

## The 100 mile Round Rotherham experience

### Ray Mathews



What makes anyone want to run 100 miles? This is a question that has been levelled at me more than any other. And certainly more times than I can remember over these past few weeks, since i was confident enough to make public that i would attempt to complete the double Robothams Round Rotherham event. Well the answer to that one, I will try to explain as we go along, but needless to say, Age plays a massive part of the overall equation.

This sort of distance was not going to be taken on without being as fit and mentally prepared as i could possibly be, the decision had to be left, before announcing, until i was confident that the physical training was over, and I was tapering down free from injury, A small niggle I could handle for the fifty mile event, but certainly not one hundred miles, I need to make decisions on how much further it is possible to push the limits of my mind and body, Well this distance would give me the answers.

Having had a pretty good year in terms of running, London, and Edinbrough marathons and the 100km Del Sahara Race, this is probably the best opportunity for me to have attempted this great event. There comes a time when it's not just enough to "think you're capable", proof is the provider of just about all the answers i need at this cross road in my life.

I felt the best option was to start the run, do a double lap, but making the second fifty mile as part of the event proper and getting away with the early 6 am start on Saturday morning, The decision then was how long would i need to complete the first fifty miles through the night, fortunately i am local and actually live on the rout. This event is no stranger to me so the chances of going wrong, or getting lost would be quite unlikely,, or so i thought,, but that's another story. So i decided to start my run on Friday late afternoon at 5 pm, giving me a good twelve hours to get back to the start

All plans made, Friday the 15<sup>th</sup> October, friends and Rotherham Harriers officials to start me off from Manvers College; we observed a one minuets silence for Ralph Rowbotham, the founder of this great event, who had sadly passed away a few weeks ago.

I set off with my fifteen year old Granddaughter Holly, and right on queue it started raining as if to reiterate that nothing was going to be easy. Running at a good steady pace, after dropping off my friends that were to run the first mile with me, we made steady progress along the canal towpath towards Wath, i couldn't help but admire the elegant easy running style of Holly as she strode out along side me, Kids make it look so easy don't they? What a great feeling being out together on this special and unforgettable day. By the time we hit Elsecar we were both drenched and covered in mud, laughing and joking as we climbed up through the woods, headlights blazing, as it was now getting dark enough to make the lights worth using, it was still raining heavy, but we are enjoying one another's company and not one complaint from her. We arrived at Wentworth Church about ten minutes overdue; Jacky, holly's mum was there to meet us,,, It's the end of the run for Holly, she has done really well, a little over six miles .Are you going to be scared all on your own granddad, i don't want to leave you, are you sure you are going to be ok, It brought a lump to my throat. Assuring holly that i was going to be fine, and promising to be careful, I waved them off, and set

off up past the church, now feeling suddenly on my own, I remember thinking, this is where it really starts to get serious, let's get on with it.

The rest of the first leg went quite uneventful and suddenly i am heading out towards the Tinsley Viaduct, along the towpath which was very muddy and slippery, the Rain had now stopped and the moon was creating a daylight effect, especially on the water .I was running very comfortable and feeling really good, as i came up the main road past the Pike and Herron pub, being conscious of drinking regularly, i know the value of hydration, it had paid dividends in the Sahara, I had also been nibbling on dried fruit, and nuts.. I had estimated that i would need something like thirteen thousand calories, and about eight gallons of water, to keep me from running out of energy during this 100mile.

Much before i know it i am down into Catcliffe, and heading out towards Treeton. The first time i feel that this distance is about to give me any problems, is when i realise that i had a blister on my right heal, it had probably been caused by the rain soaking into my socks and making the double skin section into a solid state, creating friction on my heal. I am alongside the pay booth as i approach the main road coming out of the Rother Valley Country park, a change of socks is now very important. A good time to have a short stop after the long drag out of the park.. a change of socks, an energy biscuit ,and drink, really does make me feel good and ready for the rest of the run until i reach Woodsets where i can have a short break.

