



IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER

FOREWORD BY MARTIN STONE

In June 1980 my running partner Peter Simpson and I were sitting on a yacht during the Three Peaks Yacht Race, discussing ideas for a supported Bob Graham attempt on the shortest day. The original challenge was all about completing the round in classic winter conditions with maximum darkness, in less than 24 hours. Lightweight torches were in their infancy and one could not travel quickly in the dark. There were no microspikes and ice axes were not super lightweight. We had both already completed a Summer BG and had some mountaineering skills, although I was still only 21 at the time.

Our first midwinter attempt started well, though with plenty of fresh snow. Ultimately, we lost a lot of time on Broad Stand and – after I told him to continue alone – Pete finished in 26-and-a-half hours, having valiantly battled through deep snow. Over the next few years, other runners would battle the elements on the shortest day to finish what we started. All doomed to fail.

A new approach was called for. Over the past six years I had been developing the ‘solo unsupported’ concept, inspired by the groundbreaking exploits of mountaineer Reinhold Messner, solo on Everest. Was it possible for someone to complete a solo unsupported midwinter BG on the shortest day? I got swallowed up in a blizzard on the Helvellyn Ridge on the shortest day of 1986 and then succeeded on 8th January 1987. It was the adventure of a lifetime.

Pete and I are delighted to observe the reconnection with our original midwinter concept that has taken place this winter – one that sees runners not only attempting a round in winter, but in the middle of winter, in the days surrounding the shortest day of the year*. After I completed my solo unsupported midwinter round, it was 33 years before Shane Ohly completed the second round in this style. And this winter, five people have completed solo unsupported winter rounds, three of which have been in midwinter.

However one tackles a winter Bob Graham, supported or solo unsupported, in winter or midwinter, it will never be easy. Hours of darkness, low temperatures, challenging weather and conditions underfoot will all contribute to an experience that is altogether different from a summer round. At the end of the day it is quite an eccentric undertaking but I wholeheartedly echo Finlay’s comment at the end of Ross’s article about the bond one feels with those who have also experienced these winter adventures.

**for further information on a midwinter vs winter round, please visit bobgrahamclub.org.uk*

Frost-bitten grass cracks underfoot as your headtorch pierces a corridor of light through the inky blackness showing yet another wall of tussocks and fellside. Later, you bend double against the gales which rush stinging rain against your face, 12 hours into the 16 hours of darkness that you have to contend with.

BACKGROUND: Henriette and her support runners climbing Dale Head © James Appleton



Wet shoes, frozen fingers, breath rising in clouds, the demons in the dark - the hope of a clear winter sunrise. It takes a bold fell runner to take on a midwinter Bob Graham Round.

Since the first recorded sub-24-hour winter Bob Graham Round in early December 1986 by Selwyn Wright and John Brockbank, 57 other runners have since been recorded as having taken on one of the biggest fell running challenges in the most testing conditions. Interest in a winter BGR has waxed and waned over the years, with a shower of attempts in the 1980s, a lull between 2000 and 2005, before this winter's flurry of completions in quick succession. Not only were they in quick succession, four of them were fast midwinter rounds, and - as is the case with any Bob Graham attempt - all were unique, with their own distinctive challenges.

CAPTURING THE IMAGINATION

"A winter round means doing the best with what you get - you need to be ready for absolutely anything", says Henriette Albon, who broke Elsey Whyman-Davis' winter record in a time of 17 hours 55 minutes. The Norway-based athlete - who rubs shoulders with former summer Bob Graham record holder Kilian Jornet, Emily Forsberg and her own husband and elite runner Jon Albon - came out of the blue to take the fastest time. For Henriette, however, it was something that had been on her mind for a while:

"There is a growing awareness of the Bob Graham Round. There are so many Fastest Known Times (FKTs) out there, but the BGR has a rich history around it. There is a different level to it - something that really captures the imagination."

For someone who spends their summers racing at the elite level in skyrunning and mountain running, the space between

seasons gives opportunity for that imagination to be captured. Having previously lived in the UK, Henriette set her sights on a fast time and, despite all her racing success, reflects on her winter round as one of her favourite running-related memories.

For others, the allure of a winter Bob Graham Round is rooted in familiarity; an intimate relationship with their local fells pulls them to explore them in new ways. Andy Berry - whose name continues to crop up alongside records like the winter Tranter Round and the Lake District 24-hour Record - saw the winter Bob Graham as the cherry on top of a multi-year project.

"I had done the Bob Graham all the ways I could think of and a solo, unsupported, midwinter, anti-clockwise round was the last on the list", he says.

After laying down his first attempt in 2017, Andy's 2023 midwinter attempt saw him clock a time 35 minutes faster than 2017 in 18 hours and 6 minutes. His eyes had been on his own coach Kim Collison's winter record but, as is the nature with winter attempts, runners are at the mercy of the weather gods.

A rising star in the long-distance fell running scene is Jack Oliver, a mountaineering instructor also based in the Lakes. He, too, has an intimate knowledge of his local fells, having run his supported BGR (also in winter) in 2022. While Jack had an unsupported winter attempt in the back of his mind, it was still - as is often the case - on a whim:

"I was sitting there on Christmas Day and I just thought, 'I could do a Bob Graham tomorrow!' I went out on a whim and under the radar, which I like. With winter you just have to know your stuff and be prepared to suffer. You have the conditions, which impact how you move, there's more kit and [it's] colder. Winter brings a different challenge, especially the dark. It's just you, moving at night. It's peaceful, but it is a big challenge."

INTO THE DARKNESS

In a summer Bob Graham Round, attempts tend to jostle around the summer solstice, seeking the greatest amount of daylight possible. In winter, runners can expect to face the swallowing darkness for at least 16 hours, battling with demons of the night. Even so, there will be hours of daylight, which can warm the soul and lighten the spirit.

