

## Thames Ring 250 – A journey of endeavour, friendship and belief

*Wednesday at nine in Goring 33 runners toed the line*

*Dick got them started with his usual Chime*

*Two hundred and forty eight miles and*

*One hundred and seventy five locks*

*The Thames Ring 250 is not one to be mocked*

Why did I opt into this Challenge? Well, in the days following the GUCR which I completed in just over 39 hours and 11 minutes I suffered horrendously with swollen legs, so much so that I was admitted to Yeovil district hospital with suspected cellulitis and was hooked up to a drip for two days. Following numerous blood tests and an ultrasound scan of my kidneys I was given the all clear and my legs eventually settled down. My recovery was so slow and at the time I remember thinking am I ever going to be able to run again. My family and close friends (with the exception of John as he really understands this urge) begged me never to run as far again, which only got me thinking..."but what if I could?" "What can I learn from this experience; surely my body will come back stronger?" I struggled to sleep properly for weeks and would stay up late engaging with my new found ultra-buddies on Face book. A whole new community of likeminded high energy individuals that shared the same passion and in one post Ian asked "who is having a crack at the TR250?" Well before I knew it I visiting the TRA site, deeply thinking about how could I make this happen. I casually brought it up in conversation with John and whether he would be ok to have the children for a few days as I fancied a little trip around the Thames. The instant I got the green light I was ringing Anthony and I was in!! With only five weeks to go and nagging left Achilles tendon I hardly did any training; in fact I think my longest run was just over fifteen miles. I rested and concentrated on Mind-set and my belief that this was part of my purpose in life. I only told a couple of close friends, who surprising understood and no longer disapproved, I didn't tell whole family until the night before when I posted what I was up to on FB.



### The Swan Hotel

I chose to stay at the Swan Hotel as Rajeev Patel had said he was booked to stay there and I was keen to meet him as his blog the post "the untamed Thames path" had inspired me with his humorous true grit authentic tales. I realised I'd stayed there before but could place why until I texted John a

photograph of the view and he had replied “isn’t that where we stayed for our first wedding Anniversary?” From that moment I felt empowered; it was a positive omen and I would get back to the Swan Hotel as I so wanted John to see it again and revisit those happy memories. I didn’t see Rajeev until the morning of the race as there had been a mix up with his booking but I did meet Javed and Keith and enjoyed absorbing their knowledge, tips and experience of previous ultra-races. I retired fairly early and slept like a log until I was waken at 5.50 by shouting in the corridor. I got up, showered and then listened to a couple of meditation tracks before meeting Marit at breakfast.

### **The Start to check point one**

I still felt really laid back and relaxed even after collecting my number, I don’t think it ever really dawned on me what I was about to do. Others seemed nervous and tense constantly fiddling with their kit bags and others applying tape to soles of the feet. I’d set the intention to just go with the flow and not to think beyond the current mile I would be running and to take each stage one check point at the time. My strategy this time was simple; start slow and live in the moment. Prior to the day I practised visualising the event as 10 marathons, 10 individual opportunities to succeed, celebrate and enjoy.

The first 10 miles was slow and steady running for about 25 minutes then walking for about five minutes - this seemed to work better than the 8 and 2 routine I’d adopted during the GUCR. I was able to remain disciplined this time and not get carried away and get tempted to surge on a pace with the leaders. I can recall feeling content and happy being out on the trail again away from digital world of technology (though of course I still had my mobile phone) with nearly everyone’s number so I could phone a friend if I got completely lost. That was my only fear, losing my way and having to retire from being timed out. With this in mind I made sure I kept within 50 yards of the runners ahead, I caught up with a group and I recognised Lindley Chambers as one of the guys who had egged me on on FB to sign up. Lindley and I were in instant rapport, reminiscing about the GUCR as apparently I overtook him at the last checkpoint. Both being ex-military it was easy to relate to his engaging stories and his passion about his events company challenge running. I admired his enthusiasm for life, so we teamed up and ran on together. Both distracted in conversation and unknowingly to us we missed a bridge only realising a mile and half later when we spied Tony running on the other side of the river.



