

# Denis Rankin Round: Discovering My Ultra-Ego

## Introduction

It was back in February, on a cold evening, Micky had arrived at the hub in Mallusk and I could tell he wasn't himself. When I questioned him, it transpired that he was planning to do the Denis Rankin Round that weekend, but his support had fallen through and he was going to cancel.

Little did I know that my actions over the next 10 minutes would ultimately set me on a path of discovery of my own over the next 5 months...

I had never even walked in the Mourne before, let alone run, Dambusters half marathon doesn't really cut it for the purposes of what we were about to do.

Ultimately I received a text in the early hours of Saturday morning from Micky to say that the winds were too high and the round was a no go, I felt bad for him as I knew how much he was geared up for the challenge that weekend, but for me it was probably a blessing in disguise.

Over the next few weeks I went on recce runs for the sections I'd be supporting on, I loved it, I'd always been fond of trail running but never on this level, the word 'fell' always scared me a bit but I was loving this.

To cut a long story short, Micky got to do his round a few weeks later and I got some invaluable experience at fell running and course navigation for sections 3 and 4... the wick had been lit but deep down I knew I was a long way off, I hadn't even run an ultra before, never mind one over this sort of terrain and elevation.

My first ultra, albeit on the roads of Connemara, was a couple of weeks later. I survived my first race at an ultra distance and my confidence started to grow. I started reading books by Scott Jurek, Hal Korner, Killian Jornet and races such as the UTMB, Western States, Hardrock came on to my radar and started to take priority on my to do list.

My attention turned back to the Denis Rankin Round but deep down any serious thought of 'I'm going to do this' was met by an overwhelming fear of what that would entail, after all I'm still a complete novice when it comes to fell running, what right do I have to be taking on this beast.

The Mourne Way Ultra was next, for me this was going to be the benchmark for committing to the Round. If I couldn't handle 52 miles of trail in the foothills of said mountains, then there was no way I'd be able to manage that distance going *over* 39 of them.

8 hours is a lot of thinking time, I hadn't seen anyone for hours and I was closing in on the last section to Kilbroney forest, a runner was coming towards me, as he got closer I recognized the face, it was Aaron Shimmons out on a training run, what are the chances! I'd first met Aaron during Micky's round and he had waited in Donard Car Park with us for him to complete, that was a stroke of fate I thought and once the dust from the race began to settle, I set a date.

## The Round

It was 12:30am on Saturday morning, I pulled into Deer's Meadow and there was Micky waiting in his car.

I ditched my car at the side of the lay-by, I already knew how happy I would be the next time I saw it, this was going to be our only real 'aid station' on the round as we had no other support arranged.

We dropped another small bag each in the long grass at Spelga and proceeded to Donard car park.

I had butterflies in my stomach as we drove under the white arch and parked up. We had 45mins to kill before the scheduled 2am start time.

We sat in amusement watching as several drunken groups staggered through the car park from the pub, boy and girl racers weaving their way through from time to time.

I got out of the car fully kitted up with 15mins to go, said girl racer had now parked a few spaces away with her window open. She looked over and said, "Are you going running up them there mountains", I nodded and said yes, then conversation fell silent, she gave me a look as if to say you're insane and for that moment I was in total agreement.

With 10minutes to go we did a final kit check and then over to the White Arch for a quick selfie and count-down.

## Section 1

With a touch of the pillar we were off, jogging through the car park and in to Donard Forest.

I was very aware that I needed to be patient at this point, I have a habit of going out of the trap like a rabbit, but not today and not over this course. I had studied previous rounds and knew that summiting Donard in just over an hour was a good marker, so we tried to stick to that.

The weather was perfect, hardly a breath of a breeze and a very mild 13 degrees, not bad for N.Ireland at 2am in the morning but it did have me slightly worried about what would follow. It had been a warm few days and the forecast for later was no different and doing this unsupported we just hoped we had everything we needed and enough water to last the round if the heat really turned up.

