

KIMM's Game(*)

by JOHN RICHARDSON

Seven-fifteen a.m. We're driving westward along the A66 between Penrith and Threlkeld, just about in time for our allocated start at 8:04. There's not much conversation. The weather for the past week has been cold, wet, windy and the forecast for the weekend is much the same, plus snow on the tops. Small undulations in the low scudding cloud base suggest a fair degree of accuracy in the forecast. Mike's van begins to misfire, nothing too ominous for the first few seconds but rapidly deteriorating into total debilitation as our vehicle hiccups at walking pace over the summit of a modest rise.

We pull off the road, sleet splatters the windscreen, Inken sits in silence, radiating tension. Her partner, Wendy Holmes, is waiting at the start line. I should be dancing with frustration, mad keen to get to grips once more with the 'Karrimor', instead of which one of the first thoughts is "GREAT! The perfect reason/excuse not to compete."

Mike huddles over the engine in the raw, sleety wind, guilty because it is his van, his responsibility, which is making us late for the start. Does he suspect my secret delight at the chance of not having to start at all? Can I nudge those tools into that muddy puddle with my foot without him spotting the covert action? A friend, driving to the same event notices us, stops and gives Inken a lift to the start. But Mike and I are out of luck. Despite losing one of the rotor arm bolts, dropped from frozen fingers into the inaccessible depths, we manage to revive the van and reach the start line at 8:58. The gods have sent us a warning sign which we have chosen to ignore, a weekend of retribution will surely follow.

Starts have not always been so chaotic, so ill-starred. The original two-day mountain marathon was based on Muker in Swaledale. Thirty-odd teams, including several from the Royal Marines, lined up for a Le Mans style start: dash across the road, grab an envelope inscribed with the appropriate

(*) KIMM - Karrimor International Mountain Marathon. A two man, two day, mountain orienteering event first held in 1968 (initiated by Gerry Charnley the event was first sponsored by Karrimor in 1970).

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team number from a hastily rigged washing line, mark your own map from a list of grid references and head out for Great Shunner Fell. Ted Dance was there partnered by Bob Astles. Ever the cool, skilful games player, Ted stood calmly to one side as we scabbled for our envelopes, took a couple of photographs of the historic event, packed his camera, marked up his map and cruised past most of the field within the first mile. Like most of the also-rans my partner Don Talbot and I were carrying thirty-odd pounds.

At the overnight camp Ted and Bob, looking cool and relaxed, made nonchalant comments about the pace on the first day being, "Rather like a good Rucksack Club walk." We ordinary mortals scoffed at their tent, stolen from Ted's young daughters who used it for garden play, and made feverish surreptitious notes.

Bob and Ted went on to win both the 1968 and 1969 events. Don and I went away to give serious attention to lightening our loads.

Rips in the cloud base have begun to reveal that reports of snow on Lakeland summits are false - there is snow right down to valley level. Feeling rather less than on the ball due to our problems getting to the start and having little relish for a traverse of the Dodds in this weather we take a long, circuitous, lower, more runnable route to the first checkpoint in Glenridding. All the same, there are some hints as we traverse a shoulder of High Brow and teeter along the old miner's path high above Glencoyndale in deep, wet white of how conditions must be on the tops.

Mike and I competed in different teams in the first few events, not linking up as 'consenting adults' until 1976 when the race centre was Glen Trool in Galloway. The mass start charged off up a local hill only to find ... nothing. No checkers, no checkpoint, no tent. Joss Naylor didn't seem even to break stride as he veered left and downhill for half a mile towards a trio of walkers. How on earth did he know that these were the checkpoint officials, slightly misplaced? That weekend has bitten deeply into my memory and must have played its part in cementing a long-lasting friendship between Mike and myself. On a flank of Merrick we halted briefly and Mike with his back to the lashing gale held wide his cagoule (the classic flashing position) as, cowering shivering in his lee, I stripped

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to the waist to replace a sodden shirt with a lambswool vest. Later, on the magnificently named Rigg of Jarkness, a mighty flash/boom intimated that we had come within a metre or so of earthing a monstrous bolt of lightning. Many were the retirements in the '76 event, but Mike and I each had something to prove to the other and we clung on, ignoring the fact that we were so late reaching some controls that they had been removed. Pig-headedness had its reward. We finished fourth in the Elite class ... and last.

