

# SOME FACETS, PSYCHOLOGY and PITFALLS of UNDERTAKING a CLASSIC CHALLENGE

by Martin Barry

**This is an exploration of two differing experiences of the same fell running challenge and some insights it gave me into professional practice and managing adventurous situations.**

The Bob Graham Round (BGR) involves 42 Lake District Fells totalling 70-75 miles of distance and 27,000ft of ascent (about 2000ft less than the height of Everest) and the challenge is to do it in under 24hrs. (Editor)

A few years ago a student enquired if I had any experience of doing the Round as he wanted some advice about training for it. I replied that I hadn't for the simple reason that at age 47, "if I was going to do it I would have done it by now." On successful completion of the Round the student was buoyant with encouragement and assurance that it was within my capabilities and within a few moments I was mentally committed.

Along with the highs and lows of doing the challenge, first while supported in summer and then repeating it solo in winter, I became aware of a number of learning points of relevance to my professional practice

### Learning Point -the Pitfalls of Organised Supported challenges

The obvious downside to a ratified attempt is that it entails a significant amount of logistics with lots of people to act as pacers and vehicles to get them to and from their drop-off/pick up points. Hence once a date is set and the organisation is in place, it is all too easy to 'go for it' irrespective of the weather. This is exactly what we did in May 2015 and I managed to do the first 2 legs before getting thoroughly thrashed in wind and rain on the higher fells, resulting in at least one hypothermic pacer. The successful round in better conditions 2 weeks later was a very sociable yet humbling 23 hours due to the care and attention I was given to enable me to complete the challenge; the time, patience and energy offered by my pacers was the best part of the whole thing, especially as I didn't have to carry a sac on the hill!

A couple of things really stick in my mind with regards to the highly organised and supported summer attempt.

The first is that despite many years of experience and mountain knowledge I felt unwilling to cancel the ill-fated first attempt despite awful weather and a poor forecast, as I was acutely aware of the organisational energy and time my pacers were giving.

This is one of the heuristic traps (more of which later) which I fell into. It is recognised as the type of behaviour that contributes for example, to the avalanching of winter climbers when they may have driven a long way, have limited holidays and can feel compelled to get some routes done despite poor avalanche reports and snow conditions.

Second is that one of my pacers (obviously fit and strong) got hypothermic and needed aid after pacing me on leg 1. We are of similar build and were wearing the same amount and type of running clothing, but we reacted physiologically somewhat differently.



### Learning point - the Power of Agency in Resilience and Success

I feel that in this case the issue related to ownership of the experience and agency, whereby my pacer had less invested in the run and perhaps knew that he would be stopping soon. I have noted before that those who have more ownership of an experience often have more endurance. Once when leading adult students on a long caving trip in Europe involving swimming three cold underground lakes I had to escort 3 groups across and take the buoyancy aids and wetsuit vests back to the start. I was therefore surprised at the end to find two of the students in a group shelter needing to be rewarmed, especially as I am generally not good with cold and wet myself. As the leader of the trip I had lots invested in the task of re-swimming the lakes and I felt that there was simply a necessity to accomplish it, whereas I feel that the caving students were perhaps in the same mental state of my BGR pacer, who felt that they could ease their resolve given their own tasks were almost complete.

The link here for me as an outdoor educator is partly to the issues of physical and mental resilience, but mainly with regards to the ownership of the experience, such that when adults or young people are given opportunities to be part of the decision making process, outcomes can change.

Intuitively, we can feel that as trained outdoor practitioners, we need to be in charge of many decisions, especially those involving hazards, and when we delegate the responsibility the risk factor goes up. Research <sup>1</sup> suggests that this is not necessarily the case, reinforcing the notion that allowing students a sense of autonomy is an important pedagogical tool.

Studies <sup>2</sup> in the United States by colleagues at Outward Bound and NOLS\* found that accident rates and near misses were no different when students were having an autonomous student experience (ASE) than when accompanied by instructors. Furthermore, it was reported that those sampled (14-24 yrs. range) found that the ASE

led to a much more authentic and meaningful outdoor experience, enabling the students to take charge of their own lives.