The ascent of Donard had gone well, we touched our first cairn at 1h05mins, right on target. I was relieved to get the first summit done, after all its the biggest elevation gain of the day. However, I knew that was only half the story as it is also the most straight forward summit of the day, with its well-trodden path and nice neat stone steps to the summit, the majority of the remaining 38 summits would not be so kind in that respect.

Around the wall corner and off we glided into the night, our head torches danced from rock to divot as we descended Donard and the real work was about to begin. I had recce'd this section a few times and felt confident with the directions in the dark, so I took the lead to begin my share of the navigation for the day.

I was very aware that Micky had done this all before and I didn't want to fall in to the trap of being a sheep following the herd all day, firstly I wouldn't have been content with that and secondly navigating (especially in the dark) can be very mentally draining, it would be good for us both to give our brains a

rest at different points throughout the day and just follow the footsteps of the other. I hit my mark along the wall, and it was off along a diagonal path to begin the assault on Chimney Rock. Its good trail running along here, and I always enjoy this ascent, we opened up and were making good time.

Summit 2 achieved in 1h35mins, but now the first tricky section of the day begins. On a previous recce in the day light, we had tried a direct route from Chimney to Rocky, it was OK but there really is no nice way off Chimney in that direction and we were worried about the difficult boulder/fern terrain in the dark, so instead opted for more of a horseshoe approach, the advantage being that we could avoid most of the rocks and maintain as much elevation already gained, making up for the extra distance travelled.

It worked, still not perfect and by no means an easy path, but once we hit Rocky it was a straightforward hop to the summit and off along the wall to the trail running pastures of the brandy pad.

I really enjoyed this section and before we knew it, we had summited Beg and Cove. Standing aloft Cove the darkness had faded and the sun was rising to reveal a beautiful clear, majestic view of the Annalong valley and the path we had travelled in darkness for that last few hours. Nature commanded that we pause for a moment to take it all in, it was a far cry from the last time I had stood aloft Cove back in May, on that day it was like something out of the Kingdom of Narnia, covered in crisp white snow, made all the more strange by the fact it was an incredibly mild spring day and the appearance of snow (never mind snow a few inches deep) was a completely unexpected sight.

Next was Slievelamagan, again we seemed to tick this one off at a good pace and swiftly negotiate the tricky boulder field on the descent.



My mind was starting to wander to the descent of Binnian, I didn't enjoy it much during the recce and my mind was reminding me of that, sticking it front and square in my conscience as the first mental hurdle of the day to get over. I tried to force it out by turning my attention to what I could control, a trick I had picked up from Scott Jurek, during a race he would often bring his attention back by doing a quick run-down of how his body was feeling at that moment and if there was any action that could be taken to make it better. Am I thirsty, am I hungry, yes... time to take on more fluids and food etc.

That distraction seemed to work, and we had passed by the summits of the North Tor and Binnian.

Then... there we were, standing aloft Binnian looking down to Wee Binnian, no distraction techniques were going to make this feel any better, it was time to man up and just get it done. We took a slightly different route to recce day and it certainly seemed to help, or maybe my mind had just built it up over

the weeks I had to think about it in advance, either way we got it done and stood at the foot of the

rather ironically named Wee Binnian, it may be 'wee' in terms of elevation, but after a punishing descent from Binnian nothing feels wee about that short sharp climb.

The last summit of S1 was done and off we headed to the Silent Valley reservoir. There is some strange vegetation in this area, jaggy (watch the waterproofs) and plants that seem more akin to a tropical rainforest than the County Down countryside.

Section 1 was done; 5h05mins, we were on target for time and all in all we felt pretty good. I was relieved, even though it's only a fifth of the sections it's a third of the round in terms of elevation, so getting it done and dusted was a good milestone to complete. Having said that, most of section one is well trodden trail paths and I knew things were going to change, and they did... almost immediately...