Checkpoint two lies a thousand feet below the summit of Helvellyn on the other side. Swirral Edge is almost exactly on a straight line from us to it. The snow for the last few hundred feet of ascent is suitable for axe and crampons but Walsh studded shoes and Damart clad fingers will have to suffice. A well remembered feeling of vulnerability flushes the system, focussing the mind. This is no place to loiter thus clad. But the descent to the control from the storm tossed white-out brings us into tolerable wet snow over bog and grass.

The last time we passed this way on a KIMM was in 1985, an event which brought me a certain notoriety. Alistair Macdonald had asked if we would mind featuring in a television programme he was putting together for BBC2. We were filmed at the kit check and interviewed before the start. The television crew looked for us again at the midway camp, but only five Elite teams managed to finish Day One in daylight and we were not among those five.

But there was more to it than that. Leaping down from a high wall quite early in the day I had landed badly, twisting my ankle. My log of the race records: "We put up the tent and I took off shoe and sock. There followed something of a visual shock: the very swollen ankle region jutted out at right angles from the foot which, since the shoe had not been loosened during the day, was still of normal size; it was livid red to the limit of where a somewhat longer than usual sock had covered ankle and lower calf, and black in the centre over the now obscured ankle bone. I thought I'd had it, expecting swelling to increase and stiffness and soreness to make progress impossible on day two. Rather to my surprise as I lay there feeling by turns angry and sorry for myself the pain did not increase and range of movement definitely improved

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as the swelling travelled down into the foot and reached a sort of equilibrium. I decided that if I could get a shoe on in the morning I'd give it a go ... The TV crew were waiting for us at the finish, Alistair with looks more of relief than concern and sympathy. The leg, by now swollen and discoloured halfway up the calf, received close attention from the camera and after an interview of which I remember very little we were asked to run into the finish a second time."

As the credits rolled on the resultant programme Alistair's voice-over was heard: 'Later it was found that John's ankle was not sprained but fractured. He had run 50 miles on a broken leg.'

How thick can you get?

The third leg of the day is a long contouring line across the western slopes of Helvellyn southward to a point on Seat Sandal which overlooks, beneath dramatically black clouds, golden reflected sunshine on Windermere and Morecambe Bay. Anticipating the need for careful navigation we take a bearing and climb out from the control, at a stream junction, only to find a clear green line through the wet snow, exactly on bearing.

*Below: Pete Bland (vaulting gate) and John Richardson, KIMM 1972
(St. Mary's Loch, Selkirk)*



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The navigational element of the competition has always held a strong attraction. Many times we have made mistakes - as well as countless dubious route choices, more often than not as a result of unseemly haste, once or twice due to mismarking the map. Once or twice, however, we got things right, and during the 1971 event in Snowdonia ...

Pete Bland was my partner in those days (from 1970-1975). The Saturday of the first weekend in October (later KIMM moved to the last October weekend) was blisteringly hot. At the midway camp in Cwm Eigiau the grass was strewn with fair-skinned young men huddled in sleeping bags in various shivering and puking stages of heat stroke. Sunday's route took us via Ogwen and the Devil's Kitchen to Beudy Mawr before climbing to Clogwyn station and looping 'round the back' of Snowdon until it emerged through the gap beneath Yr Aran and dropped to the Watkin Path.

At this point Pete and I were still locked in close combat with five other teams all of whom opted to reach the next control, in Cwm Dyli, by heading down to the Glaslyn valley then following the pipeline up into the cwm. Pete and I chose a more direct line over Gallt y Wenallt and were more than pleased when, on rounding the shoulder, a path materialised almost magically at our feet - this path appears now, but not then, on OS maps as a right of way.

That was the last we saw of those five teams. Adrenalin gushed. Even as it happened I found it amazing that such a turn of speed was left in the legs. With pin-point accuracy we raced up a rising traverse across Moel Siabod, checked in at the last control then descended like falling stones to the finish at Plas y Brenin. Second.