Recent research <sup>3</sup> suggests that what really makes learning adventurous is the presence of agency (feeling they have an impact on the task or experience) and uncertainty in the completion of the task or experience.



## Learning Point - Balancing Risk/Benefit for Personal and Extreme Adventures

Having completed the round in the summer, I decided to change the parameters somewhat by attempting the round in winter and solo. I was sensitive to the fact that the environmental impact of vehicle use, and that I had fallen into a trap regarding the weather with the first attempt. I wanted to have another go and essentially do it 'cleaner' and with less faff.

Constraints were that in order for it to be considered a 'winter round' it has to be completed before the end of February and although the weather was settled at the end of the month it was also freezing with any snow on the tops being bullet-hard neve in many places (a bit of a tall order for fell shoes). In contrast to the summer round, this was logistically simpler, involved minimal vehicle use and was self-supported. It also facilitated some amazing solo experiences on the tops in clear and cold weather, running by headtorch with absolutely no-one else about (I didn't see anyone from the 9pm start until 2pm the next day).

Although running solo, I was absolutely convinced that someone was running closely behind me; an unnerving experience and one which caused me to turn around and check on more than one occasion! In contrast to the summer round, I felt quite lonely at times and very vulnerable, in that a broken ankle or trip resulting in getting knocked out would have potentially serious consequences. But balancing this risk against the experience and our own judgement and decision making is why we do these things...

## Learning Point - too much Heuristics can be the death of us

Busy lives lead us into trying to squeeze lots of things in, and as noted the conditions at the end of February were cold and clear with hard neve in places. Neve can be a great thing for the winter traveller, perhaps except when wearing fell-running shoes. One of the constraints of going solo and unsupported was the necessity to leave out ice axe or some sort of spikes. This is where we come back to heuristics. Some ascents saw me moving anxiously over significant patches of hard, steep neve with ugly-looking run-outs below, whilst cursing the ineffectiveness of my ski pole and chiding myself for attempting this steep ground in fell shoes.

Despite being an experienced and competent winter climber, I pondered how I got myself into the situation where I could easily have 'spent the rest of my life getting to the bottom.' Heuristics essentially are learnt shortcuts which reduce cognitive load, but the jury is out on whether these 'rules of thumb' are useful but flawed, or just flawed.<sup>4</sup> The heuristics acronym of FACETS<sup>5</sup> goes some way to explaining it.



**FAMILIARITY** – it's always been OK before

**ACCEPTANCE** – what will others think if I backed out?

**COMMITMENT** – we've set aside resources and time in planning

**EXPERT HALO** – the other person knows lots so it must be fine

**TRACKS / SCARCITY** – this chance might not come around for a while

**SOCIAL FACILITATION** – others have done it so it must be OK

## Learning point- How Preset Aims and Ideas influence even Experienced Judgement

In my own situation I can see how a number of the categories applied to the situation I got myself into, particularly the fact that I knew I wouldn't be able to have another go for nearly a year and couldn't justify the time in training any longer.

The classic BGR tends to start and finish in one particular spot and a decision needs to be made on which legs are done in the dark. Starting from another point or timing it such that I would be on the highest fells during the warmest part of the day didn't enter my mind, yet these issues would of course be some of the main considerations if climbing in the Alps.<sup>6</sup> I couldn't help thinking how my poor decision-making in spite of significant experience could have been my undoing.

Being constrained by dates now seems foolish and goes against intuition, experience and professional judgement. For example, the winter record was run in conditions much kinder than those often found in summer and better, safer running conditions continued well past February yet were still very wintry. This is no reflection on the BGR stipulations simply that rules in mountainous terrain can be 'for the guidance of the wise and blind obedience of fools'. I think I now know which I am! ■

## REFERENCES

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\*NOLS – National Outdoor Leadership School

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