

I was hoping to land this relays report before December, which has since slipped to January. Between the date of the relays on an unexpectedly spectacular day in October and now, the official report in The Fellrunner has gone to press, and is well worth a look in case you missed it. I will however still give you a belated, NFR-focused take on the day!

Due to the constraints of the location the number of team entry places was somewhat less than has typically been the case, and as a result we were only blessed with a single ballot entry in the V40 category (we could only enter 1 team per category this time). Due to less fortune for our neighbouring clubs in the ballot, that meant we were the only male North East-based team representation, also joined by a ladies team from North Shields Poly.

In terms of team selection, the V40 age restriction discounted a number of younger club runners who had put their names forward but did make selection somewhat straightforward, with 6 eligible nominations all finding a place. After an inevitable last minute drop-out, there was a bit of panic to find a substitute runner in the days beforehand, but I was delighted when Dave France – former club mate from my time in Gateshead, and recently relocated down the road from me – agreed to “fast track” sign up for NFR & step in to the breach. That left our team line up as follows:

- [Leg 1](#) Dave France
- [Leg 2 \(pairs\)](#) Dexter & Stu Ferguson
- [Leg 3 \(nav\)](#) Chris Eggett & Roger Sillito
- [Leg 4](#) Ross Robertson

I was designated driver for the day & having rendezvoused with Ross & Chris near Birtley, we set course for the Dales. I was dismayed to learn through my passengers some way down the A1 that I had made a rather disappointing “administrative error” on the team selection front. I had somehow *incorrectly* discounted our new club member Jarlath McKenna as being eligible as a V40 runner - official apology since tendered & graciously accepted by Jarlath! That was fortunately the only major mishap of note, but did deprive us of his considerable pace on the day.

We arrived to settled if slightly overcast conditions in Appletreewick & made our way to meet up with Stu, Dexter & Kim – all of whom deciding to make a weekend of it in the campsite next door to race HQ at Masons Farm. The siting of the HQ in a smartly-presented farm shed was a real plus for the event – a definite upgrade on the marquee-based accommodation more typical of these events. Had it rained that would have been a massive bonus for a team that travels light, i.e. no tent! The weather gods were very kind to everyone as it turned out.



Leg 1



Left: The view down the field as the mass start gets under way for Leg 1

We made our way collectively to the start field which presented participants with a particularly daunting gradient from the off. The mass start was located at the bottom of the hill, and spectators were able to watch the leg 1 runners make their way up the full lung-busting length of it. Subsequent runners were not left out of experiencing this however, with each leg going this way initially.



Dave was likely to be our fastest runner on the day, and was well suited to the first leg route; aside from the 2 big climbs it was relatively runnable - at least in fell running terms. The early clag had pretty much cleared while he was out taking on an extended version of the Burnsall Classic race route. This was the only leg taking in the west direction to Burnsall Fell. Dave had a strong run & brought us home as the 10th placed V40 team after his leg – a very respectable start for us.



Left: Leg 1 & 2 change over

Leg 2

Stu & Dexter had been making good use of the warm-up area as Dave quickly came into view on the final descent. They made a rapid descent into the starting pen for the first handover which went smoothly despite the excitement of their just-in-time appearance. The leg 2 route had the most climbing overall as is typical for the relays. Having summited the initial climb from the start field they soon had to descend back to the Wharfedale valley level so they could cross the river ahead of the big climb up Simon's Seat. This was the highest point any leg reached at 485M.