Harthill is now in view with the street lights illuminating the horizon, it seems like no time before i am climbing the steps out of the village, and onto the paths up and over the fields heading out to the now very quiet Netherthorpe air field, and on past the farm. The moon is still providing a pretty good light as I cross over the canal bridge at the very pretty hamlet Turner Wood.

It's time to contact John, a very good friend, who will meet me in about fifteen minutes at Woodsets. I am really looking forward to seeing him as i come over and down the hill heading from the golf course into Woodsets, I can see the hazard lights flashing from the car which is parked up just before the church. This guy is a saint. I am soon sitting in the passenger's seat, which has heat coming from it {heated seating}, a flask of steaming hot coffee, A change of socks after taking care of the blister, and fresh trainers, I am feeling like a new man, he is also saying the right things, like i am about fifteen minutes ahead of prediction, and I am looking like I have just come from a stroll in the park.

Firbeck here i come, saying my goodbyes with thanks for his help, i am on my way, and soon comfortably into my stride the moon is still providing a pretty good light. As i reach the lake at Langold i am conscious of a pair of eyes staring out from the edge of the woods towards my right. It's a fox, he is not going to move i feel, as i get closer he is standing his ground, these are his woods, and no mere mortal like me is going to pass. I steady down to a walk and switch on my head torch, slowly directing the beam towards him, he looks about as large as a good size Alsatian dog," I am a runner "i said to him, as if that could be a pass word, bloody hell, he is still staring at me, I am now about fifteen feet from him, slowly walking forward, but towards the left of him. As if fed up with this staring game he just slowly turned and walked off, back into the woods, turning back to check on my movements before disappearing. Wow i think if i hadn't kept on moving forward we would have been there all night staring at one another,, I know that as time goes by, this story, for my great grand kids, instead of a fox, this animal will have turned into a Lion making me into a hero.

Firbeck is a great sight, i always get the feeling of being on my way home from here, and soon that is about to happen, passing the very eerie Roache Abbey, on my way to Maltby. Through the church yard at St Barthomnue ,and coming up to my cottage, very tempting to call in at home but at this time in the morning Better NOT. The reception would not be good.

Leaving Maltby behind, knowing that in just a few more miles i will be back at the Collage, but also very conscious that there are still some difficult miles to negotiate

I am feeling relatively good, no problems from the blister; in fact my feet were in great condition just conscious of the mileage in my legs, but more than happy, feeling confident that i will be able to go again for the next fifty,

The climbs are now over ,and soon on my way down into Old Denaby, but feeling the steep incline pulling at the lower back, glad to be at the bottom of the grassy hill and now onto firm tarmac for a change, just about three miles to the completion of the first fifty miles.

The canal was lit up with the moon , a lack of concentration and i had just passed the turn off left by the side of the concrete Fish statue on the tow path, just in time i realized turned back and headed left up towards the train station, the path seemed unusually long this morning as i reached the end. Heading for the turn off over the side of the bridge, down the steps and back on to the old canal ,which has had a major face lift,, I could now see the lights from the collage as i came out onto the cycle path, and shortly into the car park at Manvers Collage.

It is so very quite as i reach the doors to the sports hall. The security guy as spotted me and opens the doors gesturing me to keep quiet, I could see from the number of cars parked up that the hall would be full of sleeping competitors. He recognized me as the guy who was doing the double distance and opened the door for me. I needed to wash off, clean my teeth and completely change my kit, it's now about ten minutes to five am The Rotherham race officials were starting to arrive, and whilst i am having a bowl of cornflakes and fruit they are setting up the tables for the registration,, i collected my official race number 101, and T shirt, I was getting congratulated on completing the first fifty miles in eleven hours and forty min. Many of the athletes were aware that i was attempting this feat, and good wishes were coming in abundance. I had completed the first fifty miles a bit quicker than i had predicted, in well under twelve hours, I wasn't feeling any the worse for the faster pace, but would I suffer later on the second leg