I cannot pass Plas without reviving the memory of that flying descent. Was that really me? Did I do that?

Back to reality. From Seat Sandal our route switchbacks eastward: Grisedale Hause, Fairfield, Dovedale, Caudale Moor, Trout Beck, Froswick, Kentmere Reservoir, Harter Fell, Gatescarth Pass. Down into the slop, up into the deep and wet, down again, up again, down, up ... Mike seems to be going well and somewhere along this stretch I begin to feel a rather stronger commitment to the race. Our twenty-fifth-and-last Karrimor.

As we reach the Harter Fell plateau a wave of tiredness flows



into the legs. It is a well understood symptom of approaching 'bonk' (a technical term borrowed from cycling to describe the lack of blood sugar), but it seems only half an hour since I munched a chocolate bar. Making a rapid calculation of how many kilometres of ascent we've done so far I promptly misinterpret my symptoms. A mile later, approaching the descent to Gatescarth, the mistake is obvious and a feverish, too late, cramming down of more chocolate takes place. Too late indeed! At Gatescarth Mike in gathering dusk bounds forward towards the control on Artlecrag Pike while my legs buckle and I lean kitten-weak on a handy fence post. Twenty paces, lean again, twenty paces keep going, chocolate beginning to work.

Our fourth event together as a team was in the Rhinogs in 1979. Marking an early check on day one in the wrong grid square made a pretty disastrous start of it but we hung on and by the time we reached the midway camp had latched on again to the tail end of the bunch. The second day was not much better. Our route choice to the first check took us over endless miles of that heather-over-rock terrain for which the Rhinoggi are so rightly respected. Whilst munching my last chocolate bar I gazed at the map and realised that half our Day Two running time had so far elapsed, but only one third of the distance. Inevitably hunger gripped me almost immediately and I begged and scrounged for scraps from anyone unlucky enough to cross our path. Mike still enjoys taking the mickey about the episode although in fact my total yield was two sticky boiled sweets, until we bumped into Stan Bradshaw who was out giving general encouragement and helping on the organising side. One last time I went into the fawning, cringing, cadging routine. "Yes," said Stan, "I've got a couple of choc bars here somewhere" and he dived into his pockets. My juices began to surge like the Severn Bore ... "Oh, sorry. They must be in my other jacket." Instant bonk! Mike, noting my condition, reached into his sack and produced a fluffy, filthy something. He removed an elastic band, a length of hairy string and a couple of paper clips from what appeared to be a lump of black putty. "Christmas pud! Just what you need." The effect was electric. I felt the lump plummet down, down, down into the void. Within seconds shoulders and arms were twitching and jerking arrhythmically,

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but Mike, sure of the efficacy of the medicine, was jogging on. There seemed nothing else for it but to twitch after him. We finished that one just as the marshals were dismantling the finish funnel - with unseemly haste we rather thought.

Artlecrag Pike stands at the edge of darkness. We plunge down a mud and scree gully, find torches and note with satisfaction the tents of a few retirees.

There's a check, the tenth of the day, below Blea Water before the final leg to Threshthwaite Mouth. In daylight we'd head straight up the shoulder of Mardale Ill Bell, but in darkness and wet snow - better not. We opt for Riggindale Crag and High Street where the snow is deep and spindrift sifts through the wall. And so down to the overnight campsite in Threshthwaite Cove. It's ten past nine. Officially we shouldn't be allowed to start tomorrow, 8pm is the cut-off time according to the rules, but no-one in the control tent seems too bothered. We find a flat bit of ground to pitch the tent.

In the early events, when the first day's course had been perhaps a touch too challenging, it became the custom of the organisers to put out a bright light once darkness had fallen to guide late finishers into the overnight camp. An act of

*Below: Finishing the 1987 KIMM (N. Wales)
Photo: M.Cudahy*



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kindness appreciated by many competitors; a gesture which seemed to say "Well done! You might be slow and maybe your navigational skills could do with a polish but you're no quitter. Welcome to the overnight camp."

