence that I was still capable of running this distance and attempting the record.

The Severn Challenge, organised by Ultra Running Ltd was the perfect daily distances for the training I required. A stage race from the source to the mouth of the River Severn; daily distances approximately 26, 45, 60, 60, 26 miles.

Day 1 - Thursday 23rd May - The Hafren ultra - 26 miles

Arrival at the organisation headquarters near Worcester was to be between 7 and 7.30am for a departure at 8am. I drove there knowing my van would be securely parked while away and I was immediately greeted by organiser Steve and the rest of the runners for that day.



You could also run individual days as well as the whole lot, so runners would join and leave as their plans dictated. A cabin sized bag for sleeping bag, mat and kit was specified that would be taken between overnight camps and so I only needed to run with a small day pack with a short list of essential things to carry. I carried a basic first aid kit, emergency food, waterproof jacket, hat and gloves, tissues, maps, route description and a hand-held GPS with downloaded GPX files for navigation (Garmin 64S).

We were driven to the start point, around 3.5 miles away from the source and the nearest point accessible by road. The drive took around 2 hours and we were set on our way at 10.30am. The weather was mild, but a bit breezy, so I wore shorts and a long-sleeved top. The route was glorious; wonderful, easy to find tracks that meandered up to the source with fine views of the surrounding hills. While still on the way up Thomas Loe was already on his

way down, a 2hr 38min marathon runner. I arrived at the stone circle that surrounded a bog with Dick immediately behind me. This was the source of the River Severn. There was a stone slab path that led here so there was no need for wet feet and wading in bogs.



The route then returned to where we started which was the first checkpoint. Paul and Greg arrived with a high five as I started the return leg. The checkpoint was at Rhyd picnic site at 7.6 miles and Steve was waiting with encouraging words and ready to refill bottles and a boot full of snacks. Steve was in a G4 orange Land Rover which was easy to spot. The back opened up like a table with a variety of snacks and supplies. I refilled a bottle with water and was soon on my way. After around 20 minutes of running Tom appeared from behind, he had done a little extra and had been on the wrong side of the river and so had to back track. The route was downhill on a very quiet road now before crossing the river again and before much time had passed Steve appeared again (7.6 miles). A quick refill of my bottles and a couple of peanut butter sandwiches and it was onwards for the final leg of the day.

About 3 miles from the finish the route did a big semi-circle around to the campsite. It was just gone by a farm that I struggled to find the route. Some fields had been dug up and the GPS line was pointing through a line of trees. There was a small pond and it looked like the route should go around the left hand side but all I could find was a barbed wire fence and so I went around the rough stuff on the right hand side and continued for some way until I could find a line that took my closer to the GPS route. There did not appear to be much of a track here but I was at least heading in the right direction. Soon a solid track appeared followed by a tarmac road to Caersws. The route now went across fields to pick up a road. I was now just 200m from the finish line but my GPS sent me right up a track to a set of houses. My GPS said I was finished but continued up the track until I could go no further. No campsite, no finish. I sat down not knowing where to go. I got the map out, it said the same as my GPS and I was in the right place, but something was wrong. On the drive to the start Steve had pointed out the overnight venue and this certainly wasn't what he pointed out, but where was that point in relation to where I was. I took my phone out to ring Steve but a dog had come out of the nearby house closely followed by his owner wondering what this person was doing slumped on the ground at the end of his garden. He couldn't have been more accommodating, suggesting where the nearest campsite was – back down the

long track I had just run up! He even kindly offered to give me a lift, which I politely declined before being resigned to run back down the road.

We were all wearing tracking devices so Steve was anticipating me finishing and realised where I had gone. He rang me but I could not answer the phone in time and he left a message with directions. As I was running back down the road, as I had not answered the phone Steve had jumped in the Land Rover and was heading towards me. Problem solved, at the end of this track, turn right and 200m on the left was the finish. Steve arrived before I did and I could not believe I was in touching distance of the finish and could almost have seen the finish line had I not turned off, but it was nice to finish, collect a medal for "The Hafren Challenge" and a buff. Steve was about to direct me to the facilities when Dick appeared so he could combine the tour. There were showers, toilets, an indoor kitchen with plug in points and a line of pop up tents, each with a competitor's bag inside. There was a kettle with tea, coffee and milk to help yourselves. We all had a coloured re-usable mug allocated to be eco-friendly – mine was pink, easy to remember.