## Section 2

Leaving Silent Valley reservoir, we headed off towards Slievenagloagh. We toyed with the idea of taking the normal long route around the perimeter of the field, although longer, you steer clear of most of the marshy ground in this area. We caved to the temptation of a shorter diagonal here, despite knowing from our Mourne map that marshy ground was afoot, we shrugged and thought "it hasn't rained for weeks and the sun has been splitting the stones all week, eh...how bad can it be?"... bad... was the answer to that, very bad, especially near any patches of what looked like red grass, these were one of those 'red means danger' nature warnings. We managed to hop, skip and wade our way through most of

this without too much drama, until the last 20m or so. We came to a marshy area of red grass and I dipped my trekking pole only to see it disappear right up to the hand grip and still no sign of it touching the bottom. A few near misses and a couple of knee-deep sinkages, we managed to haul our way through it and begin the ascent of Slievenaglogh.

On paper Slievenaglogh doesn't seem like much of a problem, but it's a tough climb, compounded by the leg sapping ground en-route. You've also given back a lot of elevation gain on the descent to Silent Valley and that base elevation needs to be picked up again. Summit gained and off along the long stony trail past Lough Shannagh to Doan.

Usually this is the sort of ground I relish, but I'd had an annoying foot injury in the lead up to my DRR attempt (hardly ideal...), and this was the sort of terrain that was causing me the most discomfort. I looked for smoother side trails off the main rocky path at every opportunity, this seemed to be working and pain management was being kept well under control. Doan is a great looking mountain, it reminds me of the sort of mountain you'd draw as a kid for a volcano, straight diagonal sides going up to a point.

Visibility wise, it was still a crystal-clear day, from the summit of Doan we picked out our line across the valley below to the Ben Crom trail. This can be a tricky section, underfoot there is just no nice way of getting there and you can easily get stuck in a maze of 6ft, energy sapping peat hags on the other side of the river. Luckily, we had chosen wisely and picked up the trail to the summit of Ben Crom without any drama. We did our customary peek over the edge, a sheer couple of hundred-meter cliff edge to the Ben Crom reservoir below, summit gained and on our way.

The next section from Ben Crom to Carn is just, well, crap. There is no other word I can think of that better describes it, it's crap!

Peat hags, knee high thick grass, jaggy ferns, marshy red grass and it just seems to go on like that forever. All made worse by the fact that I'd picked a tough time of year to do the round and we knew vegetation growth would be an issue, it was, and that became more apparent as the day progressed.

We made our way out of the 'crap' close to the foot of Slieve Loughshannagh. I tried not to look too closely or think much about that, allowing your mind to wander about a mountain that was in section 5 when section 2 was not yet completed is not smart, it only opens the door to negative thoughts that every ultra-runner tries to bury deep down, especially during the first half of a long race. Thoughts buried, it was over the stile and off to complete the last 2 summits of section 2, Carn and Slieve Muck.

The ascent of these were not a problem, it was the descent of Muck that was now causing my mind issues. I had been trying not to think about it, but it was getting ever closer. My hip flexors were already shot, and the thought of that long sharp descent was not filling me with joy. The only upside to all of this was I knew after the descent we would get to my car parked in Deer's Meadow, the contents of said car were now starting to sing to us both and we were very much looking forward to getting some real food. I was right, the descent was awful, every step feeling like a knife in the hip flexor. It certainly was not textbook mountain running, nor was it fast, but it was done, and we had completed another section and overall, we were still on target.

### Section 3

Never in the history of cheese rolls, has a cheese roll ever tasted so good.

We tucked into our supplies and it was just the pick me up we needed. It was morning now and I managed to remember and send a message out to the WhatsApp group to let everyone know we had made it through the night and were doing ok.

I changed my socks (a wise move) and looked at the X-Talons in the boot of the car. The plan was to swap to these as Section 4 is pretty bad underfoot in some places, that and the shoes I was currently wearing I had never done any more than 10 miles in them. That said, I was massively impressed with the Salomon S/LAB Speed and opted to keep them on, if it ain't broke don't fix it.

I was optimistic about Section 3 and 4, this was the section I crewed for Micky during his previous DRR, and I had since spent a lot of time doing recce runs around Crenville, so with that optimism and reinvigorated by the pit stop and new socks, we bid farewell to our Ford aid station and headed off over the stile for Pigeon Rock.