Five thirty am Saturday the 16<sup>th</sup> October, i set off feeling incredibly confident that i would be successful in completing the first one hundred mile Round Rotherham

I had let the officials know i was going to make a start, and as my time was already logged at five the previous afternoon it wasn't necessary to formally set me off again. Heading out towards Wath ,and past the fire station, I was into a good steady pace, crossing over the bridge and ,with head torch now activated picking out the path alongside the lake, I could make out the tents with the night fishermen who were commenting on my being out running at this time in the morning. These guys were i suppose endurance fishermen,, I remember passing them just over twelve hours before.

Now onto the canal side, the torch giving off a light that makes it feel like you're running through a never ending tunnel , i am in automatic mode and not really concentrating,, Massive mistake// I suddenly get that feeling that i am not where i should be. Realising that i had missed the turn off from the canal, i am very close to Barnsley, and not knowing whether the canal comes back onto the rout, I feel such a bloody fool as i set off back, retracing my steps, to join the correct path. It takes me just over half an hour, and by the time i arrive back at the turn off, there seems to be a large group of athletes going through from the six o clock starters. This is the first time i feel down; estimating that the extra time lost would work out to at least five extra miles, not what i need, but making me more determined not to make such a stupid mistake again, after all i had run every one of these legs dozens of times. I have to get this negative feeling out of my head, what's another five miles.



I am now on a mission to get back into that good feeling zone. Catching and passing walkers before we reach the Elsecar woods provides me with that target, and a good steady pace sees me achieving the positive results i was after, I was now in front of a large group as we start to climb out of the woods, and heading out towards Wentworth, with the church spire now in full view. As i reach the wood yard and just before the main road, the first of the main runners came past me at an incredible pace. These guys were flying and looking strong, is this the year for a new record, which has stood now for a good few years, Held by Chris Parkes ,a member of the Rotherham Harriers.

On my way to the first check point there is now a steady stream of athletes coming alongside and passing me. Must not get caught up in the extra speed these athletes are travelling at, Steady is the pace i must maintain, otherwise i will run out of energy, and struggle to make the distance.. My phone is ringing; it's Brian Harney, Rotherham Harriers official, wondering where i am, and checking that i am still in the event, when i give him the reason for my delay at reaching the first checkpoint, his comment is predictable, how could i get lost, and miss the turn off?/. As i come down the hill to the first checkpoint there is a large crowd of athletes and spectators, i can hear the cheering and shouting of congratulations as i reach the gazebo and food table. My aim is to spend as little time at these checkpoints as possible. I have a good amount of water in my camel back; i have been nibbling food during the last five miles or so. I picked up a large slice of fruit cake, and a cup of orange juice ,and set off to a great cheer heading out across the field at the back of the football pitches, and down into the woods.

As i came out across the road, and looking up at the climb in front of me, I felt for the first time my legs were starting to feel the miles that i had covered, and so with hands on my thighs i made my way up this very demanding climb to hilltop, The path down to meadow bank road also gave me some pain in my lower back, as i gingerly made my way down towards the almost concealed entrance to the canal, and towpath below. I managed to attract the attention of a couple of runners who had gone sailing past the entrance, and as they came past me heading out towards the Viaduct at Tinsley, i received a pat on the back and thanks , just about at the same time two lady friends, from my running club[ Maltby Running club]came along side me. We had a couple of minutes together before they made their way off and slowly into the distance.

I am still being passed by the fifty mile group, and being encouraged by friends as they catch me, and then leave. The problem with this is not to get complacent and be pulled along at a pace that does not suit my plans. A lot of these guys i have trained with over the weeks leading up to this event ,but today is all about my challenge., almost to the point of being unsociable, but still competitive, if i am going to make it.