This was a luxurious site, no other tents here and a gorgeous barn conversion which had ensuite rooms. Maesmawr Art Centre was the venue with pieces of art all over and a gallery to look around. The afternoon had been pretty warm and the sun was strong now as we sat outside on picnic tables. Once we had all arrived and recovered Steve popped out for some fish and chips for dinner. As it was Greg's 50th Birthday, there was even an extra treat from Steve, a carrot cake with candles and we all sang Happy Birthday to Greg. A good way to spend a memorable Birthday.

We retreated later that evening to prepare for the next day. The owners were watering the vegetable patch next to us and although the peacock looked very pretty, it did make the loudest screeching noise ever at night. Along with the chickens in the morning and the sheep bleating it was a typical outdoor night, but I loved camping. My watch had a distance of 26.93 miles, 2,480 feet of climbing and the official time was 5 hrs 32 mins. I had lost around 20-25 minutes at the end of this event, not a problem as this was just training for me and not a race. According to my watch I slept for 6 hrs 20 mins from 11pm until 5:20am (3 hrs 46 mins of deep sleep which was impressive for me).

Day 2 - Friday 24th May - The Severn Plod Ultra – 45 miles

We were allowed to start earlier than the planned 7:30am and it was agreed to start at 6:30am for myself, Dick, Paul and Greg. Tom was to start at 7:30 being a lot faster than the rest of us. Although I was up in plenty of time and had porridge for breakfast (there was also toast if we wanted it), I was still putting my shoes on at the start time and we started at 6:35am. I was just too relaxed and was pretty embarrassing holding up the others, although they did not grumble. With my bag packed I left it in the tent. I never once lifted this bag – it was always placed in my tent on arrival and taken away with the tent when we departed. I guess Steve must be doing a lot of exercise putting up/packing away tents and carrying kit bags all over.

It was another wonderful sunny start to the day, but kept a long sleeved shirt on as it was pretty cold first thing. We soon set off across fields of long grass. The heavy dew soaked my feet and I struggled to find the way out of some of the fields. Usually by the time I found the exit gate or stile, the other lads caught me and so it continued. There was a fair bit of climbing to start with and although the first checkpoint was only 6 miles away, it took around 85 minutes to arrive with my slow navigation.



After another little bit of climbing the path then followed a flat canal and riverside path that was very easy to navigate to the next two checkpoints at 10.8 and 9.3 miles away. The route then picked up Offas Dyke path as the heavens opened and a few heavy showers fells. Unfortunately the route along the dyke was heavily overgrown with grass and pretty uneven underfoot and it was back to wet feet again and walked much of the overgrown stuff as it was difficult to maintain balance as the grass wrapped around your ankles. As I hit the road Steve suddenly appeared in the Land Rover. Although the written description clearly described the route in good detail, I used the GPS as my eyesight is pretty poor for reading and so I was never sure where Steve would pop up. Apparently this was a little earlier than the planned 8.4 miles but Dick was sitting in the passenger's seat and was sad to see his departure. His pace had dropped and after a brief chat he was struggling with some stiff legs. I refilled with supplies and the last leg, instead of being 8.5 miles would now be a mile or two further.

There was also some more difficult navigation ahead, again I was never far from the route but actually finding the track and the appropriate gate or stile was the problem and a few more overgrown tracks followed, some with the odd stinging nettle. Eventually I emerged onto a road which continued to the campsite at Montford Bridge. After the finish the previous day I made sure to listen to the name of the campsite this time and I was glad I did. I arrived at Montford Bridge to find two campsites, one on the left and one on the right. I pondered the name of the first one on the left. No, that is not the name, I glanced to the right where I could see the other campsite, and there in the distance was Steve waving and the orange Land Rover and soon the day was done at Wingfield campsite.



It seemed quite a while before Greg and Paul arrived. Apparently they had continued on Offas Dyke for a bit, but observant Steve had noticed that on the trackers and rang them. They said they only lost about 10-15 mins. Similar to the first day, it was very reassuring that progress was being followed and the organiser knew where we were and helped out where possible. Wingfield Campsite had a couple of large tents at the far end and our little line of tents on the left as we arrived. The showers and toilets were at the entrance along with a pub where we were to have our meal that evening. Another couple of runners joined us that evening who were running the next day. Another Tom who had recently run the Marathon des Sables and Ian who would complete the set of medals by completing the next day.

