

PEAK DISTRICT

The Fairly Keen Trail runner

Can a normal bloke get a Fastest Known Time? Self-confessed 'mid-pack plodder' **Paul Barton** found out...

It was the beginning of 2021, probably around blue Monday when we're all told to be down in the dumps. I'd complied. I was looking for a challenge but, of course, there were no races because of the pandemic. I'd kept my winter fitness at a level best described as 'acceptable' although six months of long-Covid ups and downs had taken its toll on any kind of structured training. But I was up for a challenge and fancied an ultra.

I'd been reading Ally Beavan's book, *Broken 2020: The Year Running Records Were Rewritten*. It's an entertaining read and while it didn't introduce me to the concept of FKTs, it did educate me on the website that documents them, which is unsurprisingly to be found at fastestknowntime.com. I immediately dumped the book and grabbed the laptop. It has a global map-based feature to explore but I just looked where I live in the Peak District. There were only two nearby: The Pennine Way that starts, or ends, in Edale and something called 'Kinder Loop'. At 260 miles, the former is a bit more 'ultra' than I had in mind,

plus it's been smashed by proper athletes like Damian Hall and John Kelly. The latter route, however, is a less famous 86km bridleway loop. No disrespect to the then current best times by Ishmael Burdeau and Max Driscoll, both about 11:45, but here was a route that I might be able to actually get a fastest time, or an Eff Kay Tee. Or, as some people call them, a record!

Now, as a mid-pack fell-plodder, I'm by no means a fast runner; I'm getting old and feeling older. But I didn't set out to look for a time that looked beatable, it really was the closest one to me! Promise. And, in the particular state of early 2021 UK lockdown, travelling to recce sections of routes wasn't entirely permitted. So here was a route, a challenge that fitted the bill. And suddenly the possibility of an old trail shuffler having an actual FKT.

Then came the fun part: the planning. At 86km, pretty much two marathons, Kinder Loop would be the longest single run I'd attempted, but having run the Lakeland 50 (similar distance, slightly hillier) I felt confident I'd at least finish.

With 2500m of elevation, it's fairly lumpy but less than one might expect for 50 miles in the Peaks. As a loop, there's the option to start wherever suits, so I decided to start at the closest point to me, in Hayfield. Running in an anti-clockwise direction this placed the more technical, and lumpiest, bits in the first half. But it's the terrain I know best, and I imagined running the flatter stuff at the end might work best on tired legs. I picked a date: Saturday, April 3 – it was the first weekend where lockdown tiers would change and allow support runners to drive around to help. I trained a bit – three or four long runs. And I tapered properly – three weeks of greatly reduced effort ending in a week of full-on laziness. Ace.



YOUR PERSONAL COACH

Goal setting works every time

Paul's FKT dream may seem impossible, but trust me when I say 'honestly, he's a normal bloke'. Let's be straight to the point here – he's also not amazingly quick, winning races left right and centre. No, he simply understands planning is the way to go when you want to achieve an amazing goal.

MAKE A NOTE

Paul did something that works every time. He wrote down what he wanted to do and told a friend (well, us). That simple trick provided him with focus, a time scale and a reference point to how he was progressing. You may not get a record, but it's certainly the way to improve! **Paul Larkins**



Did somebody say 'cake'? Well earned...

KINDA, SORTA 'RACE' DAY!

LEG ONE

I'd split the route into three similar length sections a shade under 30km each. The first from Hayfield to Ladybower reservoir. As a 'supported' effort I'd cajoled some mates to run with me and carry some supplies. I started with Dan Asbury and Jim Harbord at 8am at Set Valley Cafe. First came a couple of kilometres to warm up along the Set Valley trail. We kept our speed to a chatty pace and only walked the significant ups. Running on feel is probably best anyway.

I'd printed an elevation profile, and slapped on a rough pace chart of an 11-hour target. I'd also plopped on a 10-hour pace. Running past South Head, down to the Roych and along Rushup Edge felt easy. At this point I was under my 10-hour pace... Jim stopped at Mam Tor while Dan and I continued down to Edale road, up past Jagers Clough onto 'checkpoint one' at Ladybower. Here, I met my missus, Hannah, and current record holder Max Driscoll, who had offered to run this section with me. We did the elbow greeting, I refilled flasks, and off we jogged.

LEG TWO

This started with a section alongside Ladybower which turned out to be easier than I feared. We continued up Cut Gate, which was drier than when I was there last, running into a headwind that was milder than I expected. The day was being kind. The descent to Langsett was fast and fun and I was moving well. The Trans Pennine Trail then took us west, slightly uphill, all the way to Dunford Bridge where Hannah once again was set up in the van. I stopped

for longer this time, ate and drank more, removed a layer and was ready to tackle the final third. Steve had witnessed the first of my trail-grumps, but they were pretty minor and I was feeling positive.

