The Moffat Mountain Marathon Challenge

(the 3M Challenge)

A couple of years ago my good friend and president of the newly-formed Hartfell Hill Running Club brought to my attention the Moffat Mountain Marathon Challenge (3M challenge). This is an official round with the Long Distance Walkers Association and he thought it was something I might want to attempt at some time. As I am the Hill Running Coach for Hartfell Hill Running Club and have previously completed the Bob Graham round among other big hill running events it was of great interest to me.

The details of the 3M challenge are below and taken from the LDWA website (link below):

“The Moffat Mountain Marathon is an Anytime Challenge walk/run over the Moffat Hills in the heart of the Scottish Southern Uplands. The route is a demanding one over mainly trackless and remote terrain in high mountain country with ascent/descent of around 9,000ft. Navigational skills are essential.

The route includes the ascent of two Corbetts (Scottish hills above 2500ft with at least a 500ft drop on all sides), ten Donalds (2000ft + hills in the Scottish 'Lowlands') and two Donald Deweys (500m - 609m Scottish hills with a drop on all sides of at least 30m). The highest point reached is the summit of White Coomb, 821m (2693ft). Only two isolated dwellings are passed en route, at Fruid Farm and at Corehead, and only one road, the latter a minor single track mountain road at approximately the half-way stage of the route. The last 9 km involves relatively low level route on good paths, tracks and a quiet lane.

The inaugural walk of the Moffat Mountain Marathon was led by the Recorder, Alan Castle, accompanied by LDWA members Nigel Dean, Carole Engel, Tim Glenn, Jeff Parr, Chris Seddon and Tony Willey, on 21st April 2008 in a time of 16 hours 13 minutes. Neither badge nor certificate is available but if supplied with a brief account of your walk the Recorder will keep a list of all those who successfully complete the route”

Further information on the round can be found here:-

<https://www.ldwa.org.uk/ldp/members/show_path.php?path_name=Moffat+Mountain+Marathon>

For the last 5 years I have been competing in Ironman distance and Extreme Ironman distance events, but since becoming a Hill running Coach in early 2019 I had decided that this year would be my last in racing Ironman competitions. With that in mind I decided to have an attempt at the 3M challenge. Drawing on previous experience of completing the BGR and being a support runner for both the BGR and the Ramsey Round I decided to attempt the round in a similar format. This involved breaking the full 33 miles route into 5 smaller sections with the option of support runners being swapped for fresh runners at the various points.

On a traditional round the support runners’ duties include carrying the runner’s food, drink and spare clothing but most importantly giving moral support, kind words of encouragement or a big kick up the bum as appropriate to the contenders. In addition to the support runners there is road support, these people drive the support runners to the various change points and collect supporters coming off the hill, often also providing hot food and drink at the changeover for both contenders and their support.

About a month before the attempt I put a post on the Hartfell Hill Running Club social media page telling people of my intention and asked if anyone wanted to attempt it with me or provide either support on the hill or on the road. As a result a number of members stepped up to assist and in the end, Alison Banford took on the challenge with me and my wife Louise, Jim Buchannan and Nigel Priestley provided road support. For running with us on the hill as support we had Adrian Dean, Nick Munro, Joanne Johnstone, Ian Padley and Janet Priestley.

I split the whole challenge down as follows:-

**LEG 1** About 12 miles in total.

Moffat to White Coomb, support runners to reach White Coomb via the Grey Mare’s Tail from the SNH car park on the A708.

**LEG 2** About 6.5 miles in total.

White Coomb to the top of Talla Reservoir, road support to park just East of the small bridge OS Grid Ref 142 201.

**LEG 3** About 4.5 miles in total.

Talla Reservoir to Fruid Farm.

**LEG 4** About 5.5 miles in total.

Fruid Farm to Strait Step, support runners to reach Strait Step via the path from the A701 above the Devil’s Beeftub.

**LEG 5** About 7.0 miles in total.

From Strait Step into Moffat.