After a shower and food it was back to the tents to prepare for the next day, again we were allowed to start early. The 60 miles was to be a challenge to complete in daylight and I was happy to start early. Another two couples had set up in large tents next to us and were enjoying the odd glass or two of wine and a couple of families with young children were in the middle. The talking of the wine drinking couples went on until the early hours until around 1am a shout from Greg to ask them to politely be quiet. Not the fault of the organisation, but more these campers not adhering to campsite rules. Usually campsites are very quiet after dark. My watch had 43.6 miles, 1,450 feet of climbing with the official time of 9 hrs 54 mins. I slept from for 6 hrs 15 mins until 4am (1 hr 46 mins of deep sleep).

Day 3 – Saturday 25th May - The Severn Path Ultra – 60 miles

It was to be a warm and sunny day and so I dressed in clean shorts and t-shirt. I had toast for breakfast instead of porridge today and made sure I was ready in time for the 5:30am start. It was reasonably mild even at that time in the morning and was pleased there was not too many long grass fields to start with to keep my feet dry. Instead of taking the

tracker device from the start, as these only had a battery life of around 15-16 hrs it was best to give them out at the first checkpoint so that we could be tracked to the finish. It was more crucial to know our whereabouts later in the event rather than earlier in case of mishap and so Steve could guide us in. I never gave this a second thought as we set on our way. Me leading and the lads following closely behind as I did my usual of not quite finding the way across the few fields to start with. I didn't have the best of starts, while trying to balance between stinging nettles and an electric fence I felt the shock from the fence, that jolted me into the nettles to start the day painfully. I proceeded then to squash a finger on my left hand in a gate and then nip a finger on my right hand in another gate. It was going to be a long day!



After about 3 miles or so we hit a road where I turned left back onto the riverside path and that was the last I saw of the lads behind me. The route was overgrown in places around the stiles and gates, but we had been warned that this may be the case. The route did a big sweep around Shrewsbury and came out on a road to the first checkpoint at 14 miles. The checkpoints were a little further apart today, but again, all this information was available well in advance so you could plan appropriately. Given that Steve has organised many races and had previous information on how long it takes between checkpoints he commented I was exactly on time as expected. I then got the shock that the lads were now about 20 minutes ahead of me! Really? I thought he was joking, but no, it was apparent from the maps that you could easily short cut the route through the centre of Shrewsbury.

I was then given my tracker and realised that their route taken was not tracked and had taken advantage of this. Annoying as this was it was nothing to do with me and I had my own goals to achieve and I wanted to run the 60 miles as stated. Apparently they had been pretty slow the previous day and were over the allocated time allowance and Steve had been generous to allow to them to continue, but I was aware that if they continued at the same pace they could be timed out. I had thought if I was organiser what would I do under these circumstances. Never a good outcome. Often there are time penalties for infringements, but as these entrants had already been over the time allocation that would serve no purpose.

The next 12.3 miles to the checkpoint were a mixture of roads, fields and riverside paths. I overshot the path on the way into Ironbridge and had to make a detour back to the path. There was a lot going on here and saw the signs for a World War II re-enactment. The route went right through the middle of this festival. It was heaving with people all dressed up in old uniforms or families out for the day. It was hard to make progress, so rather than stress I walked and soaked up the surroundings. I thought I would love to come back here as a tourist one of these days and take my time looking around. On hitting the road again the pavements were blocked with people and the road congested with traffic making that impassable too. At the iron bridge where I had to cross there was a singing event going on and crowds stood listening. My battle was to weave through the standing bodies to make progress.



Once through the crowds a lovely cycle path opened up that was to lead to the next checkpoint where I heard that Steve had spoken with Greg and Paul. They had indeed admitted that they needed to visit Shrewsbury for a toilet stop and took a shortened route. Steve had the unenvious task of disqualifying them for another infringement. There is nothing pleasant for either side in a scenario like this, but Steve was probably more than aware from the timings that these lads were unlikely to make it to the finish line. For one, I have every respect for an organiser that makes it clear that deliberate rule breaking is not acceptable and enforces a penalty.

