

A Flyers Eye View of the Southern 50

Has it really come and gone again already - Another years Southern 50 hike ?!

After the glory of winning the 50k event last year it took us all of a minute or so to decide to enter again this year and see if we could defend the title.

Preparation was a serious thing of course, with three practice hikes in the months leading up to the event and lots of “tactical talks”. One of our number going off to university and “embracing the student lifestyle” didn’t help, although he did lay off the beer the week before! We also have the Flyers Creed to keep to:

- Checkpoints are our enemy
- Straight lines are our friends
- No sitting down
- Eat and drink on the move
- Pain is good for the soul
- Don’t eat the sausage rolls!
- First in the pub, last out

Things didn’t look that promising when we had to stop twice on the way up on the Friday night for one of the team to be violently sick, but Stephen said he would be fine and seemed to recover during the team meeting in the pub.

As usual the short / fitful sleep was all too soon ended with the glare of lights at “oh my God o’clock”, then a healthy breakfast and kit check. The wait after this is always where the nerves kick in, then it’s grid references and off into the gloom and, this year, the rain.

This year we started quite a long way down the list of teams and were able to enjoy some early morning team gobbling on the long slow climb up out of Watlington. With the steady rain and melting snow the conditions underfoot off road could be reasonably be described as “soggy”, with a number of footpaths resembling small rivers.

This made climbing the hills that much more fun, especially an extra steep one that had a mausoleum & church / checkpoint at the top, with Martin falling over near the top and nearly sliding back down again. The scenery in the Chilterns was even better with a topping of snow, and we had a number of Red kite sightings along the way. We also managed to get round Chequers without being arrested or shot!

After the early team gobbings we reached a patch where we knew there were 2 teams ahead and we didn’t seem to be getting closer to them, things were starting to hurt and the mood was getting a bit darker. So Paul came out with his secret weapon, some home made bread pudding (I could tell you what was in it but would have to kill you - suffice to say nothing illegal!) and that did the trick. We were off again and came across our old rivals the Undertakers just after a checkpoint at a navigational decision point; we went different ways and didn’t see them again till the end.

Then it was just team 23 in front, although we also knew that team 57 would be putting in a good effort and would be chasing us so had to keep pushing on. Martin was struggling with his hamstrings and cramp but kept on plugging away, with lots of encouragement from the rest of the team. Then we saw a team in front on a long slow climb, we went back into gobble mode and were soon away, the leading 50k team with about a third of the route to go.

Checkpoint strategy was maintained with our only stops being at two huts where we could plot grid references in the dry! The checkpoint staff were all wonderful, helpful and supportive as always - damn them - they will slow you down with offers of tea, toasted cheese sandwiches and pasties, but not for us - we have a plan and it doesn't involve comfort!

It was nice of checkpoint 13 (where our own Explorer Scout leader was based) to plant a little booby trap for the walkers - just as you came over the stile to enter the area where the tent was there happened to be a wet muddy area into which we all sank up to our shins - lovely ! We also thought checkpoint 14 was a bit much, hiding it in someone's back garden is a bit unfair - did the owners know about it - or were they out for the day?

Last checkpoint finally found and we were off on the late sprint, well by this stage fast hobble would be more accurate, to the finish. We arrived to have it confirmed that we were the first 50k team back in 9hrs and 37 mins, but then would be the long wait till the morning to see if we had done enough, or if a team behind us had been quicker.

We were very pleased that this year we also had a fledgling team of Explorers in the 30k event for the first time, team 65. Unfortunately they didn't have a lot of luck - one of them had to drop out the week before due to a chest infection and her last minute replacement twisted her ankle on the course. I believe they also broke part of the Flyers Creed and were seduced into spending far too long at some of the checkpoints ! But we were very proud of their determination to finish as a team and in the dark, with a final time of just over 12 hours. They weren't last and I am sure that they will have learnt a lot and will be much better placed for another go next year.

I'm ashamed to say that we also broke the Flyers Creed, as we weren't the first in the pub and certainly weren't the last out, but we had enough liquid painkiller to help us sleep! Then it was the morning after the slog before and the presentation ceremony. It came down to the last two 50K teams, and there was a huge feeling of relief and pride as they called out team 57 as the runners up. We had managed to defend our title and that was a great feeling, as distinct from the feeling of pain from our legs and feet, which wasn't so great! Oh, and Paul won the biggest blister competition this year, also for the second year running.

Finally we would like to say a very big thanks to all the organisers / helpers / checkpoint staff for this great event. Who knows, we may be back next year !?

Team 48
The Phoenix Flyers

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