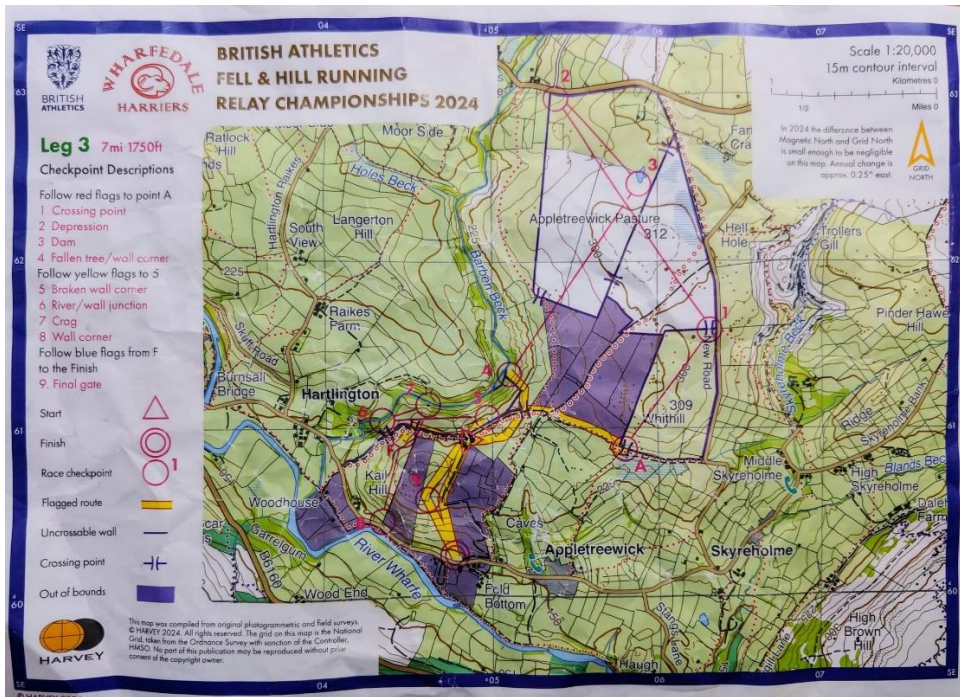


Left: Stu takes on the climb at the head of Skyreholme Beck

The route then wound back via Skyreholme Beck to take in the gorge of [Trollers Gill](#) – providing a few more ups & downs for our guys to navigate. This provided a re-union of sorts for Stu, who had apparently tackled this spectacular landform years back (however this time he was not equipped with climbing gear). After next traversing the rough moorland of Appletreewick Pasture, there was one final climb to tackle before the fast descent, back down the same route in the start field.

Leg 3

Chris & I were trying to balance the need to warm up in the holding area while not tiring ourselves out given the available gradient; as Dexter & Stu came into view we also had to hurry down to pick up the virtual baton for our nav leg. We'd already figured out where the maps were getting issued – and spotted that we'd be heading east from that point, beyond which the unknown awaited.



Left: A battle-tested Leg 3 map

The nav began in earnest as we left the safety of grazing land & picked up the rough stuff to the north of checkpoint A. The following checkpoints were relatively straightforward in the fine conditions and we opted for the longer route around Appletreewick Pasture when given a choice of crossing points. Things got interesting at checkpoint 4 where we were treated to a flagged section routing us to our final stretch of navigation up what felt like a wall of grass & earth!



From here the checkpoints came thick & fast, & it felt more like proper orienteering all of a sudden, with plenty of ups & downs thrown in. Although it was mainly on grazing ground, there was lots of route variety. Aside from missing an obvious chance to contour between checkpoints 7 & 8 either side of a hill, it felt like we got things about right.

Leg 4



Left: Ross is let loose on the final leg

Despite best efforts on leg 3, we weren't able to spare Ross from the mass start. He was still blessed with the late afternoon sun & balmy conditions. The leg 4 route was essentially a shortened leg 2, minus the sharp climb to Simon's Seat. That meant he was also treated to the steady drag up the route of Skyreholme Beck, where the course of his leg re-joined that of Leg 2 to the top of Trollers Gill. From here he had 3 further climbs ahead that Stu & Dexter had also tackled earlier in the day - before that last glorious descent to meet us all outside the finishing tent.



Left: "NFR Oldies" celebrate a great day on the hills together

We were all treated to a serving of chilli with flatbread back at HQ, along with “bottomless” tea & coffee served in our red trophy mugs! Adjacent cake & beer outlets topped off the very civilized catering options, all situated in the unique farmyard setting. With those not staying having made their way back, Stu & Dexter continued to avail of the hospitality into the later hours. I gather that Kim at least kept Dexter out of trouble through the extended drinking option provided by the nearby Craven Arms, which had become the last stand for post-race revelry.



In summary it was a truly memorable day out for all, and fell runners can hopefully look forward to future relays organizers putting on similar weather in the years ahead. We didn't win unfortunately, nor did we threaten the V40 leader board too strongly: we did nonetheless come away with the first north-east team honours once again (“You can only beat those who turn up” as a wise man once said to me).

Roger Sillito
January 2025