The summit of Pigeon Rock seemed to come rather quickly and effortlessly, probably something to do with the high spirits following the stop and off we set to Slievemoughanmore. As we got nearer to the foot of it I thought, gee, this looks a lot bigger than the time I crewed for Micky, my optimism starting to waiver ever so slightly at the realization that I previously did these 2 sections on fresh legs and by now we had already covered over 3000m of elevation. Still though, the cheese roll in my stomach was continuing to send me happy thoughts and we were soon at the summit, we even decided to take in both cairns for completeness and stood aloft, looking down on Wee Slievemoughanmore picking out our line. Unfortunately, I never got to meet Denis, but standing on this summit knowing it was his last mountain, you can't help but feel overwhelmed and privileged to be taking part in a round that is such a fitting tribute to him.

The descent of Slievemoughanmore went much better than that of Muck, my hip flexors had temporarily calmed, and my stride was flowing a lot better, we made short work of Wee Slievemoughanmore and next was the awful slog over to Eagle. I distinctly remember this part from Micky's round earlier in the year, I didn't enjoy it much then and it was a hundred times worse now with all the late summer growth. The grass and ground were leg sapping, peat hags and random pits everywhere, it just completely breaks up your rhythm and adds to the frustration as the amount of effort you are putting in for such slow gain is hard to take. We had a bit of a sing song to try and take our mind off the trek, by now Micky had managed to rewrite the chorus of Don't fear the Reaper, to Don't fear the red-grass, alluding to the marshy stuff we had encountered at the base of Slievenaglogh, and again now on our trek over to Eagle.

We stood at the foot of Eagle looking up, man it's another majestic looking mountain, by majestic I mean steep and certainly the first ascent of the day where I was thinking 'this is going to be a tough climb'. Head down and in to climbing mode, by now poles were becoming a life saver on some of these climbs, the ability to dig in with your arms and take some of the pressure off your legs was essential. It was tough going, Micky kept reminding me that this climb was also a climb of Shanlieve and Finlieve, that was helping... knowing that this effort wasn't all going to be lost again quickly on a descent.

A hop over the wall and a tap of the cairn, summit gained, and it wasn't long before we claimed Shanlieve too, things were going well for us at this point.

The route from Shanlieve to Finlieve is pretty much a straight line, but sticking to that straight line is much harder than it first seems. You need to be careful and pick out reference points along the way as you can soon lose all orientation when surrounded by 8ft high channels of peat hags. This area seems almost unearthly, like you are in an episode of Star Trek and have been beamed down on to an alien planet, it needs to be seen to be believed. Luckily though, we knew all this in advance, we had set our blasters to stun and kept our eye on the direction we were pointing.

We were clear of the peat hags and powering our way up to take the summit of Finlieve. In terms of peaks, Section 3 is almost complete at this point, but standing aloft Finlieve looking out at what is ahead, it isn't quite that simple and there was a good bit of distance to cover before making it to Slievemeen.

We took a line down Finlieve heading straight for the stream crossing at the edge of the forest. It can be quite marshy in places, so we tried to steer clear of any large patches of red grass. With only a few calf high sinks, we got to the stream crossing and were off on the initial ascent of Slievemeen and Slievemartin.

We had previously been commenting on how eerily quiet it had been all day, we had come across no one on the whole round and by this stage it was already after 1pm. So rather ironically, it was at this point we came across our first human of the day, and what was that person doing here?

"You guys aren't doing the Rankin round by any chance", "Yep, that's right, we are", "I'm just out here doing a recce for it myself" :-)

With that, we wished him luck, gave him a tip for the area we were currently in and we disappeared off through the forest.