As the route was about half the distance of one of the big 3 traditional UK hill running rounds which you are allowed 24 hours to complete, we decided to try and attempt the round in under 12 hours; although firstmost it was important for us to have a good long day on the hill with friends rather than “destroy” ourselves chasing a particularly good time. With that in mind, to make the best use of the available daylight, we planned on starting the run from Station Car Park in Moffat at 7am. This would mean the first 30 minutes would be run in the dark but as this was in the streets of Moffat and the lanes to Greygill Head it would be no issue and mean that we would have daylight by the top of the first hill. We picked Saturday 12th October for the attempt with the option of doing it on the Sunday if the weather was not good on the Saturday.

Prior to the attempt the support was organised as the following, Leg 1 no support (me and Alison would carry everything we needed to White Coomb in our back packs), Leg 2 Adrian and Nick to meet us there with more food and fluid, at Talla Jim to be in position with hot food and drink next to the road, Jo and Ian to be with him, Leg 3 Adrian, Ian, Nick and Jo all run with us, Leg 4 Louise be in position at Fruid reservoir with more food and hot drinks, Adrian and Nick to drop out here, Jo and Ian to continue. Leg 5 Nigel and Janet to be in position at Strait Step with change of shoes for us (to change from fell running shoes to trail running shoes), Nigel to take Jo and Ian out to the A701 and back to Moffat, Janet to run with us to the finish.

On the days leading up to the challenge the Mountain Weather Information Service website was watched closely for changes in the weather but by the weekend it was obvious that the best window of opportunity would be on the Saturday, so we confirmed with support that this would be the day of the attempt. On the Friday night I made up “drop bags” with everything I could want in the way of food, drink, change of socks, running shoes, etc, for each leg with a relevant label inside. The next morning I heard the rain bouncing off the windows as the 6am alarm went off and I felt sure that when I let the dog out it would still be raining, but the MWIS was right the rain had stopped by 6:30am.

Just before 7am on Saturday 12th October Louise and myself met Alison and Jim in Station Car Park Moffat, Jim and Louise collected mine and Alison’s drop bags, Jim and Louise assured Alison they would make sure the correct support runners got the right bags. Once we were ready to set off photos were taken and we left Station Car Park to start our adventure at 7:07am with a plan to be back in Station Car Park at 19:07pm. We ran through the dark, quiet streets of Moffat jumping the puddles from the heavy overnight rain and chatting about the coming day with both of us having concerns that we were not fit enough to undertake this challenge. Alison had completed the Glencoe Ring of Steall race mid-September and I had completed the Outlaw Ironman triathlon back at the end of July but since then neither of us had really done any training for ultra running. My biggest run had been 12ish miles, on the other hand I knew I was “run fit” and had in recent weeks been doing two quality sessions a week. We agreed not to get too hung up on pace and times but just make sure we had a good day on the hill and if we were really struggling we would just drop out at the next CP.

We tried to limit our pace because if we set off too fast we would suffer later on. We slowly ran the flats and downhills but walked the uphill sections and we were still on the streets of Moffat when daylight started to appear. Our second stop of the day was the sulphur-smelling well just on the outskirts of Moffat. This required a short detour from the lane and we were soon on our first proper climb of the day on the grass. We followed what small tracks we could see but we didn’t quite get the right line and ended up a couple of hundred yards west of the summit of Greygill Head. No problem, we soon found the stone Cairn and ticked off our 3rd mandatory waypoint. Running from Greygill Head there is a small path through the heather, it is always wet underfoot in these parts of the Moffat Hills but with the overnight rain it was even more so. I knew this part of the hills well having ran them many times, usually when running the Moffat Chase race route which is a former Scottish Championship race form 2006. The weather was not exactly as forecast, we had limited visibility while it was forecast as 70% chance of cloud free summits, however the strong winds, which were luckily on our back at that point, and the forecast temperature of feeling like -5 felt about right. Due to the cold we soon had extra windproof jackets, hats and gloves on.

