

1 & 2 JUL 2017

DENIS RANKIN ROUND

JOHNNY PARKS AND ALAN ELWOOD

PREPARATION

Route Familiarity

Johnny and I mountain run together and have taken part in a number of mountain marathons over the years. In Dec 2016 we were texting each other about what challenge we could take on in 2017. Johnny had completed the gruelling Grand Fondo cycle event that year but for various reasons I had not done anything as demanding. So I sent him a link to the Denis Rankin Round website and said 'what about this' and it started from there.

Key we knew would be endurance, familiarity with the route and sound administration on the attempt. To that end we spent the winter and spring getting hill ready and learning the route. This involved many cold and wet Sunday mornings running in the Mourne. The Hill and Dale and NIMRA races also provided excellent opportunities to learn the route and terrain as many of these take in sections of the round. So we had between us, by the time of the attempt, been over every part of the route.

We had also researched the information on the website from others who had completed the round and had decided on a clockwise circuit starting at 0200 to maximise light. The idea of having the wall as a guide on the last leg seemed very sensible, although the prospect of the steep ascent up Bearnagh at that late stage was less appealing. A diary check provided us with one opportunity over the weekend of the 1 and 2 Jul, weather permitting, so we set that date.



Administration and support team

Our attempt at the round would not have been on if we had no support crew. Luckily for us four people stepped in to help, providing the best support imaginable. They were Rupert, Keith, Stephen and Billy. Any success is down to their help as much as anything else. We planned to use four RV points, listed below, and decided to spend no more than 15 minutes in each. At these stops we would get some food and change socks and t-shirts. This would allow us to carry less weight, mostly consisting of full body cover, energy bars, survival bag (tent for Leg 1), small med kit, water, GPS tracker, map, compass, hat and gloves.

We loaded up the support crew with more stuff than we actually needed in the end. They had a large medical kit, the worlds supply of Decathlon energy bars, tins



of rice pudding, sausage sodas, dehydrated energy meals, 25 lts of fresh water, isotonic powders to replace salts, gas burner and stove, spare clothes and shoes, spare maps and compasses and two chairs!

THE PLAN

The final act of preparation was to develop a route plan with target times for each summit and then each leg. This would help us know that we were on track for success, preventing going too fast at the start and too slow at the end. We factored in tiredness and allowed for more time to complete the later legs, especially the final stretch from Ott Mountain. That plan is summarised here:

RV No.	Time Between RVs	RV Break	Clock Time	Cumulative Time on leaving RV	RV Location
1	-	-	Out 0200	0	Donard Park Car park
2	5 hrs 30mins	15 mins	In 0730 Out 0745	5 hrs 45 mins	Silent Valley
3	3 hrs 40 mins	15 mins	In 1125 Out 1140	9 hrs 40 mins	Deers Meadow
4	3 hrs 40 mins	15 mins	In 1520 Out 1535	13 hrs 35 mins	Slieve Martin Saddle
5	4 hrs	15 mins	In 1935 Out 1950	17 hrs 50 mins	Splega Car Park
6	50 mins	5 mins	In 2040 Out 2045	18 hrs 45 mins	Ott
7	5 hrs	-	In 0145	23 hrs 45 mins	Donard Park Car Park

THE ROUND

LEG 1

Donard Park: 0200

Rupert drove Johnny and I down to Newcastle on Sat 1 Jul, arriving in the nearly empty car park at 0150. After a quick bit of banter and the obligatory photo we turned the GPS tracker on and headed off at 0200, with Rupert returning to his home and bed – not a bad choice.

Slieve Donard: 0308

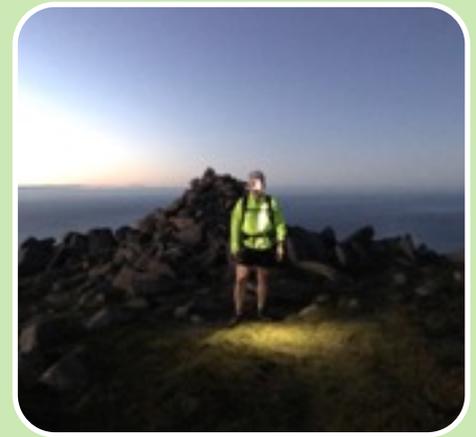
The first section was easy enough, although it does take in the greatest single climb. We opted to stick to the path up to the saddle and then follow the wall to the top of Donard. In a previous training session we had gone up the black stairs but didn't feel this gave us any real time advantage, was harder on the legs very earlier on and tricky in the dark. As it was the sky was very clear with excellent visibility; it was not to last the day. Head torches were used but it would have been possible to have got away without them. We reached the summit of Donard in good form, with the lights of Newcastle below us, and took a quick photo, something we did at every summit.