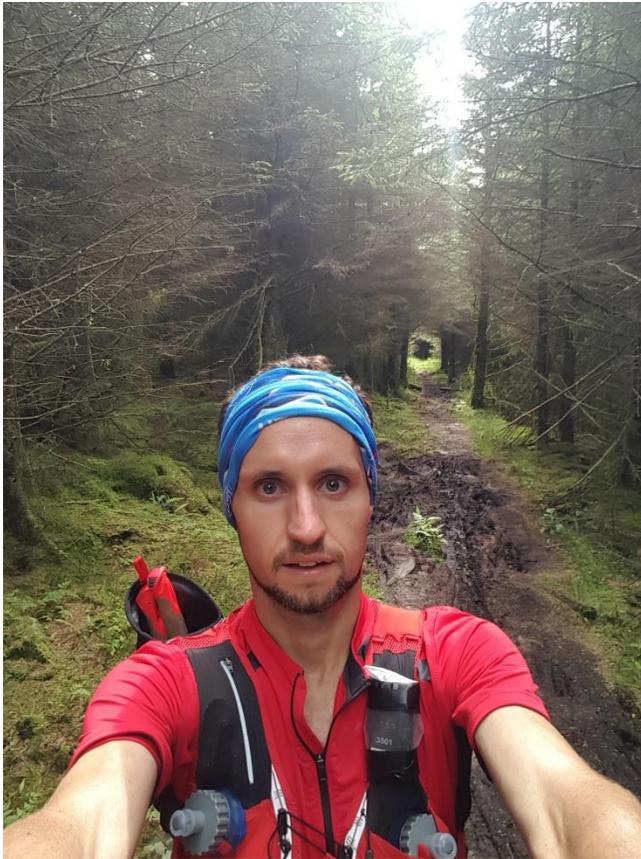
When we emerged on the other side, we had taken off some of the elevation and on good ground, but now the hard work began as we were met with a field of waist high grass and there was no escape from it, we just had to knuckle down and work through it one foot in front of the other. Even our poles were beginning to be rendered useless as they continually tangled in the long grass. It was really hitting home how difficult all this growth was making the round, it continually slowed us through sections where we would normally be much faster, and to add insult to injury the amount of extra effort to wade through all this was just adding extra layers of fatigue.

Finally, we made it through the grass and past the pylons. It was a relief to be back on to a runnable track and off we stormed up Slievemeen to gather the next summit before making short work of the short sharp climb to Slievemartin. Section 3 was done, it was harder than I had remembered, partly due to fatigued legs, mostly due to grass growth, but it was done, and we knew what was coming next, Crenville... this place was going to be a mess. The growth here is bad enough at the best of times, but judging by how the rest of the day had gone, it was going to resemble something between a swamp pit and a tropical rainforest today.

#### **Section 4**

Even though I was prepared for it, I wasn't... the reeds were towering over head height and packed so tightly together you couldn't even get a footing on the ground.

They were so tightly packed that they took my full weight on several tumbles, catching me before I hit the ground in one big grassy hammock. I must admit it was strangely relaxing, lying there surrounded by reeds, looking up at the clear blue sky and nothing but the sound of nature and Micky's distant footsteps. I climbed out of the hammock and caught up with Micky, the one thing we had going for us was we knew this place like the back of our hand by this stage, so navigation wasn't a problem, but gee it was tiring going through here, every step was like lifting your leg over a fence, and when your foot landed it was in the lap of the gods if it landed on firm ground, a hole, a spiky bush or knee deep swamp. Through the growth we spied the fence posts that mark the summit of Crenville, it was done, thank ....



We ducked down through the forest and hit the path. This was glorious running, especially after what seemed like hours of wading through all that grass. I'm pretty sure I put in my fastest few km's of the day through this section and it felt great and more like the sort of running I was built for. I was somewhat buoyed by the fact that I could still run at that speed after all the elevation, distance and time covered, it certainly gave me added confidence for any future ultras I'd embark on after this.

Next up was Slievemeel, this is a mountain I just can't figure out. We've been up here a few times and no route up seems like the right route. It's covered in these tightly packed, reddish brown, twiggy bushes, about shin high, poised to rip the flesh from your leg with one wrong move.

Since we had failed to come up with a better alternative we just decided to take in as much easy running as possible on the path around Slievemeel, then take a quick duke up the

shortest (steepest) route to the summit and straight back down again. It still didn't feel right, but we got it done, with no blood drawn, a bonus, and we made it back down on to the easy-going forest trail. This was another great section and a part of the round I really love. The forest trail led to an opening in the trees and Tievedockaragh.