1987 was our twentieth mountain marathon. Finishing twenty had become a major target for me. A flood of elite entrants - encouraged, no doubt, by the Alistair Macdonald film of the '85 event - and a slight miscalculation of timing in the submission of our own entry gave us an extremely late start time. Nonetheless we were fiercely fired up and ran strongly, usually in the right direction, from Dolwyddelan over many a hill and dale to Nantle y Garn where darkness engulfed us. The camp lay among the quarries of Cwm Trwsogl, a fairly simple matter of descending the southern side of the hill, picking up the path and following it through the forest to the camp area. On the forest edge, pretty well in line with our compass bearing, shone a brilliant light; a beacon we decided, scarcely pausing to discuss the matter. We approached with confidence and quizzed the loony with the lamp who confirmed immediately that his function was to direct competitors through the forest. "Down there for half a mile, turn right and you're through!"

We galloped off chortling at our foresight in consulting this Welsh half-wit. I even paced out the half mile to the right turn. And then the forest swallowed us whole. Three hours we spent groping through its intestinal tract. Every time we reached a junction we took whichever track went closest to a south-westerly direction and, unfailingly, each track would curve away to right or left. Sustained by murderous thoughts toward our Welsh 'helper' and by a passion to complete 20 KIMMs we plodded on. At length, Mike's torch by now having failed, I spotted an east-west footpath and within minutes we emerged from the Beddgelert forest about three miles beyond the campsite. It was our record latest first day finish, nearly 11pm, and just to round things off Mike had forgotten to pack the pan so we had nothing to brew up in. Before my hands could reach his throat he had rectified this small matter by locating Inken's tent and borrowing her pan.

It is irritating but Mike insists on doing the 'lie-down-on-the-tent-to-check-for-lumps-and-hollows' bit before he will allow the

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poles to be inserted. He pronounces the pitch OK and we push in the seven pegs which hold erect our marvellous little home. He gets in to sort out his gear while I fill the wine box liner which serves for our water. We're ready to cook.

Midway through the 1981 event we camped by Greendale Tarn, west of Wastwater, using Mike's 'thirty-bob-from-Woolworth's-fifteen-years-ago-and-we'll-just-take-the-flysheet-to-save-weight' tent. Hail, sleet, snow fell with abandon during the night and by morning the little tent was bowed under the weight. I swore to have something better for the next year and managed to get hold of a length of lightweight Goretex and a couple of bendy poles. Sue did the rest. The result is not overly attractive to the eye, but to the body ...

The '89 event was in Mallerstang and the Howgills. We reached the midway camp shortly after dark in torrential, icy rain. The tent had to go up for sheer, elemental protection but by the time we had the pegs and poles located the inside was a paddling pool. An amazing transformation followed as we cooked our evening meal and the tent dried itself out. Despite continuing foul weather we enjoyed a snug, comfortable night - apart from the inevitable, occasional cramp.

Tonight's weather does not put the little tent to quite such a rigorous test. We cook on a small gas burner, a modest concession to comfort. Time was I counted out Meta fuel blocks and used a pan no bigger than a decent cup to heat my instant soup to tepid and there are some, I believe, who cook nothing, carrying pre-cooked cold food and a token fuel bar wrapped in kitchen foil as a gesture towards the competition rules.

Mike has chosen the pitch with his usual eye for detail. The lie of the land slides him luxuriously into the middle which means that I and my sleeping bag (of course I've brought my five feather ultralight model leaving the new slightly bulkier but much warmer bag at home) are squeezed up against the tent fabric on the windward side ... which is no problem until the next storm roars down the cove at about 2am. As rain turns to sleet (about 6am) my bag begins to feel a bit damp, although it is actually just cold. Whimpering merely draws the half expected rebuke from the utterly comfortable figure whom I am helping to keep warm.

By 7am sleet has progressed to snow and a dismal dawn reveals

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that the storm has carried off the officials' frame tent. They've reorganised themselves into three smaller tents and my request for our control card meets no objection, simply a cheerful "good luck!" We cower in the tent until the last possible moment - which is actually several moments beyond the last possible moment - then dive (crawl arthritically) out, whip out pegs and poles and roll the slushy bundle into my rucksack. Mike has left something vital at the bottom of his sack which necessitates a furious unpack/repack so we're a minute or two late toeing the line, but we do spot Inken for the first time in twenty four hours.

