

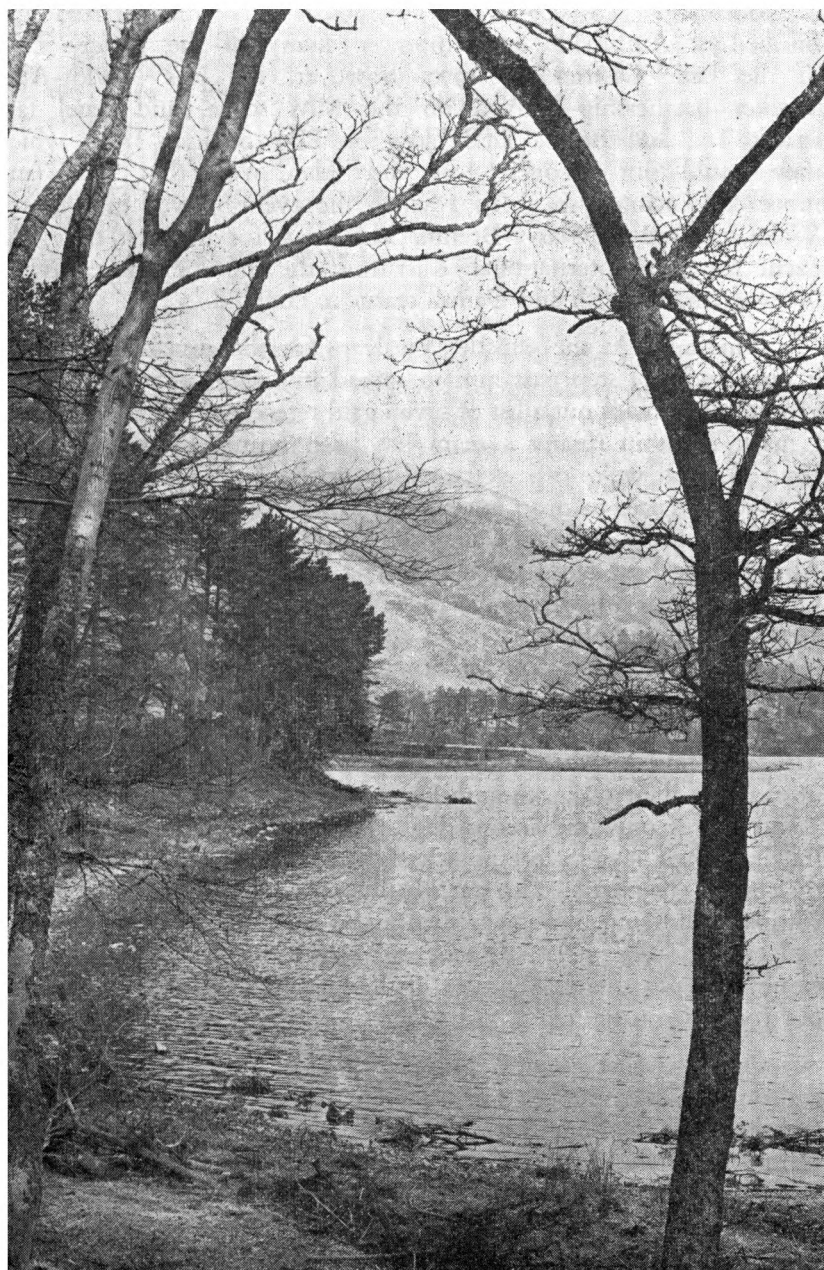
The Mountain Marathon

BY JOHN RICHARDSON.

Eight a.m., September 30th. Pete Bland and I arrive at the Saint Mary's Loch Yacht Club by the Tibbie Shiels Inn. This year's Mountain Marathon, starting here in Selkirkshire, is to take us about fifty miles over the Scottish Lowland hills. We seem to be the only competitors preferring to drive to the start on the morning of the first day of the event, rather than camping on Friday night in the grounds of the Yacht Club. The camp bristles with last minute breakfast activity before the equipment check to which Pete and I now subject ourselves "Tent; sleeping bag; emergency rations; cooking equipment; compass; whistle; map; etc., etc. . . . O.K, you'll do. Here's your final information sheet." Useful if zest for lightness has led to the elimination of all paper from one's kit.

Eight-fifty-nine a.m. Entrants in the Elite class of the event take their places for the Le Mans style start (the Standard class are already half an hour on their way). Each team stands opposite, and a few yards from, an envelope suspended from a wire and bearing their team number in large figures. Gerry Charnley gives last minute instructions through a hand megaphone. The running shorts and thin shirts of the competitors do not quite accord with the aspect of the handful of spectators, shrinking wet-eyed into sheepskins on this raw, windy morning. Well, at least it's fine.