Usually for us it is route one up Tievedockaragh, but we just didn't fancy it today as again the grass was looking very overgrown. Instead we opted for the long way around along the well-trodden paths. Straightforward enough summit, off along the wall and on to the trail to Pierce's castle.

It really is great running along here, especially on a clear day. The ground is nice and cushioned underfoot, similar to that of the brandy pad, and on the right you have the impressive steep faces of Shanlieve and Eagle staring back at you. Pierces castle crowned and off we headed to Rocky, taking in the customary non-required summit of Tormanrock.

At this point we were still in good spirits and going strong.

Micky had run out of water a while back and with it being a warm day and still some time until our next drop bag in Spelga we decided to make short work of Rocky and get down to the river crossing so he could refill from the stream. Then bam! For me anyway... as we ascended Rocky, I started to feel the fatigue, a bit like hitting the wall in a marathon.

All of a sudden, my mind started to turn on me and my hip flexors got their knives out. I told Micky to keep going at his pace as he needed to refill with water, I was going to take the descent a bit slower and try to manage the situation. Descending Rocky was painful but at least it's a relatively short descent.

I got back down on to the Mourne way and tried to remind myself of how I felt during the recent Ultra along here, my mind wandered to that day and it seemed to help, I was catching up with Micky and by the time he had crossed the footbridge I was only a few meters back. That was a worrying moment I thought, how could I be gliding along carefree at one moment and then drop like a sack of spuds with little or no warning. I've never tested myself out like this before and it was perhaps a sign that it was starting to show. My mind had really turned against me and there stood the next grueling climb ahead of us. Cock mountain. My mind was making it out to be Everest and even at the best of times I have a mind block for this mountain.

We always take both summits on this and perhaps that was compounding the issue. We headed straight up for the first summit. My mind was now having a full-on row with me, why are you doing this, why are you going this way, go around and up to the second summit. I stopped one third of the way up and almost broke down, Micky gave me a stern talking too and it's exactly what I needed. I got up in almost a fit of rage and drove my poles in hard as I ascended the next hundred feet in anger. The rage faded and so did my short burst of superhuman strength. I paused for a moment and looked up, my mind was telling me I'm never getting up there and in a way, it was right...I wasn't, well at least not all at once.

I reasoned with the chimp in my head, telling it that perhaps we couldn't get all the way up there, but we could get to that rock 50m away, it agreed, and we did. Next up, a small purple plant up ahead, we can get to that, and we did. And so it continued until finally we were aloft the first summit of Cock Mountain, I felt a sense of relief and achievement. Overcoming pain is one thing, but overcoming a mind telling you to quit is perhaps even more difficult, and for now I had come off victorious in that battle.

It was a short dash down from the first summit and back up to gain the second, we looked down and could see Spelga car park in the distance, our mind turned to the drop bags we had hidden the night before, praying they hadn't moved or that a dog hadn't come across them and ripped everything to shreds. We descended to Slievenamiskan and then down along the line to Spelga dam, we had made it, Section 4 was done and our drop bags were in one piece. We sat down at a picnic table and got stuck into our supplies. I was watching Micky down a bottle of Coke, I could have ripped his arm off for that bottle, but I wasn't going to dare mentioning anything, he had earned it and I had learned a lesson to pack my own in future. All I had was the same lemony sports drink I had been drinking all day, and I was pretty sick of that taste right now, luckily I had packed a small bottle of water as an afterthought, to my amazement it was sheer bliss...in all of its non-lemony glory!

## Section 5

We cleared up the picnic and I thought to myself, we have this now...one section to go...we have this, just as long as my legs get me up Bearnagh...

I had done quite a few recce runs at the start of Section 5 and always enjoyed them. Spaltha will be a nice easy one to get us underway, wrong..again...

We crossed the stream to start our 'straightforward' run to the summit of Spaltha and there it was... another field of impenetrable head high reeds. Where the hell had these come from was all I kept asking myself, I was here not much more than a month ago and there was nothing. Again, like 2 ducks, we waded our way through the tightly packed reeds and up to Spalta. It was at this point I realized, to my horror, that my tracker had stopped flashing. I looked at Micky's and his was still going, phew! But my mind started turning to a backup plan in case something happened to his.

