

## The Great West Fell Race 2008

You can never really trust the Dartmoor weather, but on this day, the weather gods were smiling. It was pleasantly warm but not too hot, and the hills were clear of mist, although being able to see Yes Tor looming in the distance may not have been good for my confidence.

The walk across the reservoir dam to the start provided a welcome distraction, but then it was down to business. Suddenly I was in a small huddle of lean and mean-looking fell runners. No fun-runners dressed as chickens here, just forty or so crazy people with nothing better to do on a Saturday afternoon than to run up to the highest point in Southern England and back. As fast as you can.

Then we were off. A pleasantly flat start soon showed its true colours when, after a couple of hundred yards we dog-legged left and started climbing. The first kilometre of the route was marked to keep us on the vague trail. I glanced to my left and rest of Devon already seemed to be a long way down. I resisted the urge to look upwards, instead preferring to concentrate on the heels of the runner in front of me. Just as the lactic in my legs was about to force me to walk, we reached the first checkpoint, and blissfully the start of a flatter section of the route.

From here the route choice is your own decision. Our next target, Yes Tor, was hard to miss. It's huge dark bulk rising ahead of me and off to my left. I knew that a straight line to the top from here would take me into a suicidal river gorge, so like everyone else I carried on along the track for about 400 metres, until it's possible to break off left across open moorland and head straight for the Tor. What you can't see at this point is the boggy ground you have to pass in the process. What you can see is another climb.

Having successfully negotiated the boggy ground, I now found myself picking my way through boulders. I was aiming for a large flat-topped rock which I knew led to the summit. Other runners took a wide berth to avoid the boulders altogether. At last the ground started to flatten out again, and for the first time for a while I had the energy to start running again. The actual summit of Yes Tor can be hard to see until you're actually on it, although occasional glances of the army flag pole helped guide me to the second checkpoint.

Hard-work done, I set out along the long, wide stony track south towards the next checkpoint at High Willhays – the highest point on the route. It's only a few metres higher than Yes Tor so the track felt quite flat. I looked around and for once was able to appreciate the fantastic views off to the West. On a good day you can see the Cornish coast from up here but I'd recommend keeping your eyes on the ground as much as possible.

Checkpoint ticked off, I turned west and started a hair-raising descent over rough moorland towards Black Tor. I could see the next checkpoint below me in the distance, but taking your eyes off the job in hand here is a big mistake. I fell twice on the way down, but thankfully the ground is soft and forgiving. And I wasn't alone. Several others ahead of me were also using my unique forward-roll descent technique. I seemed to take no time at all to reach the Black Tor checkpoint. The marshals pointed me in a new direction and off I went again, following a vague flat stream-path which they assured me was the way back.

This section was tough on the ankles at first but gradually become more runnable. Perhaps too runnable because for the first time in a while everyone started racing again while all I could muster was a humble jog. The track was now wide, flat and grassy and I was having fun despite being overtaken. But even better was suddenly finding myself back at checkpoint 1, and the start of the rapid descent back to the finish. Going downhill is my thing, and as I hurled myself down the slope like a runaway HGTV I even managed to reclaim a couple of places. My decision to wear good fell shoes was starting to pay off. Then the fun was over and it was a flat charge to the finish and a chance to sit down and assess the damage while enjoying a cup of water.

All in all, an excellent race. Just remember to take your own drink with you as the only drink station is at the end. Also, be prepared to navigate your way round if the mist rolls in!