Treeton checkpoint is my next fuelling station, and as i approach the cricket ground, again i can hear the cheers for me as i come into view. A few of my friends, who are taking part in the relay event, are giving me a great welcome as i reach the check table. I feel like an Olympic champion. Refilling my camel back to the brim with water, eating a couple of small boiled new potato's, fruit cake, bread and jam, together with a cup of hot coffee, i then set off on the next to the longest leg of the race, and Harthill. I now have a group of steady running athletes in front of me, providing me with my next target; my pace is now a very steady jog/ walk, but making progress never the less. by the time we reach the lakes at the Rother Valley Country Park i am level with the group of five ,staying with them for about a couple of miles.

It's time to make a move; they are having blister problems, with three of them starting to struggle. By the time i have reached the motorway bridge just before Woodhall village, looking back, they are not in sight, feeling good for that little bit of competition, i am now able to see the village of Harthill and my next checkpoint. Walking now more than running, my first feeling of distress comes as i slip, whilst coming over the style at the bottom of the field below Harthill, as my foot slipped on the muddy plank, i came down with a jolt, and my right leg locked up solid, the pain from my calf, which was now just a solid ball, and the muscle in my shin now like a steel rod, was horrible , cursing , but knowing i would have to relax and wait for the muscles to settle, it seemed like hours, but infect, probably just a couple of minutes , Oh the relief as the muscles eased back to their normal shape, it was better than winning the pools,

as they say. Praying that this was just going to be a one off, i set off up the hill, nursing my right leg. I stayed only a few minutes at Harthill, knowing that i need to keep on the move and reduce the risk of my legs ceasing up. It's now raining heavy, crossing the field towards Netherthorpe, i had had a warning the rain was coming, and had put on my wet coat, zipped up and hood at the ready, the rain turned into hail stones within about ten minutes and was making a loud drumming noise on the coat, the wind had also increased with the hail making it more difficult to see where i was heading across this open field, Shelter was half a mile away at Turner wood, but by the time i reached the hamlet the weather had subsided. I felt cold, uncomfortable and miserable for the first time. I realized that i had not been eating or drinking for the last four or five miles, rectifying that with some Christmas cake and energy drink.

Evaluating my situation, i decided that Woodsets was about twenty minutes away, so making warming up a priority, or i would end up with muscle damage, I made the extra effort to start running at a steady pace, I was confident that it was better to get my body warm and more functional. It worked, although i was feeling tired and breathing heavy, i really did feel much more comfortable in my body. Woodsets is always a very welcoming check point, the officials, and ladies put themselves out to provide the best of food and drink, nothing is too much trouble for them, it really is very much appreciated.

I had my bag of clothes, socks and shoes waiting for me, but apart from changing my top ,i decided that my feet were feeling exceptionally good, so leave what i had on, i felt it better not to risk upsetting what was working for me, there was now only about twenty miles to go. Wow how good is that.

John, my friend who had met me the night before was again there to greet me. Do i fancy company for a couple more of the legs, he asked me. Great if you fancy more walking now than running was the answer. Fuelled up with water and more food for me to have on the way, we set off across the playing field heading for Langold Lakes. It's strange having company, and i realize that we are now travelling at a better pace than for a long time i am also feeling better with less aches than for some time. We are soon catching and passing people in front of us, that had come passed me some hours ago, it's a great feeling as they congratulate me on my double lap, and wish me good luck. I mention the episode with the fox, as we pass the lake, and head off towards the woods at Langold; he is impressed with my calmness.

Catching another four athletes we are able to guide them on the rout as we head out to Firbeck, another welcome site coming across the ford and up the lane to the check point.

We left within five minutes and set off at a pretty good pace to Maltby, John complimented me on the pace we were travelling, and able to predict reaching the next check points by about six thirty. By the time we reach Roache Abbey we have caught up with another athlete who was struggling with blisters on his feet, he asked me if he can tag on to us to get him through to Maltby, it's good to have company, also knowing that i am still travelling pretty trouble free after all these miles. I am due to pass my cottage within ten minutes, so i ring through to Maureen to let her know where i am. Maureen and my daughter Karen are waiting to greet me as i pass through the letch gate at the church; they are surprised and pleased to see that i am not in any pain, or struggling. I am told that i look amazingly fresh, which makes me feel great. We spend a couple of minutes with them, and leave to make the next checkpoint before it starts to get dark.