The next part of the route sent me in circles around fields becoming more and more overgrown. At one point I hit such a wall of crops and weeds that I could not physically fight my way forwards and crawled sideways through branches, nettles and brambles to pop out in the next field that was a nice path. The route now varied between overgrown paths and half decent riverside tracks to arrive at Bridgnorth. Here I saw Paul and Greg arrive from a different direction as I continued on the path forwards. The next section was very uneven underfoot with grass around shin height that had been recently cut but kept getting tangled around your feet and so ended up walking yet again.

The distance to checkpoint 3 was 13.3 miles, now some 40 miles done for the day and another 20 still to do. It was warm as I wandered though the middle of a campsite curious

as to where the route went, when all of a sudden I could see Steve waving in the distance and I had arrived. I was well in need of water now and a few more peanut butter sandwiches. Yet again on leaving I struggled to find the path and wasted time going backwards and forwards trying to find a track. The next checkpoint was 12.5 miles away and a mixture of riverside paths, frequently overgrown in places and minor roads.



It was a nice setting for the last checkpoint by the canal locks and Steve was waiting with two of his daughters to cheer me on for the remaining 6.6 miles. All I wished for was a nice path to run, which initially I was granted for a couple of miles before the overgrown paths returned and found myself in nettles, long grass and slightly off-route again. Over a gate and head back to the river to find the path did exist and tripped and stumbled my way along. Up to the road and over the bridge and the campsite was on the left as described by Steve from the last checkpoint. I knew from the description this was the right route but it seemed to go on for some way and saw no signs for a campsite.

Finally that wonderful sight of Steve waving in the distance and reassurance again. He did warn me that the Land Rover was not the finish line and he jumped in it to drive to the finish, which I am pleased to say I finished in daylight. Hot pizza was waiting and was nice to have a shower to wash off all the grass and leaves that found there way down my shirt.

It had been a wonderful sunny day, a real mixture of terrain, pretty flat for the most of this but the uneven paths that were very overgrown in places had made the going very slow. The campsite was again an absolute gem near Holt Castle. A quiet place with picnic tables to sit at and undercover area for breakfast should it be cold or raining in the morning. I was late to bed by the time I organised myself, rehydrated, showered and prepared my bag for the morning. My watch had 61.6 miles, 1,590 feet of elevation with the official time of 15 hrs 36 mins. I had 3hrs 53 mins of sleep (52 mins of this was deep sleep).

Day 4 – Sunday 26th May - The Severn Way Ultra - 60 miles

There were to be another couple of runners join for the day. One was to set off later with Tom and another had planned to run with me as this would be his longest ultra ever run and was worried about navigation, that was Lucas.

We left this quiet haven at 5:30am. The second Tom who had run the previous day had greeted me in and got up to see us off, he was a very encouraging person. The day was not

to be quiet though as Lucas loved to talk, unlike me that likes to be alone with my own thoughts. It wasn't long before I could not find the route and was left and right trying to find the way. "Where is your GPS pointing?" was Lucas, "through the middle of that building in front" was the answer. We made progress, albeit a little slowly and there was an extra checkpoint for this day, the distances being 6.4, 8.9, 9.4, 10.6, 14 and 9.8 miles. At the first checkpoint on a nice wide pavement next to the river Steve's wife was waiting for us. Lucas recognised her immediately. We didn't hang around for long though as there was another long day ahead. My legs were not feeling that bad, no real niggles, just a little bit of stiffness as would be expected.



As the path narrowed and circled through a short patch of trees and bushes we crossed a footbridge and turned left. Shortly after I realised we were drifting off the GPS line again and tried to figure out how to get back on route. A cycle path seemed to be parallel that would join further down so I took this. I could not believe it when around 30-40 minutes later we arrived back at the first checkpoint and had done a full circle and were now at over 9 miles for the 6.4 mile mark. Another bad start to the day! I only have myself to blame for that and really needed to concentrate to get this right. Poor Lucas remained deathly silent for a good while until I spoke to him again, then he soon chirped up again. He was such a happy, likeable guy, but the opposite to me and am sure he would love to have chatted the whole day and got lumbered with "the quiet one".