Most smart phones will geo-plot the location of the photo so this was a back up to prove our locations and time, one I ended up needing due to the GPS tracker getting turned off by accident for a short section on Leg 5.

Chimney Rock Mountain: 0340

After a steady descent off Donard we followed the wall across the Bog of Donard until we picked up the path heading to Chimney Rock Mountain, which we followed up to the crags before jogging along the ridge to the summit. By now the sky was getting even lighter and we could clearly see Rocky Mountain, our next target, as well as the route along the remainder of Leg 1.



Rocky Mountain: 0406

We decided not to go down too early off Chimney Rock Mountain, which we had done in a previous trip, as the ground is hard going being rocky and broken. Instead we jogged back the way we had just come following the path along the top of the spur line to the crags before turning to drop down to the head of the valley that separates Chimney Rock Mountain from Rocky Mountain. We crossed this rough ground, hit the wall and followed it along before peeling off to summit Rocky. By now day time was almost upon us and the torches were not required as we turned to head for Slieve Beg.

Slieve Beg: 0449

We had made the mistake of following the river North towards the Brandy Pad on a training run. This area is cut across with peat hags and very hard going. This time we retraced our steps to the wall and followed it North, crossing the Bog of Donard before hitting the Brandy Pad and jogging along it to Beg. After an easy climb on the path to the top we headed for Slieve Cove.

Slieve Cove: 0507

A brisk steep ascent, veering off to the left, took us to the top of Cove. The sun was rising now and we seemed to be chasing the light on the side of the mountain. We reached the top some 15 minutes ahead of schedule and feeling good. A quick drop down took us to the foot of Slieve Lamagan.

Slieve Lamagan: 0528

The climb up Lamagan was steep but steady with only one error as we peeled off to the left slightly too much, needing to correct ourselves by 200m as the summit came into view. We summited and then headed West off the top for 300 m before turning South to drop down to the saddle with Binnian, so avoiding the worst of the boulder field on the flank of Lamagan.



Slieve Binnian North Tor: 0609

Crossing the saddle we headed up Binnian using the main path. We passed the North Tor, took a quick snap, and headed for the summit. By now the view was amazingly clear.

Slieve Binnian Summit: 0628

The path to the summit was clear and good going so we jogged along, avoiding the temptation to go too fast too early. We passed the wall and then climbed up to the rocky crag and the summit, took a picture and headed down to Wee Binnian. We knew this to be a very steep drop and slow going as a result. We crossed the wall to its West side at the top and started the descent at a gentle and tentative jog.



Wee Slieve Binnian: 0648

About a third of the way down Binnian I unfortunately tripped and fell forward, twisting around as I did and landing on my back with my feet up hill. I'd managed to knock my right knee, opening the deep cuts I'd sustained on the Slieve Gullion race earlier in the year. The knee high grass on the rest of the route played havoc with this. I'd also managed to bruise the knee badly, that also played on me for the rest of the round, and my right calf cramped up to add to the fun. Having been 20 minutes ahead this cost us 5 minutes as I descended more gingerly now. We found the summit gully on Wee Binnian and followed the wall down to Silent Valley, where we could see our support crew of Keith and Stephen waiting for us at the head of the reservoir.

Silent Valley: 0715 to 0730

We made our way up to the path that runs along the edge of the reservoir and sat down on a bench, after using the hose at the back of one of the buildings to rinse off my bloody knee. Keith and Stephen had cooked up some hot dogs for us to dine on along with mugs of coffee. We dropped off the torches and tent (I had carried that as for Leg 1 we had no safety cover close by) and collected the survival bag, water and fresh rations. Suitably refreshed, with socks and t-shirts changed and my knee cleaned with an antiseptic wipe, we set out for Leg 2. Just before we did I put on some suncream, an overly optimistic gesture as it turned out. Having had enough to eat, and been eaten enough by the swarm of midges that arrived, we jogged off at 0730 heading West towards Slievenaglogh.



LEG 2

Slievenaglogh: 0812

There are a number of ways up this mountain, none easy. We opted to follow the paths and then the wall West, keeping the bog to our right and climbing to the wall running North. We then followed this, picked up the further wall that takes a direct route to the top of the mountain and followed this up. It's a craggy path and not that easy to keep a straight line. On reaching the wall bend we checked the map and realised the summit was on the other side so jumped over and jogged up to the top.