My Fenix was going well and had tracked the whole day so far, but the battery wasn't going to last to the end of S5. Luckily a few days prior I had bought a small power bank and remembered to pack my Garmin lead. As we traversed the peat bogs from Spalta to Slievenamuck, I managed to get the Fenix on charge, treating it with the same care as a newborn to ensure I didn't hit the wrong button and lose the activity. All of a sudden, we had summited Slievenamuck and were on to the Ott trail, it's amazing what a little distraction can do for the mind. All this messing around with my watch pretty much gave me that last summit for free.

I had done my homework on this section and had already given Micky a heads up that we were going to do it a little different from his normal route. We ascended Ott and I led the way as we kept a high line over to the stile at the base of Slieve Loughshannagh. At the stile Micky turned to me and said I had nailed that route, hearing that was a good boost for me mentally at this stage. So far everything I'd learned about mountain running and navigation, particularly in the Mourne, was down to him so to get some feedback like that really helped my confidence.

And there we were, standing at the stile below Slieve Loughshannagh. We had crossed that same stile almost 11 hours ago, and at that point I had already been dreaming about being back here during S5. A wave of positivity filled the negative void that had been plaguing me since Cock mountain. Sure, my body was hurting, but that seemed like a perfectly acceptable response to the onslaught it had been put through so far, the difference now was that my mind was feeling strong. I worked hard on the ascents, I was still breaking each one down in to, "that rock up there", "that shrub", "little by little", "slow and steady wins the race"... never had that saying been more poignant than now. Slieve Loughshannagh and Meelbeg both completed with hard work and determination, but the pace was steady, and we weren't faltering.

Next was Slieve Meelmore, we decided to split on this one to see what way up was quickest, I opted for the diagonal route to the lesser wall and Micky stuck to the main wall. To be honest it was much of a muchness, I arrived about 30s earlier, but hey, at this stage it was a novel thing to do and gave us a mini challenge to distract our minds from the bigger one.

I knew what was coming next and deep down the chimp inside was trying to get out of its cage again. But a rather uneventful descent through the tricky slabs of Meelmore calmed it down, that went much easier than I was expecting, just one big problem to deal with now, and there it was in all its might, staring me down from its perch high up in the clouds, Bearnagh.

I tried not to overthink it, instead I turned to Micky and said, "let's just get this done". In my head I was now void of all emotion, I felt pretty much robotic and had been programmed with one simple task to complete. Left foot forward, right pole forward, right foot forward, left pole forward, repeat.

It was working, we were approaching the top of Bearnagh, the task had been executed and the robotic void gave way to a flood of emotion. I cautiously allowed myself to think, that's it, we've done this now, just take it nice and easy, don't do anything stupid and you are home.

Yes, don't do anything stupid... we were going well again now, my hip flexors had once again retracted their knives and we were powering our way down Bearnagh with Hares Gap in the distance. Then whack, I had simultaneously managed to kick a rock and jam a pole, sending me head over heels and back on to my arse. Phew, that was lucky, I'd managed to come off unscathed, even my pride remained mostly intact as Micky was oblivious to the whole incident. It was probably a combination of a lapse in concentration coupled with an increase in pace to try and beat the fading light. Either way it wasn't my smartest moment of the day and was a stark reminder how it can all be taken away in a few seconds, especially on this unforgiving terrain.

At Hares Gap it was time to get the head torches ready, light was quickly fading and we had counted ourselves lucky to get this far by daylight. As we ascended Slievenaglogh the darkness fell on what was left of our round and we were back to how we started the day, running by torch light. It's hard to remember much detail about the track from Slievenaglogh to Corragh, by this stage it was dark and my thoughts were already a mountain ahead, I knew that Commedagh was a beast and I was just hoping deep down that my legs would carry me over it. The weather was setting in now, we had been lucky all day and this was the first sign of cloud, then out of nowhere... bang!