I was closely monitoring my GPS now and double checked every turning until we came to the bridge. Clear as day the path turned right over the bridge and not left, but at least we were going in the right direction. The path went around the docks and then back to riverside paths and then abruptly came to a "footpath closed" sign with a diversion in place. We climbed up to the road and roundabout and I could see there was construction where the path should have gone. I could not find a path back down and wasn't too sure where the diversion was sending us. It appeared to send us down the road which would add to the distance, but I decided this must be the way in absence of any other route. About a mile down the road a reassuring diversion sign had been placed and so knew we were still correct, but I was beginning to worry about the overall pace due to the extra distance covered. After a 2.5km diversion the path resumed the riverside route, only to find this was long grass, uneven underfoot and overgrown in many places. My only amusement was at the expense of poor Lucas. I don't think he had ever been stung by nettles! I heard the

“ouch” followed by a few unrepeatable words aimed at the nettles. Soon after he asked what cream he should put on the bumps that appeared on his legs. He did not get a sympathetic answer and told him I had worse the previous day.

The path then backtracked up to the road and the second checkpoint where Steve was waiting. I was worried about our slow progress. Lucas told me he had 18 hours to complete this ultra although I thought the time limit was less, but Steve confirmed that as I was guiding Lucas there was a more generous time limit should it be needed. This was a great relief but still wanted to finish before darkness.



The route continued on a riverside path again, reasonably easy to find now, but still overgrown in places that slowed the pace along with gates and stiles. Soon we arrived at Tewkesbury and as we hit the road I was aware we were heading off the GPS line again. I stopped to read the written instructions. No sooner had I read we were the wrong side of the canal than Steve was ringing, realising we had overshot the route and guiding us where to go, we were not far from the third checkpoint now and soon we arrived along a very pleasant track to reach Steve.

The next section on the riverside path was much less overgrown now, around ankle deep grass that was quite runnable in places and very pleasant. The odd shower came down every now and then, Lucas would stop and put his jacket on and off as appropriate whereas I decided it was warm enough to simply continue. Navigation was much easier now and it was good to make progress as there were still many miles to run and soon checkpoint 4 arrived, 35 miles into the day (although we had done a bit more than that), so another 25 miles to go with the next checkpoint some 14 miles away.

It was here that Steve warned us that the next section had the worst stinging nettles of the entire route and it was probably best to cover up. I decided to tough it out while Lucas made sure his long socks were pulled up, his arms were covered and even put his gloves on. My GPS must have had sympathy for me as after around 100m of shoulder height continuous nettles it took me back to the road and we could see the Land Rover

approaching. We were directed back through a gap into the nettles again. Poor Lucas was in agony, he did ask if the nettles didn't sting me as there was no reaction, I won't repeat the language I was hearing as he followed me through. I must admit my legs felt like they were on fire and Steve was correct, this was the worst bed of nettles I think I have ever been through, but all part of the adventure I suppose.



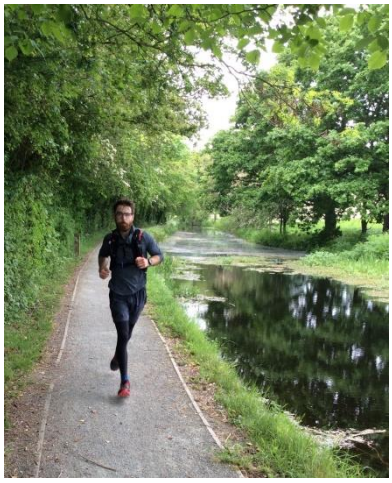
It was a relief to exit this section with a little respite on a road on the outskirts of Gloucester, but my navigation was challenged again as we ended up in an industrial estate. I gathered the route was the other side of a massive wall and needed to find a way to get there. I stopped to ask someone working if there was a path to the river. He directed us back along the path we had just been on but did state the path was very overgrown. Much to my amusement Lucas was more than happy to show off his lumpy, stinging legs and say "you haven't seen what I have just been through!". After retracing our steps I did find the overgrown path that I had not realised was a path and continued our progress.

Lucas had finally become quiet now and was lagging somewhat. This was the furthest he had ever run and had ambitions for a 100 miler and so was stepping up the distance. The only conversation was when we saw cows ahead and he was worried about them attacking us. I was used to Lucas now, don't worry, you stay behind me, they will move, he was such a sweet guy, but didn't appear to have much experience of the outdoor life. He had run 100 marathons the previous year though.

The route was now much easier to find again, with the odd overgrown patch, but mainly long grass with an uneven surface underneath, but pretty flat. There were many gates to slow that section too. We were well into the evening and Lucas was asking where the next checkpoint was. It was hard to tell him the mileage. I knew it would be around 50 miles, but with the extra miles done I was not entirely sure how my extra we had done and it was over 54 miles by the time we did reach the last checkpoint. I was resigning myself that this may be a long walk to the finish but Steve said the right words to Lucas (whom he obviously knew quite well), insisted that we continue at Sharon's pace and he would have a Chinese meal waiting at the finish, the thought of his chicken fried rice perked him up.