No panic only an extra 3 miles to a 27 mile leg! After a while we caught up with Rajeev and Marit who were surprised to see us behind them. We arrived at the first check point in 29<sup>th</sup> position at 5.30 hours odd. I was keen not to hang around for long so I quickly replenished my water bottles, grabbed a drink of flat cola and took a few biscuits, checked my feet for any hot spots and headed off. Lindley quickly caught me up and we continued on the next leg together, sticking to a 20 minute run and five minute walk pattern, after

a while we reduced this to 10 and 5 as we were both suffering from back pain. Lindley was really suffering as he had taken a bad tumble landing hard on his hip after tripping over a tree root. We battled through the crowds that had gathered for the annual regatta, constantly dodging the never ending stream of posh frocks, colourful old school blazers with traditionally straw boaters. I ran into a few people as they seemed totally unaware of my presence, though some just stood their ground unwilling to step out of the way for a bedraggled looking runner. Lindley's back issue worsened and I was starting to feeling sick; I wretched a few times but my stomach was empty so nothing came up. As the route took us off the tow path and into the town we stopped at a local pub and refilled our bottles while Lindley enjoyed a cold coke with me opting for a grapefruit juice topped with ice. Refreshed and with bounce back in my step I was eager to press on and get to the second checkpoint before darkness. My back pain had subsided, and I was feeling strong again. Lindley was giving it his best but he was really suffering and his pace again slowed and mentally he made the decision to call it day at the next check point. I arrived about 15 minutes before him; I was gutted to see him drop out but knew it made sense in the long run.

### **First night**

Andy and Ernie whom I ran with briefly during the first leg were at the checkpoint and were getting ready to leave so I asked if their minded if I tagged along for night leg. They agreed that it would be sensible for us all the stick together so I quickly downed a cup of vegetable soup, donned my night gear and set out at a steady pace. I didn't want to hinder them so I just ran when they ran and walked when they walked, Ernie knew the route well apart from a slight diversion at one point. Thanks to Andy and Ernie's recommendation I learned the power of milk so feeling totally re-energised following our short pit stop at the late night shop we moved on. Ernie's quads though were giving him severe grief, so being a qualified sports therapist I gave them a quick once over which must have looked a little bit bizarre in the middle of the night. It seemed to do the trick though and we were moving again albeit at fairly slow pace. The section through Richmond proved at a little tricky at times, but thankfully Ernie had the helm and his intuitive sense of direction ensured we stayed on the right path. Ernie's blistered feet started to hinder him, the morning hours proving the most difficult, though the sighting of an urban fox lifted my spirits. The final stretch into checkpoint three was tough going and at one point we started walking more and more oblivious of the time. I decided that it would be better if we ran for at least a minimum of five minutes and walked for two to just get into a steady rhythm - that way overall would be moving more quickly than just sauntering along. Once into this rhythm we made more progress and before we knew it we were into the checkpoint at Yiewsley.

### **Thursday Morning**

I cleaned my teeth and changed my socks again, had some hot coffee and rice pudding and changed out of my night gear ready for the next marathon. I set out on my own as Andy had left about 10 minutes before me and Ernie decided to stay longer and get his feet sorted out. I walked for the first few minutes until the stiffness in my legs subsided and then fell back into a steady rhythm of five and two. I listen to a hypnotherapy track called mental massage which helped ease and release any tension and generally made me feel more alert. It allowed me to get into such a nice flow state I was running more than walking now and I started to catch people - I was surprised to see Javed walking up ahead, I had expected him to be up there with the leaders, but unfortunately Like Ernie had

