

Late finishers (again) report by Tony Davis

The S'50 of 2009 must have generated more hits on weather forecasting websites than all previous years together. With up to 9 inches of snow around a week before the event the S'50 website warned of a possible cancellation (whimps!)

But as is usual the day dawned clear and dry and after a 03:15 wake-up to travel to Watlington the Late Finisher's assembles again to take on the S'50. We were soon trotting along crunchy snow towards the 17 checkpoints that would take us around the 50 mile route. Our team comprising Colin, Steve, Asa and myself are 'veterans' of the S'50, Colin + myself also took part in the 1st S'50 some 30 years ago, and I was feeling very old, looking at the 20 – 25 years olds bouncing around the school eager to get going.

As there were only a dozen teams doing the 50 mile event we were pretty lonely, seeing only 1 other team till checkpoint 3, where some creative navigation allowed our main rivals team 13 (the Chesam Bois Snorkling bog hoppers or whatever), to catch us up. Over the next 20 miles or so we kept spotting this team (which was a bit annoying as we were going flat out).

It was also disappointing that we weren't making any time up in teams 7 & 9 who kept a steady 30 to 40 minutes in front of us despite our efforts to catch up. We were told they were racing through checkpoints looking very young & fit. So by about lunchtime we'd resigned ourselves to 2nd or 3rd place and settled back to enjoy the scenery and the cheese toasties from checkpoint 10. After the initial frozen ground the heat of the day plus the progress of the 40 or so 50K teams turned the paths into muddy tracks – still it made route finding easier just follow the footprints. Unexpectedly we spotted one of the fast 50 mile teams leaving checkpoint 16 as we approached, we'd gained 20 minutes somewhere (probably from a long an painful trot down a farm track that will remain a nightmare with me), and soon passed then at Santa's grotty grotto (checkpoint 17), and then realised we were now leading the 50 mile race !. We kept on pushing ourselves up the seemingly endless hill to checkpoint 18 just as dusk settled, having passed several of the 50k teams. The last 9k seemed to comprise one boggy track after another, and whilst going uphill was a slow slog, going downhill in the slushy muddy tracks in the dark was terrifying as there was minimal grip and I had to grab trees to control my descent. The last 4 k was along the relatively flat but muddy Ridgeway path and it was with great relief we hit the firm road just before checkpoint 20. My apologies to the staff at this checkpoint as all I did was slap my ticket down and headed off into the dark towards Watlington without a word. We all jogged the last 2k to the school - much to the surprise of Watlington's night life who weren't used to seeing 4 guys dressed in lycra and head torches running down their high street. Asa assured me that a right fork at the town centre was probably the right route and there was a tangible sigh of relief from us all when the school came into sight. We only then had to follow the scenic route– between the parked cars - round the outside of the school - past the canteen and up the steps to reach the finish. We waited a nervous 4 minutes in case team 13 somehow materialised, but it was not to be for another hour before any other 50mile teams arrived. We'd won despite the 25year advantage the of other fast teams. My thanks go to Asa, Colin & Steve who dragged me round (again!), and all the checkpoint staff who provided excellent refreshments from a variety of locations.

After 30 years of running the event you would have thought the organisers would have got it right, and I think they have – I cannot fault the event in any way – even the showers at the finish were good !. I think that after 30 years I can justify retiring from the 50 mile event, leaving it open to the youngsters to fight out – I'll take on the 50K route next year.