The waypoints of Blue Cairn, Swatte Fell and Falcon Craig were soon “ticked off” and when we reached Hartfell Summit I updated all the support members via text and the group Whats-App that we had reached Hartfell summit in 1:57 minutes which meant we were running a hour ahead of our predicted schedule. The consequence of this was that all support runners were going to have to be in place at least a 1 hour earlier than planned. I wasn’t surprised as I knew I had ran this part of the route before and completed it in 1:50 hours. I took a quick couple of photos but we didn’t want to hang around getting cold in the wind. The running from here to Hartfell Rigg is good fast running down the quad track with the fence to handrail off for navigation. Alison had been moving well all morning and I was having to move a bit faster than I would otherwise to keep up. We ate something every 30 minutes with me calling out the time to eat, I was eating potato scones, flapjacks and muesli bars (I know I need around 300 calories a hour when running in the hills to keep up my energy). We both had “camel back” hydration systems in our rucksack for fluids and in addition, should we be in need of clean water on the hill, Rick of Moffat-Outdoors had kindly sponsored us with a Befree water filtration system.

After Hartfell Rig the fenceline turns north-west and you follow this uphill before crossing the intersecting fence and dropping down into Rotten Bottom, our next Waypoint. After Rotten Bottom we climbed up the distinctive small peak of Games Castle to take some photos (this is not part of the round but we did it anyway) and from there we headed uphill again but on a good path to Firthope Rig. The underfoot conditions on this part of the route are good and you can move quickly over the ground. Our biggest hill of the round was next, White Coomb at 821 metres, and this is a “out and back” peak. We hoped to meet our first support runners of the day here and we approached the small stone cairn trying to peer through the clag to see if they had made it in time to meet us. I was concerned we were moving so well that we would outstrip our pacers. We could see no support runners at White Coomb so we discussed what to do next. I suggested that as we had plenty of time we walked the route for now and I would ring the support crew to tell them to catch us up. We started to walk away from White Coomb while I was trying to make the phone call but before I got connected, out of the clag appeared Nick and Adrian. “Well, that worked out well” I thought.

Our next way point was Donald Cleuch Head which is an easy one to miss as it is just off the fenceline which takes you to the following waypoint Firthybig Head but luckily I had recced this part of the route so knew the pitfall. Firthybrig Head was ticked off and it was on to Lochcraig Head which is located right at the north end of Loch Skeen. With a slight clearing in the clag we took some photos before pressing on, it is all mostly downhill from here to Megget Stone and we were still moving well but I was just starting to feel the very first signs of fatigue in my legs. Next the brilliantly named Nickies Knowe was summited. Coming down from here Alison took a fall, but no real harm was done and from the ridge we could see Jim’s car and it was reassuring to know he was in place. The final bit before Megget Stone involved some “bog trotting” up to the road. I placed a hand on Megget Stone to mark it as done then we ran down the tarmac to meet up with Jim, Joanne and Ian.

Jim had a set of folding chairs out and a fantastic spread of food supplied by Margret his wife (the hot soup, tuna cobs, pork pies, various cakes and tea all went down a treat). I ate loads of food, aware that a good “feed” would stand me in good stead for the next half of the challenge. I checked my watch to find we were 1 hour 35 minutes ahead of our schedule, plenty of time in hand for any “fade” in the latter sections as we tired. Both me and Alison changed our fell running shoes and socks for fresh, dry ones and I put on an extra t-shirt as it had been colder on the tops than I expected. After a 25 minutes stop the 6 off us set off down the road which, due to its steepness, is named by local cyclist as “Talla Wall”. At the bottom of the road we cross a foot bridge to start the biggest and hardest climb of the round, up Garelet Hill. We are now into new territory for me as this next section is the one that I have not run over before, although I had ran on ridges and in the valleys all around Garelet hill. After 30 minutes of hard climbing we made the trig point at the top and were treated to fantastic views to all sides as the lunchtime sun had managed to burn off the clag from the hilltops.