Mike has a thoroughly well earned reputation for not being at his sparkling best in the early morning. Things have come to a head on several occasions during that hour between stirring and starting Day Two. But the most virulently carbuncular such head came during the '82 event and led, ironically, to a minor triumph. It was the only year in which the event moved seriously southward, to Dartmoor. On a clear, frosty morning I quickly ran through the usual partner-stirring ploys: place a tempting brew substantially beyond his reach (he's out of his bag and back in with the brew in a flash); lie about the time, the distance to the start, the bull charging towards us across the field; truth about how everyone else has packed up and left - Mike is unmoved.

We reached the start line on this occasion just as the Elite class were zooming off on their mass start. Naturally we zoomed after them, marked up check one and charged off to the south-east only to realise five minutes later that we had forgotten to collect our control card. Furious with himself Mike threw his rucksack at me and galloped back to the start, leaving me to continue with the two sacks. I still chuckle over the account he gave of what happened when he got back to camp. Mike approached the control tent at top speed calling to an official who sat at a table officiously shuffling papers.

"Team 27 Elite, control card please."

The official refused to look up, continued to shuffle and called, "Wait over there will you, I'm busy right now." Mike's hands tensed involuntarily and shot forward, thumbs groping for the jugular. The official, aware of sudden atmospheric cooling, leapt backward from his seat, scabbled feverishly in a box and produced card number 27 with surprising speed.

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Mike caught me in what seemed like ten minutes, though he passed generous comment on how much progress I had made carrying two sacks. From then on he gave me a tough time. By check three we had caught up some of the lads I only expect to see at the start and the overnight camp; well, Mike caught them and I clung desperately to his coat-tails. We finished the day tenth, the event fourteenth overall and won the veteran's prize, the only time we have done so, though we came close a few times.

Pluming spindrift borne on an easterly gale enlivens our traverse of High Street. The scene is surreal, on any other day in such a blizzard one might occasionally meet three or four hooded, mittened, breeched, booted, gaitered, cramponed and dedicated mountaineers forging steadfastly ahead. Here, leaping in and out of knee deep footprints, in and out of the whistling white-out, are dozens of competitors in long johns, running shoes, thin cags, polypropylene gloves ... and one over there in SHORTS! Mike mutters the tenor of my thoughts "If this is going to last I'm for finishing at Martindale."

The most snow I can remember during any previous event was 1981, as mentioned above. My log records: "If the night was poor, the morning was worse and several stout hearts failed to make the start line. Mike and I were seven minutes late and went very badly on the long first leg. The new wet snow made the feet colder than I can ever remember, usually they slide almost unnoticed into a state of numbness.

Mike had bad guts and it certainly smelled that way, giving an added incentive to break the trail rather than mark his footsteps. We stopped to disrobe, we stopped for food, for drink, for footcare and for further disrobing. At the first check we were thirty-sixth 'out of thirty-five starters,' said the checker. But then we began to find a bit of oomph and at check three in Langstrath we lay twenty-seventh. I think we finished in the mid twenties and anyway it was rather chuffing to enter the field to a round of applause as the first vets home. Mike, incidentally, was carrying one of his shoes as his toes gave him agony as they thawed out on the run down Langdale." (Later I seem to recall howls of anguish from the showers at RLH). Ted and Don won the vet's prize that year.

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An hour or so later, as we pass through Martindale and deposit the assortment of polythene bags, chocolate wrappers and soup sachets which are our litter from the overnight camp, the weather has changed completely, of course, there are even splashes of sunlight on the thawing snow and many teams pause to doff clothing. Our route lies west up a steep slippery climb to Sleet Fell (good name!) then south over Place Fell to Stoney Rigg Tarn. We've been shadowing a Norwegian team enjoying (?) their first encounter with the Lake District. They jog away from the tarn ahead of us towards the descent into Patterdale and it's rather a surprise as we follow them over the brow and start down the steep slope to see no sign of them.