The Two-day Mountain Marathon was first run in 1968 in the Pennine area of Yorkshire's North Riding, starting and finishing at Muker. The idea, stolen from Scandinavia, is for a team of two "to find their way across moorland and mountain areas using orienteering skills and carrying sufficient food for two self-supported days on the fells including an overnight camp". Remembering the weight Don Talbot and I carried over the fifty miles of that first Marathon even now induces sciatica. The contrast between our packs and those of Ted Dance and Bob Astles, who won that inaugural event, was laughable. How we scoffed at their tent, swiped by Ted from the back-garden games of his daughters; jeered at their torches, little better than the key-ring type; and sneered at their groundsheet of thinnest polythene. But we were back next year with our own adaptations of the same ideas.



St. Mary's Loch

Terence Leigh

Bob and Ted also won the 1969 event which started and finished at Ambleside and embraced many of the Eastern Fells of the Lake District. In 1970, however, the Joss Naylor-Alan Walker partnership arrived on the MM scene, and cruel fate struck Ted and Bob a fatal blow on Pike o'Blisco from which they could not recover. Joss and Alan won that year, and more convincingly so in 1971 when the event moved into North Wales, centred on Plas-y-Brenin. This year, for the first time, the event has gone international. Karrimor, the sponsors, have invited Norwegian, Swedish and Danish teams to contend.

Nine a.m. At the whistle Pete leaps for the envelope and tears it open, while I step past him to spread my map on a flat piece of ground. Pete reads out a list of seven grid references and checks me as I mark them in (many a team has been beaten by a mismarked control). And we're off, westward up Ratlin Side, across a shoulder of Muckle Knees to drop into Winterhopeburn and climb steeply to our first check at Five Cairns Hill (174188 on O.S. Sheet 69). Already, we hear from the checkers, a Norwegian pair is in front. One of them is Stig Berg, the 1968 World Champion Orienteer and 1972 runner-up. Now we head for a spot close to Geddes Well (136238), over Nickies Knowe, down to the Megget Stone and a long traverse of a shoulder of Broad Law. I am enjoying what could be called a bad patch. The ball of my left foot hurts like hell; two teams pass us taking a rather higher line and I allow myself to be lured upwards in their wake, though I know that my original line is right; "And this is only the second leg", pounds in my miserable brain. Inevitably we have to lose pointlessly gained height jogging down to the check. The next leg also starts badly with a slight misreading of the compass, allowing those two rival teams to recede into the distance, and a viciously steep descent of Great Knock paining Pete's troublesome cartilage. The idea of doing this for pleasure sinks, like our rivals, from sight.

Our next checkpoint lies on the ridge of Taberon Law (153290) and our chosen route takes us between Birkside Law and Hunt Law, and down to Stanhope Burn. On the climb up Taberon Law another team soon catches and passes us — but it turns out to be one of those which we thought were already in front. Either they're fading or they chose a poorer line than ours from checkpoint two. Whichever is the truth, it is a cause for joy. As we near the summit, a member of one of the other teams on whom we have gradually been closing suddenly sits down. He ties his shoelace, but we know that trick, and

sure enough we pass his harassed-looking team-mate five minutes later. Cause for more joy.

Check four lies on the minor road close to Manor Water (202323) and we choose a traversing line to Newholme Cairns Hill then down the stream to Old Kirkhope. The traverse puts the weight on the ball of the right foot and the pain of the left gradually fades and dies. We manage quite a good jog down the mile of road to the Land Rover of Frank Traviss. We are lying joint seventh here. The Norwegians, we hear, have increased their lead over Joss and Alan who, in their turn, are pulling away from the rest of the field. The team in sixth place were at the check only seconds before us, and the fifth pair we spotted rounding the shoulder of a hill half a mile ahead.

The fifth leg involves the ascent of Glenrath Heights and Dun Rig on the way to the check at Loch Eddy (281309). We ought to be trotting up the track by Glenrath Burn but the fierce wind, head-on for the first time, cuts us down to a walk. The climb feels like the steepest and hardest of the day; it is heather-clad and we no longer feel the morning's gush of adrenaline, but we can see that comparatively we are doing well. By the time we reach the ridge we know that we must be in sixth place, and from Dun Rig the sight of another unrecognised team astern leads us hopefully to believe ourselves fifth. Cause for still more joy.

Joy is finally unconfined when, on reaching Loch Eddy we are informed that our position is in fact fourth. The small loch is a surprising pocket of English Lakeland without crowds, transplanted into the rolling open heath/moorland of the Ettrick Forest. Wooded along the western shore, its clear waters invite bathing but the knowledge of our unexpectedly elevated position aids the postponement of such self-indulgence, and we hobble off across Deuchar Law to Craighope Burn, the penultimate checkpoint (288281).