Doan: 0914

We dropped off Slievenaglogh by following the wall down towards the main path that leads up to Lough Shannagh. Keeping the wall to our left proved to be better ground than on the other side of the wall, which we had used on a training run. Hitting the path we headed North towards the top of the lough. It was about now that Johnny started to feel off peak. Undaunted we crossed the river and headed up Doan using the Hill and Dale route. We stayed to the North side, climbing to find the path that leads South to the top along the spur and jogged up to the summit.

Ben Crom: 0946

We knew the ground between Doan and Ben Crom is a maze of deep peat hags so we dropped off Doan heading North East to cross the river and climb the shallowest part leading to the spur line. This avoided the worst of the hags. Here we found the path and jogged South to the summit before turning around to retrace our path heading North. At this point Johnny began to feel very unwell and his continuing the round was in real doubt.



Carn Mountain: 1037

Cutting the pace we heading back down for the river between Doan and Ben Crom where there is a path that heads North and avoids the very difficult peat hag field North of Ben Crom. We then picked up the main path at the base of Slieve Loughshannagh and turned West for the saddle at Carn. We crossed the style and headed up Carn Mountain. By now Johnny was struggling and had to put a lot of effort in to push on.

Slieve Muck: 1059

The climb from Carn Mountain to Slieve Muck is a simple affair on most days but Johnny was finding things tough. This was not a good sign and I was worried for him. We summited, locating the SI Control for the Spelga Skyline Race that was about to start, and then turned to follow the wall down to Deer's Meadow, seeing the support team waiting for us below.



Deers Meadow: 1117 - 1132

We arrived at Deer's Meadow to see two chairs sat out, burgers on the pan and to be presented with cups of soup. The support team were playing a blinder. Both of us sat down, ate and changed our gear. I felt revived but Johnny was not in good shape and made the right decision to stop. We were soon also joined by some marshals from the Spelga Skyline race. Grabbing some more nuts, chocolate and jelly babies I headed off, feeling worried about Johnny. It would turn out on hospital medical advice that he had done the right thing.

LEG 3

Pigeon Rock Mountain: 1147

I headed up Pigeon Rock using the wall as a handrail. As I did so the weather started to deteriorate, with the mist rolling in and visibility dropping. This was not a good sign as the next sections had the hardest navigation. I reached the top and took a quick photo.

Slieve Moughanmore: 1213



I hugged the wall off Pigeon Rock but I'd climbed the route up to Slieve Moughanmore on the Hill and Dale race a few weeks earlier so knew to peel off from the wall to head for the summit. This time, with the visibility down, I took a bearing to be sure. I knew I was at the top when the second SI Control of the day came into view. As I paused I'd a quick thought about the man whose name this event is in and whose last race had been on this very mountain. I never knew him but was in his debt. By now the visibility was down to less than 100m and the rain was threatening.

Wee Slieve Moughanmore: 1229

Given the poor visibility I took a bearing and started off down the hill towards Wee Slieve Moughanmore. Only the compass told me I was going the right way until I managed to drop out of the mist and could finally see the next summit ahead. The ground was rough with long grass masking bog, holes and clumps as I progressed to the top. This was to be my lot regarding terrain for the next number of hours and proved to be a real test of determination.

Eagle Rock Mountain: 1305

I left Wee Slieve Moughanmore heading for the Windy Gap and picked up the river, using it as a handrail towards the gap and the wall. The ground was tough going, as the grass seemed to pull back every step forward. Around now I saw some of the runners on the Spelga Skyline race, and even chatted to one. I followed the wall up and climbed steadily to the top of Eagle, passing some walkers on the way who couldn't believe what I was doing when they asked and I told them. I had entered the mist and rain again at this point and just before the summit I did my good deed of the day showing a group of DoE youngsters where they were on the map and pointing them to their next destination. Reaching the summit in reasonable form (less my knee that was feeling things), I headed for Shanlieve.

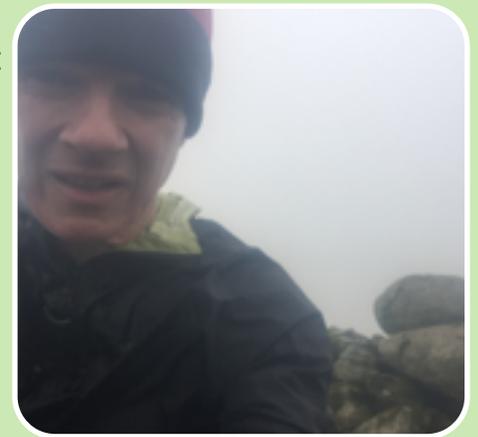


Shanlieve: 1315

The route to Shanlieve is usually simple enough, following the wall and then dropping South to the cairn. Given the lack of visibility I played safe and took a bearing from the wall bend and paced out the distance arriving at the summit cairn quickly.