LEG THREE

Richard Dixon, my long-suffering running partner, had the job of coaching me to the finish. By this point I was losing my sense of humour. Although about 30km felt like a long way to go, the most critical part was some more of that Trans Pennine Trail delightfulness. I'm a fell runner at heart and the flat stuff is not my jam. It was about 10km and slightly downhill, so no excuses. With some wise words from Rich, we ran it all and I started to feel my sub-11-hour target was 'on'. The baking afternoon sun became my only weather complaint and was, in truth, quite pleasant. The Charlsworth road climb felt tough but was always going to be a walk. I'd maintained a policy of jogging all the flats and running all the downs. I was moving well and still enjoying the running. With Lantern Pike behind us we ran quickly down the track toward the finish. The track meets the road near Set Valley Cafe, where I managed a kinda-sprint finish.

So, can a normal bloke like me (and you!) bag an FKT? Drumroll, please... I finished Kinder Loop in 10:19:04 – faster than I'd realistically hoped for. So that's the FKT then? Well, yes... for about two weeks! A bloke called Jamie Shipston ran it in 9:25! Congratulations, Jamie, I guess! But I had it, for a bit, and that's pretty cool for a mid-pack plodder.

FIT FOR AN FKT

The gear for the job

Here's the kit that Paul relied upon for his FKT attempt

INOV-8 TRAILFLY ULTRA G 300 MAX, £170

Just a couple of test runs and I knew these were the ones. Capable on fairly technical bits but really came into their own in the last third when I knew I'd be fatiguing.



MONTANE SABRE LONG SLEEVE T-SHIRT, £38

My favourite top. Crazy lightweight and the Polygiene treatment really works – it was stink-free after 86km! I wore a black Inov-8 Merino base layer on top as it was cold at first.



2XU LIGHT SPEED COMPRESSION TIGHTS, £100

It was a bit too cold for shorts on the day so I grabbed these. Comfortably compressive high-end tights.



SALOMON S/LAB SENSE ULTRA 5 SET, £135

Best packs on the market, I reckon. I needed something light as I had runners carrying extra food and safety gear. For two 500ml flasks and minimal gear, it is great.



RUNDERWEAR RUNNING BOXER SHORTS, £20

I'm a big fan of these. No chafing issues, job done.



1000MILE SOCKS MEN'S FUSION DOUBLE LAYER ANKLE, £12

Quality double-layer sock; no rubbing issues here.



PENNINES

Following in the footsteps of Wainwright

Brian Melia ticks off 247 Pennine miles in fewer than four days!

In 1938, a 31-year-old unknown hill walker undertook a 211-mile journey up the east side of the Pennines from Settle to Hadrian's Wall, and back along the west side, in 11 days. Fell runner Brian Melia has just completed the revised route of 247 miles in a little over 88 hours.

That unknown hill walker was, of course, Alfred Wainwright whose fame grew with his seven pictorial guides to the Lakeland Fells and then later the Pennine Way and Coast to Coast long-distance footpath guides.

But his *A Pennine Journey – The Story of a Long Walk in 1938* was not published until 1986, and by 2010 Lake District-based long-distance footpath enthusiasts and Wainwright admirers David and Heather Pitt, with the aid of Wainwright Society members, adapted Wainwright's original walk to form the waymarked long-distance leisure route that Brian followed.

Brian, an optometrist at Hull University Teaching Hospital who is an experienced ultra-runner, chose the *Pennine Journey* route because his wife Susan had walked it in sections with their dog Poppy and said, "It is one of the best walks I have ever done, you should run it".

As far as he knew, no-one had ever run the route, and this was just what he needed. "I was going through some dark

days with the NHS", says Brian. "We were going into a second lockdown, so I needed something to give me inspiration to see me through the dark winter days."

He didn't know the area very well, so he spent the winter months poring over maps and when lockdown was eased he managed to get out with Susan and their son Richard to recce the route.

Beating the clock is not the be-all and end-all for Brian. "I am a fell runner first and foremost," he says. "But my passion is long-distance trails with new scenery."

"The *Pennine Journey* hadn't been run before, so it was a voyage of discovery for me. When you stand on the platform at the starting point of Settle, you think, 'I have to run more than 100 miles to get to Hadrian's Wall.'

"Wainwright described Westgate as the last wilderness in England; I would describe it as magical. The terrain is very varied. When coming across from Horton in Ribblesdale to Yockenthwaite, you're on fells; when you are going up from Buckden to Bainbridge the scenery is dominated by Limestone pavements; while from Tan Hill to Middleton in Teesdale is very boggy. The great thing is there is hardly any Tarmac, with the most being about six miles from Askrigg to Gunnerside compensated for by grass to run on in the middle of the road.