Suddenly, my feet take flight and I'm bum-sliding down the wet, snow covered grass. Great, this is better than walking. Wooah! No it isn't. Dig the heels in, don't panic! Aim for that little bump and ... Phew! That was too close for comfort. The slope is covered, over a width of several dozen yards, with the skid marks of competitors who have slid this way before us. On wobbly legs we totter down, meeting the Norwegians a couple of hundred feet lower, one looking shaken, sitting in the small, stony hollow which stopped their glissade, the other re-ascending, not for another go but to try to find their maps, one of which Mike has picked up, and their control card. Further down another competitor descends cautiously on hands, backside and one foot, the other held painfully clear of rocks and bracken. Several teams we hear retired at this point and at least one runner visited hospital the following day to have his gravel dug out.

There are four more controls before the Threlkeld finish and the second of these, on the western flank of Raise, has a closing time of 4:15pm. But first we must climb fifteen hundred feet over a shoulder of St. Sunday Crag, descend to Grisedale and the Glenridding mines and climb again through the high col between Whiteside and Raise. According to my watch we reach the check, 'the sheepfold', at 4:17, but the control marker and punch are still there.

Second day deadlines have become an increasingly intrusive feature of the event as the years have rolled by. Many times Mike and I have narrowly achieved such a deadline - or failed to do so, chosen to ignore it and carried on regardless. The 1980 race was on the Isle of Arran. We had

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a frustrating first day making what seemed to be all the wrong choices; if we chose to contour, up and over would be proved by others to be swifter, if we upped and overed other runners would tell of a well beaten path which they had come upon within yards of leaving the previous control. Because of the need to ferry most of the competitors off the island on the Sunday evening, the second day was marked by many tight (for us) deadlines. We made the last such cut-off with a satisfying fifteen minutes in hand only for our concentration to waver and a serious navigational error to occur. This caused us to be so late at the finish that: a) Arch rivals-and-friends Dance and Talbot whom we had well licked with only a check to go beat us to the tape by a few minutes, and b) we had no alternative other than to run straight through the finish to our base tent, hastily bundle it into a sack and race on to catch, by the skin of our teeth, the last ferry to Ardrossan.

In mist and fading light we head north over the Dodds and waste valuable minutes of daylight seeking out the last hill control which is in Jim's Fold above Wanthwaite Crag. All that remains is the precipitous traverse across the crags in near darkness, deep wet snow and on rubbery legs. It knocks the final dregs of competitive spirit out of me and Mike has to administer a benevolent Walsh to the long johns to keep me moving. It is clear that the dedicated souls marshalling the finish are waiting only for us and one or two other teams. No, we are not the last to finish but the fiasco with which Day One started has ensured that we have the longest overall running time. And this completes a rather satisfying cycle: in our first and last Elite Karrimors, separated by sixteen years of ups and downs, Mike and I contrived to finish last.

Sue, who has come to the finish to cheer us in, has been getting seriously worried. Such is the state of the communication system in this huge event that, because we finished late on Saturday the race controllers have no record of our participation in Day Two.

Inken and Wendy, having battled all the way round to Patterdale on Day Two, but realising they have no chance of reaching the control with the 4:15 deadline in time, have finished over the Dodds without calling at the last three controls. Frustrating!

All in all it has been a worthy final act in twenty-five consecutive mountain marathons. A couple of years ago we both realised that the fascination of the event was wearing thin for us. There's the

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monstrous size of the thing, so far removed from those earlier years when most of the faces of the competitors and officials alike were familiar, and such a distance too from events such as our own club fell race where navigation skills are of the essence. The trouble was that for most, if not all, of our years together we were the only team to have entered every Karrimor in the Elite class and ultimately that became a treadmill from which it proved difficult to disengage. So, two years ago, we made a pact to try for twenty-five, then call a halt.

No doubt there will be withdrawal pains. Mike told everyone we encountered in this year's race: "This is our last time." Few believed him, but I'm sure Mike does after so many replays of the tape. Me, I intend to be somewhere far away on the last weekend of October 1993, discovering the peaks of some sunny Mediterranean island maybe, or on the Club's island meet.

*M.Cudahy on the Eagle Stone above Baslow, White Peak
Photo: I.Blunk*

