

25th Llanbedr to Blaenavon Fell Race-Celebration or Requiem

I arrived in Blaenavon 26 years ago as a fresh faced GP having served my apprenticeship in Cumbria where I acquired a liking for long fell races. At the time this was not an activity the local populous was familiar with, rugby being the only sport worth talking about. So a GP running about the hills in shorts was definitely a bit of an oddity so it was a great pleasure to discover another kindred spirit had also migrated south, one Phillip Dixon who at the time was pastor of one of the numerous chapels.

So with Philip's evangelical flare to the fore we set about bringing Fell running to the valleys of S Wales and the race was born. The first race was in 1980 when Phillip beat 37 other hardy souls in 2hrs 10min, and with the exception of the foot and mouth year 2001 it has been held every year since. The route has undergone a few changes over the years due to changes of land ownership and access difficulties but has always featured the now notorious North face of the Blorenge as the final climb. MDC was formed about this time and with it came many other races in S Wales. So although Wales has an earlier fell running hero in Guto I guess we can claim to have reintroduced the sport to S Wales in the modern era.

The original route going E from Crug Mawr through Forest Coal Pit was my favourite even though it included a road section as it gave one a runnable route up Sugar Loaf. The way off the hill then got incorporated into a garden so next up was the direct route on this leg with the kind consent of the local farmers. I was never very keen on this one as it was a bit of a slog up Sugar Loaf which only the very fit could run. So when there were some changes in land ownership I took the opportunity to alter the route to its current format which though longer allows most people to run Sugar Loaf

By far the most successful runner over the years has been Andy Darby who won the race no less than 8 times in the 80's and early 90's. His best time of 1.53.38 has never been beaten and 5 of his wins broke the 2hr barrier which has only otherwise been broken by 10 others over the years. I have excluded the 1986 race from these statistics as it was as a British championship race run over a slightly shorter route to accommodate the larger numbers, a record of 106. This was won by Jack Maitland in the remarkable time of 1.50.17 with the next 2 also just under Andy's time but only Jack's record could be considered to have bettered Andy's performance. There have been 3 other multiple winners, Simon Forster with 3 and Mark Palmer and James McQueen with 2 each. Two vets have won the first being Les Williams in 89 and the other being John Nixon in 92 in one of the few times under 2 hrs (1.58.58). Of the ladies Lydia Gould in 92 set the best time of 2.16.13 on the old course but Menna Angharads time of 2.19.03 is arguably better given the longer route.

Numbers have been fairly consistent over the years averaging 50-60 with the occasional 80 in years when the race has been included in the Welsh championship but since the foot and mouth year numbers have fallen worryingly to 40 in 02 and 03 and to only 25 last year and of those 15 were Veterans or older.

And so to this year our 25th anniversary and the title of this article

YES we are going to celebrate so after the race I have booked a proper meal in a local restaurant in the early evening which I hope most of the competitors will stay for and to which I shall also invite our helpers and of course we would love to see some of those who competed in earlier races joining us as well. I'm afraid I have no means of contacting most of them I can only hope they still read The Fellrunner and contact me. Then on the Sunday we will organize a short fun race of about 5 miles as a handicap based on the previous day's times so in theory you should all finish together. So please come and make a weekend of it, have a look around our World Heritage Industrial landscape and visit Big Pit with its fascinating underground tour which incidentally is free. Also the Archbishop of Canterbury is taking the service in our 200 year old church on Sunday for the religious amongst you We may be able to help with basic floor space or camping locally if you need it.

BUT- There seems to be an undeclared civil war going on within Welsh Fell running between AAW and the reformed WFRA both of which are currently hoping to use our race as part of their separate Welsh Championships. Both have their own and separate insurance policies only one of which can be used for any given race. So at present I don't know under which banner the race will be run or if the other group whichever it is will turn up or boycott the race. Most of my helpers come from MDC which has mostly gone with the WFRA but my son needs to be associated with AAW for team selection purposes. So I am kind of stuck in the middle and with already lower numbers competing we can't afford to split our numbers further. We are traditionally the first significant race of the new season in Wales so time is short to sort out this mess.

So there we have it I'm planning to celebrate but without everyone's support this could be the 25th and final Llanbedr to Blaenavon race.

As I need to have numbers in advance for the meal please enter in advance on a form obtainable from my address. Meanwhile I am keeping my fingers crossed!!