"It was very emotional reaching

'Wainwright described Westgate as the last wilderness in England. I would describe it as magical'

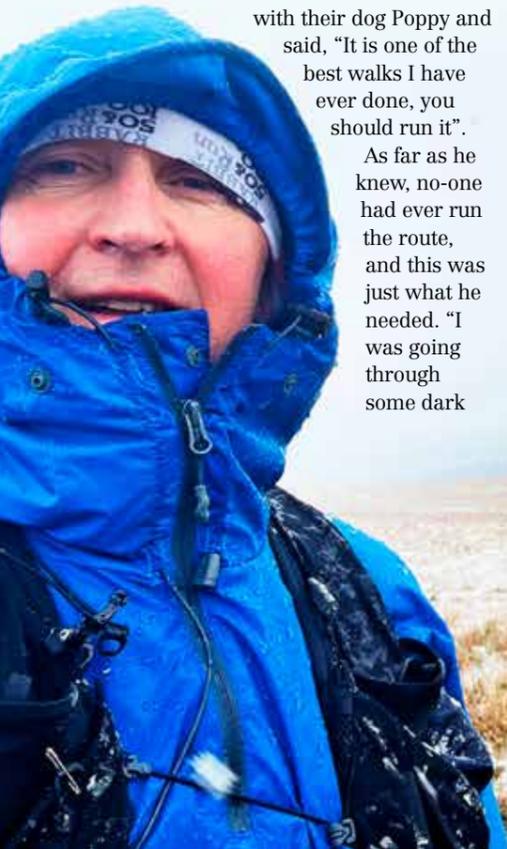
Hadrian's Wall. You're coming across the fields and you don't realise the wall is there. Just before Chollerford the wall just emerges out of the grass – this is where the path turns west and follows the wall to Greenhead."

As well as the varied terrain, Brian experienced the whole gamut of weather conditions. He set off from Settle station with blue skies, little wind, and temperatures of 2-3°C, but by the third day all hell let loose, with rain and hail and even snow – yes, snow, in May – on the summit of Ingleborough.

The only real low was when Brian developed a blister coming across Hadrian's Wall to Steel Rigg and was fearful that it would threaten his record attempt. But, by the time he arrived at Greenhead, the most westerly point on the wall, he had it under control and, with the benefit of another pair of comfortable running shoes, was able to complete the route.

Brian cautions that this run is not for the faint-hearted. "It is very demanding and requires a good deal of organisation," he warns. He had a team of 14 supporters – including road support and helpers on the fells – and there was the added challenge that on some of the moorland sections there is no path, requiring map and compass to try to stay on a bearing.

But he would strongly recommend it to other runners who want to experience some of the finest countryside in England. "We have Alfred Wainwright to thank for bringing this to the attention of the ever-growing hiking community," he says. "And now it's the ideal route for a multi-day trail running adventure."



NORWAY

Midnight express

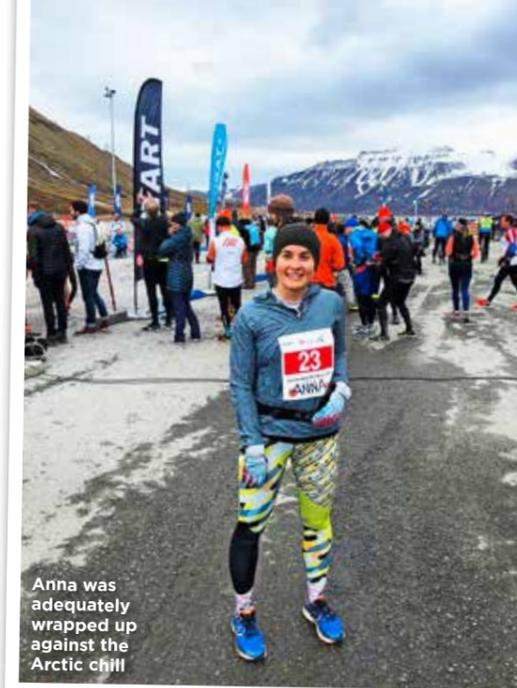
Anna Stanglewicz experiences a marathon to remember in the Arctic Circle

It's 2am, but it might as well be noon. The sun is shining brightly and a polar bear is staring at us through a window decorated with reindeer antlers. This was the first glimpse of our accommodation when Oli and I arrived on a remote Arctic archipelago with 24-hour sunlight, 600 miles from the North Pole, in an attempt to dispel the dark cloud that had been hanging over us. We had been trying to start a family for too long, and were eventually given a diagnosis that having a child was going to be challenging or even impossible. As a result, our mental health took a dip, and I suffered from several months of insomnia. In an attempt to refocus, I signed up for the Spitsbergen Marathon and decided to dedicate running it to our future child.