The finish was about 2 miles away by road, but over 10 miles by the route we had to take which was the Severn Way. It was a lovely route though, circling round an embankment next to the river as the sun set even lower in the sky. I picked up the pace to run and it was great to see that Lucas was doing as instructed and stuck to my heels as this would reduce

the amount of darkness time we would have. Lucas did ask if we would make it back in daylight. I knew it would be close to 11pm and that we would need our headtorches. We made good progress and was so pleased that I barely had to navigate as the path was easy to find. As the light finally gave way and a small breeze picked up I knew my temperature was dropping, so along with my headtorch I put on my waterproof jacket to keep the heat in. I was stumbling much in the darkness and had to walk in places. With about a mile to go



I was looking for a path to the left to the finish point and still managed to miss it. Luckily Steve had walked out the last mile or so to find us and guide us in. I was pleased he did. The finish was at Top Barn, another incredible place to stay. Gorgeous woodwork greeted us inside the barn. Table and chairs were set out and our meal was waiting for us. For the first time I was hungry and needed to eat first. It was nice to be inside as it was getting cold outside and could not believe our little tents had been popped up inside the barn and only a few steps away from where I was seated. A lift had arrived for Lucas and he soon departed with his longest ever run in his legs. I bet he hopes for a more talkative partner on his next ultra, but he had had a life lesson in stinging nettles that I am sure he will remember.

A start time was agreed for the next day, which was only a marathon now. At my bag my towel was sitting on top. I had left it out to dry on a fence the previous evening and left it there. Steve did a sweep of the site and knew it was mine (it was a blue one so it wasn't obvious). I sorted my kit and maps as normal and prepared for the morning before finally switching my head torch out at 1:30am. My watch had a distance of 65 miles, 620 feet of elevation and officially finished in 17 hrs 40 mins. I had 3 hrs 50 mins sleep, of which only 29 mins was deep sleep.

Day 5 – Monday 27th May – The Bristol Severn Ultra – 26 miles

The alarm was set for an hour later than previous. It awoke me at 5:30am (I was usually awake before to turn the alarm off before it sounded) for the 6:30am departure. I marvelled at this lovely barn and took my time over breakfast before I realised what the time was. I was running late again, no excuses, just too relaxed. I was the only one starting as 6:30am as the extra runners were starting at 7:30am today along with Thomas Loe who was leading the event by a good few hours and doing an excellent job. I started about 6:40am and found it hard to get my bearings at I had finished in the dark. Back down to the canal were the instructions.

I reached the canal but could not figure out which side I should be on and didn't want to get stuck on the wrong side as there seemed to be a path on both sides. My GPS did not determine which side and so I stopped to get the maps out of my pack and it clearly showed

the other side. It was a cool, but sunny morning and knowing the wide mouth of the Severn was ahead I guessed it could be pretty breezy and so opted for a long-sleeved shirt and was pleased I did. I really didn't put pressure on myself on this event and probably should have because I was taking it too easy and really could not get myself going this morning.

I stopped and started with little things that were niggling me and realised I needed to get going as there was still a marathon to run. After about 90 minutes or so I seemed to perk up and get my running legs back. The path was along the canal, a lovely surface to run and absolutely no navigational problems and before I knew it Steve was ahead. The next mile or so of the route had changed slightly from what was on my GPS and followed instruction back to the riverside. There were only 2 checkpoints for day 5, the first at 7.8 miles and the second after 10.7 miles. The route mainly followed an embankment to the second checkpoint, with a few fields and small overgrown section that turned inland by a power station.