A nailbiting choice of route (part of the attraction of this type of event) presents itself between Blackhouse and the final check (229262) at the overnight campsite upstream from Dryhopehope — yes, that's the real name. Do we flog our flagging selves over North Hawkshaw Rig and a shoulder of Deepsack Knowe, or do we try to force a run along the easier-looking and longer path to Dryhope and up the track by the burn? We decide to go up and over, and are almost immediately convinced that our choice was a poor one. The going is rough, the climbing endless, our pace too slow. We descend steeply to the farm and manage a trot of sorts, for the benefit of Chris Brasher's camera, to the finish of the first day. We have held our fourth position from Dennis Weir and Ted Dance who are fifth and

24 minutes behind us. The Norwegians have accumulated an incredible lead of forty-eight minutes over Joss and Alan, whose own position seems unassailable, short of some major navigational error on their part. Already rumours are being whispered of the fantastic super-foods with which the Norwegians replace any loss of energy!

It is in the campsite that various solutions to a common obsession — that of pack weight and minimization of same — are revealed. Large blue polythene bags (really no more than bivvy-bags but passing scrutiny as tents because of two minute poles which hold them open at the front) figure prominently among the so-called tents. Pete and I don't mind; our tent weighs less than two pounds — as against the three pounds plus of the plastic bags — is four feet six inches high as against twelve inches, and has almost enough room for interior cooking. To sleep two in one of these plastic bags must be a considerable test of friendship. Our cooking equipment consists of a Meta stove and pan: 2½ oz. plus a few bars of fuel and some matches. Airline-type plastic cups, knife and teaspoons — one of which disastrously melts whilst stirring the stew — suffice, with a couple of light plastic baby-bowls. The balance between the quantity and weight of food required and the amount of fuel and cooking time necessary is fascinating and has as many solutions as there are teams in the race. Our own answer is to cook several small quantities of dehydrated foods consecutively, eating soup while the first stew simmers, and stew one while stew two is in preparation and so on. We find that in this way we are able to digest the necessary quantities of food and keep cooking equipment very light, but it makes a protracted affair of the evening meal. Our carried clothing consists of one sweater each, the thinnest we possess, waterproof anorak and overtrousers, breeches of nylon orienteering-suit material and a spare pair of socks, not stipulated in the rules but a fine luxury with which to start the second day. We started day one carrying a little under ten pounds each including the sleeping bags in which we lie, borne sleepward by the groans and curses of discomfort from the direction of the plastic bags.

Sunday starts at six-fifteen a.m. which is first light. Gerry Charnley blows a whistle; for most of the campers it marks the end of the toughest part of the endurance test, a call to a less painful world of breakfast preparation and camp striking. Quips and jests lie noticeably thinner on the grey, rocky morning ground. Pete shuffles off Salvation-Army style for water. Shuffling because his slippers are polythene bags, and the water bucket another one. Breakfast is Oysters a la Courtenay (raw eggs), chocolate, Alpen with sugar and

extra milk, needing the addition only of water, and a brew. By seven-twenty, stripped once again to shorts and shirt, we're packing the last things into our rucksacks.

The seven-thirty second-day start lacks something of the spontaneous enthusiasm of day one. There are no spectators, so nobody makes a flamboyant sprint for the first hill. The first leg takes us over Deer Law to a 2,005 foot spot height close to Shielhope Head (197252). From there we skirt Cromalt Craig to a small feeder of Linghope Burn (160237). Continuing over a shoulder of Broad Law and crossing our previous day's tracks we drop to the upper end of Talla Reservoir and follow the Gameshope burn, heading for the Loch of the same name. Two minor tactical errors, unfortunate route choices rather than mistakes, mean that Ted and Dennis are hot on our heels at the reservoir and pass us in the first mile of the jog up the burn. Dennis grins broadly; this must be one of his more enjoyable moments. Pete curses and I suffer the sudden death of hunger knock. We pause for a bite and give feeble chase. Surprisingly by the checkpoint at the loch we have closed the gap to a couple of hundred yards and in crossing White Coomb we re-pass Dennis and Ted. Our turn for cheery waves and grins, theirs for a food stop. The descent alongside the Grey Mare's Tail leads to the worst climb of the day over Mid Rig to the check on Back Burn (216144), but from here on we are heading home. The field is now well spread out, the weather for the first time in the whole of the event is rather warm. We are ahead of the threat of Dennis and Ted, and the lads in third place are ahead of us, on the horizon, beyond our grasp. The competitive urge wilts in the sun. The final check is directly above Tibbie Shiels Inn near the source of Thirlstone Burn (260202). We manage a shambling trot down the burn and — galvanised by the sight of spectators — a running finish. There is even time for an hour's quiet retching on the sward before the prize giving. (The Norwegians were first, having covered fifty miles with fifteen thousand feet of climbing in about twelve hours. Joss and Alan were second, Walkington and Shuttleworth third, Pete and I fourth, Dennis and Ted fifth). Then the long road home.