On the day of the race, I woke up early to a breathtaking panoramic view of the Arctic landscape from our hotel window. Downstairs, the breakfast buffet was sumptuous, but I somehow managed to limit myself to a couple of freshly made waffles with berries, remembering there are no bushes or trees on Svalbard. Oli was going to hire a bike and cheer me on along the way. The temperature was perfect for running, between 0 to 3°C, but with a windchill factor of -7°C and occasional freezing rain. The air was cold and fresh – straight from the North

Pole, it seemed. The international and local crowd was already gathering at the start line and most runners wore hats, gloves and long layers. 147 runners took part in the full marathon distance, with more in the half marathon and 10k. There was a good mix of intimidatingly fit-looking semi-professional runners and normal folk like me. The race felt just the right size to create a buzzing atmosphere but feel intimate at the same time, as if we were taking part in a secret event. There were even race marshals in polar bear costumes adding to the atmosphere! Polar bear danger is real on Svalbard so there were also guards patrolling with rifles on ATVs to keep us safe during the race. Although no polar bears interfered with the event, a week earlier one had been spotted inspecting the route.

Finally, the starter pistol went off and up the hill we went, following the long curve of the gravel road overlooking a wooden church, the cemetery, colourful little houses that are typical of the Longyearbyen settlement, and mountain slopes. The route was varied, challenging at times but incredibly scenic. It took us out of town before turning back towards civilisation. Ahead we could see snow-covered peaks, glaciers, and one of two husky farms. Reindeer were crossing the road. On the

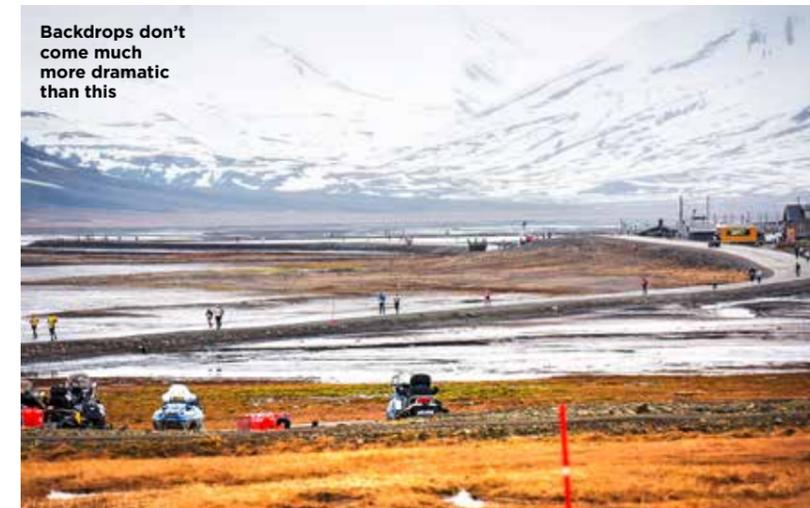


Anna was adequately wrapped up against the Arctic chill

right, Hjorthfjellet mountain guarded the entrance to Longyearbyen. Then the route became quite steep but with truly fantastic views of the port, the airport and the remains of an old mine.

In my mind I was running like a gazelle, with a radiant smile on my face – an opinion which was later revised when race photos revealed what a red hot mess I was trotting up those rocky hills. But I had a song in my heart. Over halfway, through, debilitating pain shot through my knee and Oli raced on his bike to the pharmacy for painkillers. I ended up taking more than the recommended dose but was determined to finish the race. I remember passing the 30km marker outside town – the view was incredible as we ran along a lake partially covered in ice, with snowy mountains and fjords in the background. I felt a pang of sadness that there were only 12 kilometres left. On the last long incline before the finish, I was jogging leisurely and chatting to a fellow runner, Lauritz, about life on Svalbard. A few metres before the 'mål' (goal) marking, I let him go ahead to collect his medal, and then it was my turn. I didn't win the race (a fellow Polish runner, Piotr Suchenia, who had won the North Pole and the Antarctic Ice Marathons the year before, took that honour), and neither did I manage to run sub-four hours as planned. But I felt happy again, and Oli was waiting for me at the finish line.

Finally, we managed to get over our most important finish line. The following year, after several rounds of IVF treatment, we were rewarded with the most darling little girl, Olive, with whom we'll be returning to Svalbard soon. **TR**



Backdrops don't come much more dramatic than this