The headwind was blowing with intermittent sunshine as I reached the last checkpoint before the finish at Oldbury-0n-Severn as one of the day runners caught me up and chatted for a bit. With around 8 miles to go I thought it was almost done and I would have no further problems as I continued down the embankment with the Severn Bridges getting closer all the time. The embankment gave way to a stony beach area and a path went off to the left up the cliff side path. I pondered my GPS now thinking I don't want to be the wrong side of the cliff. The path on the left went to a motel and my GPS was pointing directly ahead and looked like a path climbed alongside the motorway to reach the bridge. I clambered over the stones until I was underneath the bridge. According to my GPS the path should turn left and go to a footbridge across the motorway. There was no such path. I retraced my steps and then thought maybe I didn't go far enough. Eventually I gave up and took my pack off to read the instructions. I was losing too much time wandering backwards and forwards and could not find the route. The instructions were clear, that path I saw that went to the motel was what I should have taken and would now have been at the top off the cliff and not the bottom. There was no way out other that head back. The phone rang. Steve was tracking me and realised something was wrong. Thomas had now finished and tried directing me. I continued retracing my steps, aware that I was now holding them up as they could not leave until I finished. I was still

retracing my steps when the phone rang again, apparently I had retraced my steps too far and overshot the path again. I could only see the cliff face still and continued to backtrack. I was very frustrated at myself for wasting so much time here. Once at the path to the motel there was a sign, but it did fork away from the motel which was what I should have observed. I held the instructions in my hand to guide me for the rest of the route, but it was easy now.



After the footbridge over the motorway I went under the second Severn Crossing and the beach was now 1750m away, or so the sign said. With just 200 metres to go, the rain came in time to drench us all and spoil the finish. No great fanfare, just quickly to the Land Rover to avoid the rain and the event was done. The statistics for this for the last 7 years were a 26% finish rate, so 3 in every 4 do not finish. Well I beat the odds and finished and was content with my training, although I probably did take it too easy, I felt happy that I finished with no niggles. I had managed to create a couple of blisters on day 4 due to having wet feet for most of the day, but my legs were tired but fine. My watch recorded 28.2 miles and 414 feet of elevation gain with the official time of 8 hrs 12 mins.

Steve took us to the services for something to eat and a cup of tea before returning to Worcester where we set off from and my van was waiting for me. This trip for me had been all about having long runs out during the day and reducing my sleeping hours to mimic what lay ahead on my next challenge. It had been absolutely perfect for that and I was pleased that I only rested for 4 hours or so between the long days. Every day finished with a different medal, which when put together mapped the course of the River Severn and joined together in the form of a jigsaw puzzle to make on extra large medal. The first four days I got a buff and the last day a t-shirt (I even got a ladies one!). All finishers received a finishing trophy. My official time for the 220 miles was 56 hours 54 mins.



As with all long races and adventures, there will be highs and lows of the course. The mountains were beautiful, the riverside and canal side paths lovely and tranquil, and the overgrown paths awful, but all joined to make a great route along Great Britain's longest river. The campsites were brilliant, far better than many I have used and very unique. The organisation detailed precisely the facilities and food available along with distances between checkpoints which were well detailed in advance and everything that should have been supplied was supplied. Kit bags were taken between campsites, individual pop up tents were put up for us and taken down afterwards. I had a thoroughly enjoyable trip, met some lovely people and even though this was a small, low key event, these are the events I prefer rather than mass participation events. I like to be out on my own with my own thoughts and enjoy being at one with nature and camping.





The statistics sound tough, the route itself is not that undulating, the route follows quite close to the river much of the way which I thought would be easy to find, but in reality the paths were often hidden where local councils had not kept them clear and can guess this will vary much over the years depending on the weather conditions and when the council tackle the overgrown paths. I never really went far off route but I wasted much time in trying to find the correct way out of fields. The long grass with uneven surface underneath was also a big slowing factor for me as this was a training run and didn't want to risk falling or turning an ankle and so was more cautious than normal. These were the factors that made the event challenging to me. As always, it was a great adventure and did enjoy taking part and having the full experience of running from the source to the mouth. A great way to prepare for longer ultras.



The shoes I wore for this were the Altra Timp 1.5. I also wore the gaiters designed specifically for

Altras which worked a dream. After many tangles with long grass and overgrown paths there was not a mark on these shoes proving that the uppers are pretty tough. The gaiters did their job and kept all stones and debris out of my shoes and not once needed adjusting. My feet were wet for most of days 2-4 due to dew or rain and running in wet grass. I did manage to find 2 blisters on my right foot, but this was probably more due to having wet feet for so long and uneven paths. These shoes have now run over 600 miles and can still probably do another 600 miles. They have spacious toe boxes to allow for expanding feet on these long runs, good cushioning, perfect grip for the surfaces encountered on this event and are very tough, durable shoes.