Finlieve: 1354

I knew from a previous trip that the route to Finlieve, which is a small incline on the spur, was going to be a challenge. On that day the visibility had been superb but even then the featureless spur line intersected by deep peat hags and slippery bog has been hard to cross and made it difficult to stay on the right line to locate the very small cairn (less than a meter tall) that marked the summit. Then we had pushed to the West/right and found better ground from where we had seen the summit eventually and I had planned to do the same. This time the visibility was less than 100 m with driving rain. Realising that any error could cost me the round I set out at a steady pace, pushing right as planned, using bearings and pacing the 2.5 km distance to ensure I knew where I was on the map. Unfortunately I must not have moved far enough right and ended up in the worst of the peat hags, some bigger than me, including one I fell in that I struggled to get out of. This all served to push me off line and it was only as the mist cleared to 200 m for a minute that I realised I had higher ground to my right so was on the East of the spur and at risk of running past the cairn. I corrected my course, re calculated the bearings and adjusted the pace count to account for the extra distance I had covered when moving back up onto the spur top. It was with a huge sense of relief that I saw the land start to rise ever so slightly towards what had to be Finlieve and then the cairn emerge out of the gloom some 60 m directly ahead of me. I'd done it but slower than planned.

**Slievemeen: 1505**

Taking a bearing in the gloom I ran off down hill enjoying the open and fast land that brought me down to the river junction with the forest and better visibility for a bit. I hugged the forest line to my right and after a while entered the small path that took me onto the paths in the forest. I followed the Westerly path to the forest edge and then climbed back into the mist, keeping the Northern mast to my right, before dropping into a reentrant and following it towards the style and my next RV. I saw the lads waiting for me but had to run on telling them I had to get up to Slievemeen first. This I did, following the fence up, before turning round to meet the lads.

Saddle between Slieveoneem and Slieve Martin: 1515 – 1530

The support team had parked at the forestry commission car park in Kilbroney and walked up to the style. They were waiting for me with hot rice pudding, more energy food and a cup of coffee. I ate, changed my socks and t-shirt, refilled with fresh water and rehydration powder and headed for Slieve Martin.



Slieve Martin: 1534

It was a straight forward and quick climb up to the top of Slieve Martin and the trig point before heading for the fence line again and jogging down hill towards Crenville, a route I knew from the Fallows Race earlier in the year.

LEG 4

Crenville: 1555

Crenville is a nightmare to get at, being covered in waist deep tussock grass, holes and bog. I was determined to cover the least of this that I could so I kept on the Fallows route following the forestry break, at the end of the fence, North before branching down the path on the right, just at the bend in the break, which luckily for me still had white tape marking it. I then had to struggle, repeatedly falling over, the 400 m to the two posts that marked the top before reversing my path and finding in the mist the next forest break that lead to the junction of several paths and the mountain bike trails. Once on the path I followed the Western one heading North.



Slievemeel: 1631

I jogged along the path, left the forest, jumped onto the mountain bike path for 100 m and then climbed steadily over the tough grassy bog on a bearing to the summit. One more bagged but the rain persisted.

Tievedockaragh: 1713

I moved North towards the obvious bend in the fence line along the wood, over very hard going ground, and then followed the forest break to the Red Bog path. I ran along this crossing the Yellow River and then followed the path up through the forest before breaking into the open and climbing to the summit of Tievedockaragh. It was still raining with poor visibility and I was now 10 mins behind schedule, but there were signs that the weather was breaking at last.

Pierce's Castle: 1733

I followed the wall on Tievedockaragh South East and then picked up the path network that crosses the bog and leads straight to Pierce's Castle. This was better going and the weather was lifting so as I summited I had clawed back the time I had lost earlier on due to the poor visibility and terrible ground.

Rocky: 1805

For Rocky I headed directly North, contouring to the West of the peaks between Pierce's Castle and Rocky and enduring more tussock grass and bog pits. I arrived at the saddle crossed by the Ulster Way and from there followed the obvious path up to the summit of Rocky.

Cock: 1853



To get up Cock I avoided going the shortest, but steepest route, opting instead to head back the way I had come up Rocky and onto the Ulster Way. I followed this East down into the valley, crossed Rocky Water and then headed on a bearing North East onto the shallower flank of Cock and started to climb. As I did so a familiar face appeared in the shape of Billy Reed who had been waiting for me despite doing the Spelga Skyline race earlier that day. It was a real morale boost given all that time on my own concentrating on nav in the poor visibility and we chatted as he lead the way to the Northern summit.