There had been a risk of thunder and lightning forecast for the night of our round, and I was thinking, no way, not now, not when we are so close. It wasn't thunder and lightning... that bang was followed by several more, it was a fireworks display! Not sure why or where it was coming from, but it was pretty cool to hear it go off just as we are approaching the end of what felt like an epic achievement.

Commedagh wasn't going to beat me, I called upon the robotic power and movement that got me up Bearnagh and once again it lifted me high into the clouds through sheer hard work and determination. As we climbed though, the visibility dropped, not helped by the shining head torches. Pretty soon it became apparent that it wasn't going to clear and to make matters worse, the wind was now picking up too. It felt like we were being dealt one final challenge that stood between us and victory.

We climbed the stile at Commedagh and headed off on our bearing, concentrating on holding a straight line in the low visibility. Then the shadow of the Commedagh summit cairn came into sight, we had made it, the last summit was done, now we just needed to get back in one piece. We had a short discussion about what to do next, the plan was always to go off the front of Commedagh and take the short route back to the finish.

The visibility was very poor now and the wind speed had picked up considerably. We looked at our timing, we weren't going to break 21 hours and either way would probably have us back in less than 22. With Micky being so much better experienced in these situations, I left the decision up to him and was 100% behind him with whatever choice he made.

Smartly, we headed back to the wall and gingerly descended Commedagh back to the saddle. It seemed fitting to finish the round the way we started it. And with near zero visibility, increasing winds and very fatigued legs, it made the decision to come back down the Glen river path a very wise one indeed.

The finish was now in touching distance, we just had to follow the path back and down through the forest to the car park. We were moving well again but man did that path feel like it was never going to end, even though we were descending, it seemed at least a few miles longer than when we had gone up it earlier in the day, one last mind trick to finish off the round. But it wasn't going to get to me, we were doing this, we are in the finishing straight, the victory lap, the checkered flag was up ahead.



One last jaunt through the forest, being careful not to go head over heels again, easily done with all the tree roots here as I had experienced a few months back! We emerged from the trees, and that was it, back jogging through Donard car park.

It was like a scene from Back to the Future, we had returned to the same car park, on what felt like the same night we had left it, same alcohol fueled patrons, same petrol head racers. The white arch was up ahead, we had made it, and just like in the beginning, we ended with a touch of the arch, a handshake and a hug. Like the film...things weren't the same, time had moved on and I was now a member of that coveted group of people who have taken this journey before me and the many who will take it after.

It was a strange finish in many ways, we hadn't really told anyone we were doing this, and we had done it unsupported, so

there was no one else there to share in the moment. All I wanted was to get a bottle of coke and hit the sack, so in a way I was glad it ended like that. Under the arch we turned to each other and with a shrug and sense of achievement, we were done, we had completed the Denis Rankin Round, and we were tired.

## Lesson learned

Mountain running is a skill.

Like all skills, it can't be picked up overnight, or over a few months for that matter.

It takes years of practice to perfect, gain experience and confidence.

Being a good trail runner does not make you a good mountain runner, sure it helps, but not a lot!

Yes, anyone can train hard on hills, run hundreds of miles and build up a good engine to get you to the top of a mountain. That bit, albeit hard work, is the easy part. It's how you get down off said mountain where the problem lies. The way I see it, there are 3 options.

1) Slow and steady - while, on the face of it, there is nothing wrong with this approach - Slow descents mean continually loading your body with braking forces and when the task at hand involves 39 descents, those braking forces become a problem after a while as your hip flexors, quads and lower back all take their turns in fighting for your full attention as they cry out in agony for you to stop.

2) Fast, with little or no skill - Sure, you might get down a few, and quickly at that, but you are dicing with what is almost certainly an inevitable trip to A&E.

3) Fast, with skill - Watching any of the pros, or even the guys at the front of the local mountain races, you can see how they can effortlessly and elegantly glide down a mountain, not only taking minutes out of their competitors, but doing so in a way that protects their body from the high braking forces of the descent. It's a true skill that requires fantastic balance, strength, courage and focus. A skill that one day, with enough practice, I wish to gain!