suffered with his feet. We conversed for a while and Javed advised me to take it steady and not overdo it too soon. I continued, alone, lost in my thoughts; running with eyes half closed I paused for a brief power nap with the warmth of the sun making it easier to drift off into a real deep slumber. Thankfully Javed awakened me when he passed as I was completely gone. 20 minutes later I caught up with Andy who was planning to have a 15 minute nap and I continued on for about five minutes walking until I came to the familiar section from GUCR. I became confused and couldn't decide the right way to go; intuitively I knew the route but had a nagging doubt so I decided to wait. It wasn't long before Andy appeared having cut his nap short, he confirmed the way and we carried on together arriving at the next checkpoint in 13<sup>th</sup> position just after just after 1.30 in the afternoon. The next leg was tough as we running in the midday sun with little shade, though easier to navigate as the route, though backwards, it was familiar. We arrived at Check point 5 at about 9.30pm and heard that Ernie was still battling on. I remember briefly sleeping in the chair, while the checkpoint staff replenished water bottles and got my night gear ready. I think we rested at the checkpoint for about an hour.

### **Second night (Thursday) to Friday Evening**



The next section was through Milton Keynes again like the Grand Union it was in the dark, stupidly and to Andy's entertainment I fell into a muddy watery ditch, I also lost my map and though we backtracked we couldn't find it. So we agreed to stick together again through the night counting even more bridges together. During the night the temperature dropped and at one point I got my space blanket out and wrapped it round my legs. At around 4:30 AM I started to go rapidly downhill;

the nausea had returned again, I was retching feeling sick and dizzy. I think the heat of the previous day was beginning to take its toll and I think I'd let myself get slightly dehydrated and hadn't eaten enough either. I was starting to lose it and in a confused state I was seeing things such as women's stiletto shoes, snow on branches of the trees, green eyes, and giant sized ants. I was swaying all over the place and Andy had to steer me clear of the canal. I weakened and was forced to stop. Getting cold and beginning to shiver Andy wrapped me up like an oven chicken. It was a good job in retrospect as I could have easily gone down with hypothermia if I'd been alone. The brief nap perked me up a little and once we got to checkpoint 6 at Fenny Compton (183 miles) got some hearty food and some of my strength back. We arrived at the checkpoint in equal 10<sup>th</sup> place and were told there were 5 more runners still behind us - we both hoped that Ernie was still one of them.

I knew I needed to eat and was given a plate of local bacon, I was struggling to force it down as between every couple of mouthfuls I retched. "Do I stop now?" my mind was still willing but my body was weak and I could not stop this sick feeling. "Or could I?" I remembered the crystallised ginger in my bag and it quickly settled my stomach - without it I would have probably been forced to retire. I had a brief wash changed in to a new set of training gear (pink top inspired by mini

Anderson) and set off again determined to get through to the next stage. We pretty much power walked the majority of the next leg, only stopping to refill our water bottles, enjoy an ice cream and pint of milk. The Canal folk were intrigued by our race numbers, often we stopped briefly to explain our lunatic behaviour as they struggled to comprehend the distance we still had to go. They were great offering us water and even beer, one chap sprinkled some table salt into my mouth and another lady disposed of our empty milk cartoons.

Although running more of the final section was equally as laborious as Milton Keynes, especially counting down the endless bridges that seemed to get further apart. We finally arrived at Check point seven at about 10.30 pm, the staff were really helpful, again I changed my socks and refuelled on rice pudding and soup. One of the checkpoint staff took us back to the canal and bid us on our way for a 3rd night of relentless views of the ever continuing canal path. This night is pretty much a blur in my memory, I can recall having more hallucinations with trees appearing as Meccano toys, Robots, spaceships and princess castles - it was like a winter wonderland but I felt safe in the dark. I know Andy and I stopped for a nap as were now both swaying like a couple of drunks due to being so sleep deprived. I was woken with a start by the day break as it was suddenly light, gosh for a moment I panicked thinking I'd slept for hours and had been timed out. The welcomed and much needed rest boosted our pace as we wanted to cover as much ground as possible before the midday heat zapped our strength again.