Slievenamiskan: 1903

Billy and I dropped of Cock and jogged across to Slievenamiskan easily enough, covering the simple climb to the summit. Billy then lead the way down to the gate at the dam and we arrived in the car park where Keith and Stephen were waiting.

Spelga Car Park: 1915 – to 1930

Arriving earlier than expected, I'd clawed more time back, the support team excelled themselves here with a hot chicken chow mien on the menu, bought in Hilltown and re-heated on a gas stove. I devoured this and some coffee, filled up with fresh water and rehydration powder, changed socks and t-shirt once more and headed off, knowing I would see the lads again shortly at the Ott car park for the final handover of kit.



LEG 5

Spaltha: 1955

I used the path from the road before crossing, after 300 m, the river to the West and moving on a bearing to the summit of Spaltha. It's not an easy summit to locate, not being very prominent, but I had been there on a training run with my son Andrew only two weeks earlier so knew what I was looking for. Plus by now the visibility was back.

Slievenamuck: 2010

It's an easy move across the top of the valley to the ridge line of Slievenamuck and to pick up the path to the summit so I was there quickly and was starting to gain even more time. I moved down to the Ott car park to meet the guys where I had a few spoons of hot rice pudding, topped up with an extra water bottle as there are no easy water sources on the last section and picked up my head torch.

Ott Mountain: 2040

I used the Ott Track to reach the flank of Ott before climbing it from the North just by the crags. This was an easy enough summit to get at and I was soon on the way towards the next.

Slieve Loughshannagh: 2059

I had taken part in a Hill and Dale race over this terrain and could even see the trails left by that race I thought. I followed these to the saddle, crossed the wall to get out of the wind that had picked up and climbed to the top of Slieve Loughshannagh easily enough. Now all I had to do was follow the wall more or less home.



Slieve Meelbeg: 2120

I found the descent off Slieve Loughshannagh tougher than the climb, and this is how it was to be from now on, but soon I was scaling Meelbeg. Again Andrew and I had run this the other week so I knew what to expect. I just had to remember to cross the wall to reach the cairn.

Slieve Meelmore: 2138

Again getting off Meelbeg was slow, mainly due to my injured knee, so I enjoyed the climb of Meelmore much more. The cairn was 200 m shy of the wall bend and stone hut many people will be familiar with so once I reached this I turned to pick up the Northern wall down to the saddle with Bearnagh. This was broken and stony ground and not easily or quickly traversed so I was glad to get down and reach the climb of Bearnagh.



Slieve Bearnagh: 2210

In some ways I'd been dreading this as it is the worst way to get up Bearnagh but in the end it was just a matter of getting the head down and keep going. In what seemed like not too long a time I was at the wall junction that marked the waypoint. I dropped down, passing a photographer on his way up to capture the setting sun, and headed for the Hare's Gap. It was a slow progression down again and I was glad to finally reach what I knew to be the start of the last series of climbs.



Slievenaglogh: 2248

Following the wall once more I was soon at the summit of Slievenaglogh, aided by the steps that are in place. By now it was dark so the head torch was truly required.

Slieve Corragh: 2311

The summit of Slieve Corragh is just off a prominent bend in the wall so I located it with ease. On the way up I passed a large group of people signing songs around a camp fire, goodness knows what they had brought up to burn. They quizzed me as to what I was doing so I explained that I was covering 90 Km and 6000 m of climb in the Denis Rankin Round. They asked how many days I had to do it in and I won't say here what they replied when I told them 24 hours! Just after the summit I discovered the GSP tracker had got turned off sometime after I last checked it at Meelmore. I turned it back on and was thankful I'd photo's of every summit anyway.



Slieve Commedagh: 2336

The final ascent was upon me and now I knew success was possible. I pushed up the side of the mountain but felt the climb this time. I think the realisation that the end was close sapped me of some nervous energy. Nonetheless I reach the stone hut on the wall and entered it to put on some extra warm layers as it was blowing a gale by now on the other side of the wall. I used the time to drop the support team and my wife a text to say I was nearly at the last summit and would be heading down shortly. I left the hut, crossed the stile and was immediately battered by a biting cold head wind but the lights of Newcastle below put all that out of my mind. I ran up

to the summit Cairn.

Donard Car Park: 0040

To get back to the car park I opted to take the ridge line North before dropping down East to the corner of the wood. By now I was done in and, wishing to avoid another fall or broken ankle at this late stage, walked slowly down the steep slope. Normally this run to the car park takes 40 mins or less. Tonight it would take a good hour. I reached the wood line after what seemed like an age and picked up the small path leading into the woods. It was now I took the only wrong bearing of the entire round when I aligned my compass to the Northing lines and not the Eastings.