As usual, though, Finlay Wild cast convention aside. Having already laid down the second-fastest (now third-fastest) summer time, the Flying Scotsman from Fort William fancied a new challenge of his own making. Along came the 'Dark BG' - an idea to run a Bob Graham Round in winter between sunset and sunrise. Solo, unsupported.

The first attempt came on the longest night of the year. Finlay remembers, "I set off with a real sense of foreboding. I had been planning on a winter solstice attempt for months, regardless of the weather, but it was so bad. By Scafell Pike conditions had deteriorated further - heavy rain and very strong winds - and it became impossible to continue. I had all my layers on and was feeling OK but I had a narrowing safety margin and it became clear that I wasn't going to get round. The weather was atrocious, so I came down. It was still an amazing experience and some of the worst weather I have ever been in, so it tested all my systems."

Fast-forward to 6 January and Finlay was off again at 4.03pm with 15 minutes less darkness to play with than last time. "The weather could not have been any more different", he says. Stars studded the sky as he left his stud marks on frozen summits. The outlines of the fells cut across the skyline, providing some level of orientation in the dark.

Arriving back at Moot Hall after 15 hours 35 minutes, Finlay laid down a new record time for a winter round in a way that might only be attempted by very few.

In a sense, this was Finlay's way of embracing the essence of a winter Bob Graham. Andy Berry says, "The winter round was never about the conditions; it was about the darkness. That really tests you mentally."

SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE

A winter Bob Graham Round is a true test of one's mountaineering: to know the unpredictable nature of the mountains to assess risk, change plans, navigate well at night and look after oneself are all skills required in either a supported or unsupported winter attempt.

As a skilled mountaineer, Jack Oliver was drawn to the more holistic challenge a winter round presents: "You're constantly having to keep yourself in check and juggle different priorities. It was this epic day that challenged me in so many different ways."



ABOVE: Henriette and team climbing Lord's Rake © James Appleton

Reflecting on his attempt, Jack jokes the first legs were almost a breeze: "It rained on leg one which initially concerned me, but I put my headphones in over the Dodds and just sailed along to Helvellyn and caught the most incredible sunrise on Fairfield.

"I was having such a blast and in a flow state when, on Bowfell, I hit the deck which seriously rattled me. I considered binning it because my hip was so sore. I wondered if I'd miss my target time, but actually I built my way back over leg four and five and I think overcoming that slump actually made the round that much sweeter.

"You are totally reliant on yourself in that moment, so to know I could overcome that hurdle myself was a massive achievement."

As someone who has done a mix of supported and unsupported attempts, Andy Berry knows well the merits and challenges inherent in both. There's a simplicity in strapping a pack on and heading into the fells for an adventure, but there's a deep sense of camaraderie which comes from a supported effort.

"In a way, this was a bit of a jolly for me", he says. "I like having a mix of performance-focused projects - like the 24-hour record - and ones that are adventures for myself. It isn't one or the other for me."

Henriette is the odd one out in this group in that she opted for a supported round, but as someone for whom this was their first Bob Graham, it was a chance to sample the unique culture which surrounds the round.

"I have done a lot of unsupported FKTs in the past. The odd thing about the BG is the support element, with the road crossings and the WhatsApp groups - it is really unique that way. For me, that was a bit strange, but it elevated the day for me.

"I remember crossing one of the roads and Martin Stone was standing there and he shouted, 'You're a superstar!' And you really do feel like that! It was incredible to share that experience with people."

While a supported Bob Graham does facilitate a more performance-based attempt, Henriette is clear that is not what it is all about. Having read all the books and studied the culture, she laughs that her attempt was "like visiting Disneyland®" with all the imbued history and community around it.

"That is what it is about", she says. "The record helps you push your boundaries, but this was just the coolest adventure for me."

CHANGING FACE OF WINTER ROUNDS

With almost 3000 fell runners having now undertaken a summer Bob Graham attempt, are we now seeing the spillover into winter rounds as runners seek greater and greater challenges? As Henriette says, winter records are becoming of greater interest to elite athletes who are seeking a goal in the off-season.

Andy and Finlay agree on this point, but Finlay adds that projects like a winter BGR allow for a different kind of experience: "I find these attempts often spark your imagination and curiosity in different ways than racing, and they can get much more out of you. I often think they allow me to get much deeper into the mountains and your experience of them."

There is, of course, the social media factor. Jack - whose sunrise selfie on Instagram garnered nearly 500 likes - admits that the growth of awareness in winter rounds and their allure could be down to the increasing social media presence of fell running.

"I think it is great more people are being inspired to explore the fells in different ways, but an Instagram post can hide the real story behind these attempts and what it takes to succeed in them. People see the beautiful sunrise shots, but they don't see you knee-deep in a frozen bog in the wind and rain, because who is getting their phone out for that?!"

Jack has tried to bring some honesty to social media about the fickle nature of winter rounds. He has twice tried to undertake a winter Paddy Buckley and twice been forced off. In a candid Instagram video shot within the safety of his car, he recounts how sometimes the weather or how you feel, simply don't align. The fells will be there another day, when they lower their defences and allow the brave to take them on.

Reflecting on the changing perception of winter rounds, Finlay offers a sagacious view: "There's a real bond you feel with people who have done stuff like this. It's cool to be living and running in a time surrounded by other people interested in these rounds and wanting to push each other in this style.

"To be honest, it is quite a quirky thing we are into, but for all of us it is a love of the mountains and adventure, and I think that's really powerful."



HENRIETTE ALBON

© James Appleton



ANDY BERRY

© Andy Berry



FINLAY WILD

© Rosie Watson



JACK OLIVER

© Jack Oliver