The next waypoint was a little strange one as it was just a fencepost on the tree line, but nevertheless we all ran quickly down the hill to it in the long grass which necessitated running with a high knee lift. It wasn’t long before we had reached Laird’s Cleud Rigg and from here, after a quick discussion between ourselves as to the best route to take, we contoured round the hill to the col between Garelet Hill and our next waypoint, Erie Hill. From the top of Erie Hill we had great views over Fruid Reservoir, which provided another photo opportunity for the 6 of us then quick running followed as we headed down by the fence line. First we encountered Capilus Hill en route for Brawns Hill. With these two “in the bag” we came down the hillside before dropping onto a track which was running in just the right direction for Louise’s car where she was waiting for us with more hot drinks and food.

We had a short stop with her for a drink and resupply and at this point Adrian and Nick who had run from the SNH car park on the A708 to here got a lift back to Moffat with Louise. We continued with Alison myself as contenders and Jo and Ian as much-valued support. The first bit of leg 4 was easy going as we ran round the south end of the reservoir on the road and track and then started to climb on a track towards Ballaman Hill. After a while that track faded out and in this part of the challenge good navigation skills are a must, especially if the visibility is poor. The rolling moorland has few features to mark your progress and unlike the first half of the challenge there are no fences to “handrail” off. This leg seemed to take quite a while to cover and in part this was due to the underfoot conditions getting worse, making even jogging difficult. After Ballaman we headed for one of the best-named hills on the route in my opinion, the Crown Of Scotland. With this hill summited we had in front of us what would be the toughest section of the whole route. While the first bit as you descend down off the Crown of Scotland is ok, the next bit heading towards Strait Step is very tough going; marshy tussocks for most of it. We had to walk this bit and I think all of us took at least one tumble. On the positive, our navigation was spot on and we sighted the remains of an old footbridge, no more than two tree trunks spanning Whitehope Burn. After carefully crossing the burn one at a time on the tree trunks we continued walking towards Strait Step and could see our support crew on the hill waving to us. We headed for them and me and Alison ran up to Great Hill before heading back down to Nigel and Janet.

Nigel had put up a small shelter and we had a little to eat but the important thing was to change into our trail shoes from our fell shoes. We knew we had a fair bit of road and track to run back into Moffat and fell shoes are not ideal for this. Joanne and Ian went back to the A701 with Nigel via Annanhead to get a lift back into Moffat while Janet continued on with me and Alison. Janet was in training for her own ultra-race in November and had already run that morning, so it was great to have her with us for support in the evening. We made good time on this section as it is almost all downhill on a variety of grass, track and road and it wasn’t long before we were turning off the tarmac Beechgrove Road and running on the path by Annan Water towards Moffat, a path we all knew well as we have run it many times during our club training nights.

As we neared the end, we could see our supporters cheering us on at the entrance to the car park. We rounded into the car park and stopped by where we had parked the cars at 7:00am that morning. I noted our total time as 10:39 minutes - job done. It was great to have all our support crew waiting and cheering us into the car park at the finish.

A massive thank you to all those who helped make this happen, special mention for Louise for her unrelenting support for me doing all these madcap schemes, Jim for the inspiration, not only for this but for running in general and Alison for having the faith to run the whole round with me.

**In retrospect.**

My suggestions as alternatives to the route would be:

Start and finish the round at the Ram Statue in Moffat marketplace, then run up behind the old Moffat School take a right turn and follow the footpath round the bottom of Gallow Hill coming out on the lane bellow Moffat Well or the other alternative is run up to Hind Hill via the track though the wood at the bottom of Gallow Hill, then on to Greygill Head. This gives you the advantage of finishing in Moffat town centre were everybody can see you finish, rather like when you finish the Bob Graham Round, all the locals know what is happening in the market place and cheer the runners home.

Make Game Castle a waypoint, you have to pass through rotten bottom to get to it and it is a distinctive land mark making it easy to find.

Leave out Laird’s Cleud Rigg as we could have in Hind Hill.

Possibly add in Annandale Head as a waypoint rather than Great Head as this is higher, but also easier for support crew to access from the A701.