We have left the guy who had come through to Maltby with us as we head out towards Old Denaby, and our last check point. John has decided that he wanted to come through to the end with me, He is more than welcome, he is great company ,and taking my mind off the fatigue that is slowly setting in. It's now getting dark and up ahead we can make out a group of people that are having problems with deciding on the right rout as we catch them up. They are now part of our little gang as they latch on to the back of us making our way up and along the top of the ridge, heading out of Hooton Roberts. They are dropping back, and soon we are on our own again, dropping down the grassy field to our last check point, looking forward to meeting up with Ray Howith and his group of helpers.. He has

spotted us comes down the field, shouting his greetings, and waving his torch for us to see. As we arrive he grabs me, lifts me off my feet, and plants a big sloppy kiss on my cheek, congratulating me. Only just over three miles to go, he keeps telling me. I am going to ring through to the finish and let them know you're on your way he shouts as we make our way down the road.

Crossing over the railway, and onto the tow path, we are making good progress, and i am now feeling on a high, the fatigue, and stiffness has just about left me, it's amazing to think that there is now less than two miles to go .a message has come through on my phone "Do i fancy Fish and Chips "I nearly step into the canal as i try to answer Helen, a good friend who will be at the finish to greet me, I still find it difficult to make my phone function whilst jogging, but manage a no Thanks.

We are on the approach to the Manvers College; the whole place is lit up in the night sky. As we follow the set out rout, to keep us away from the car park and possible moving cars, I can see the finish line and the greeting party of people are cheering as I cross the line.

IT'S DONE,/ over one hundred miles, I am still feeling half human, it's also less of a problem than i thought it would be, bending down to remove my muddy shoes and socks at the entrance to the hall. I was greeted with a very warm welcome from Helen handing me a plate of pie and pees with mint sauce, and a hot cup of tea, just what i need. Although i am a bit reluctant to sit down, i feel comfortable and relaxed as i tuck into the pie. The realization that there are a good few athletes still to come in brings home the sense of achievement that i am being congratulated about. The Harriers officials and supporters of the event are clapping and cheering, together with a good deal of hand shaking from the other athletes. I am asked if i would fancy doing a lap of honour ,Ah Ah Ah.

I am just about picked off my feet, as Brian Harney comes across to the table and nearly squeezes the breath out of me, together with very genuine, emotional congratulations, and this coming from a great distance, and record braking runner. I feel very proud to receive this accolade from him.

I am now wanted for photographs and pick out a spot on the back wall, trying to look like an athlete; I am feeling really good now, and not what i had expected at all. I have no pains, just a little stiff, and a blister on my right heal, which has not been a problem since we applied the plaster the night before. I feel incredibly lucky that i have been able to complete this 100 mile plus race, which has lasted for a total of twenty eight hours, without any problems, and able to cope with the distance, both mentally and physically. I feel that i did get the food and drink intake just about right, and that i can apply that knowledge for future events.

Questions have been answered, / I now know that I will be capable of take on the very long and demanding endurance events, without fear of running out of energy, or the strength of mind i would need to overcome fatigue to be able to make it to the end.

It's time to leave the collage say my goodbyes, and thanks to everyone who had supported, and helped me to achieve my goal. Just the simple task of being able to bend over and fasten my shoe laces as we leave is so satisfying, only people who have experienced that problem after a long run will understand what a major task that is.

A massive thank you to so many of my friends for your help and encouragement, you all know who you are. A very special thank you to John, Brian, Ray, and Helen, each one of you contributed in a different but special way.

Ray Matthews