At one point I recall we wasted the best part of thirty minutes faffing around trying to avoid a puddle that spanned across the breadth of the tow path. Even at one point using the map as a stepping stone and then having to hook it back through the mud with a stick. Top tip for future runs - carry a couple of plastic bags to put on your feet when faced with a menacing puddle. After that brief delay and to amuse ourselves we started to think of different uses for the map - getting from A to B didn't

even feature. My Favourite three were; useful tool for guarding against a swan attack, stepping stone and a fan, I believe we got up to about 12-15. I decided to call Ernie to see if he was still in the race as I knew he had been cutting it fine at the cut off to preserve his feet. He was in good spirits and seemed pleased to hear from us. A few hours later Ernie called us and asked where we were and I was pleased to hear he was only a few bridges behind. Andy surged on at this point as he was worried that we were cutting it fine. My right shin was beginning to hurt so I extended my walking stints and limited running pace (if you could still call it that). Ernie caught up with me about 4-5 miles from checkpoint 8, he had be running flat out to catch up and helped motivate me to run more. We arrived at Check point 8 where I was greeted by Marit who had been at every CP since retiring herself at the halfway point. She had been supporting me ever since and I really appreciated her encouraging comments. Debbie, Ernie's Partner, was managing the CP and supplied us with veggie sausages, beans and mash. Andy had already demolished his and was also most

ready to leave so we bid him farewell as he left about an hour before us running strong, I expected he would finish before nightfall.

### **Final Night and last leg home**

I on the other hand walked nursing my sore shin, this penultimate marathon was drawn out, though the scenery was more interesting, we stopped for some pub grub when Javed joined us. We spotted Thomas and invited him, but he was keen to press on. I offered Javed some of my ploughman's as it was big enough for four, and my blistered tongue from gulping a newly poured cuppa soup at an earlier CP was making it hard going. Javed told me to stay strong as I would be the first British woman to complete the race if I made in back to Goring and he said had total faith in me from the start. I had carried his encouraging words from the get go, especially his metaphor of running as simply smiling and dancing from start to finish. I'd started with the quick step and few bursts of high energy disco but for the final leg it was going more like a death march sadly. When Ernie and I arrived at CP 9 I was struggling even more and the final 500 metres to the tent seems to go on forever. At this point to be truthful I was beginning to doubt whether I would be able to continue, I was worried that if I complained too much I would be prevented by the staff from going on. Debbie gave me an instant ice pad that reduced the nagging pain in the shin to a more bearable level and I couldn't really moan too much having seen the state of Ernie's Feet. He is a true hero and real fighter, despite the odds he fought back against his red raw toes, I so admired his grit and determination. The check point staff were brilliant and the chairman of the TRA congratulated me on my efforts so far. The Last leg was a mere 19 miles but without doubt the hardest physically, as it wasn't just going to be an easy Sunday morning stroll in park like I hoped. We slept for about an hour, when Ernie shook me to get ready to leave, for a moment I didn't know where I was, confused and disorientated, I fumbled to get on my Salomon vest jacket and head torch, which again was twisted and upside down. Annoyingly my torch kept switching itself off every 10 seconds, luckily for me Ernie carried a spare that he was happy for me to borrow. Rather than walking and lifting my feet, as the grass was so sodden I discovered that I could slide my feet forward akin to cross country skiing motion. With less pressure on my shin I was feeling positive that I could finish this race and soon I was back into a dreamy flow state, listening intently to Ernie's colourful stories. Totally unaware of the slow progress we were actually making, it wasn't until day break that the panic set in, thinking I had come all this way only to be timed out. Reduced to tears, frustrated with my lack of physical strength to pick up the speed I lay down on a bench - the sleep monster had got the better of me, I was zonked. Ernie had a job to wake me, I remember leaning on him and walking with my eyes shut, we stopped again and he massaged my shoulders. Within a few minutes I was alive, as if energy had been transmitted from his hands, like a battery recharger. Wow we were flying again and it was not long before Debbie, John, Marit and my three children were beside us. We all ran into to the finish together where I experienced a feeling of overwhelming joy and sadness that the journey was now over. 97 hours and 10 minutes. What next.....??