

THE RECORD-BREAKING RUN ACROSS
THE LAKE DISTRICT FELLS

THERE IS NO MAP IN HELL



STEVE BIRKINSHAW

FOREWORD BY
JOSS NAYLOR, MBE

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Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield
www.v-publishing.co.uk

'A wince-inducing insight into what it takes to break epic fell-running records, told with the sort of reluctance and humility that makes Birkinshaw all the more of a hero. I loved the book.'

DAMIAN HALL, OUTDOOR JOURNALIST AND ULTRAMARATHON RUNNER

'He modestly describes the toll it takes as his body gradually disintegrates over the seven days, and also the difficulties the fatigue gives him afterwards. If you like extreme challenges, this is a brilliant unravelling of the preparation and effects of Steve's navigation to and through hell.'

STEVE CHILTON, FELL RUNNER AND AUTHOR OF SEVERAL POPULAR RUNNING BOOKS, INCLUDING *IT'S A HILL, GET OVER IT*

*'The world of ultra running has many ordinary people doing extraordinary things, but none more so than Steve Birkinshaw. In this book Steve tells his own remarkable story from his childhood exploits in orienteering to his record-breaking six-day 214-peak Wainwrights run. The aftermath of this huge effort saw Steve suffer with an unknown illness linked with fatigue, and he tells this side of his story with openness and emotion. **There is no Map In Hell** is a story of a family man with a yearning for adventure in the hills, and is a book that any runner will love.'*

ANDY NUTTALL, ULTRA MAGAZINE

'A very entertaining, revealing and highly readable account of this top mountain runner's trials and tribulations on trail races and record-breaking attempts – most notably the Wainwrights. It's a fascinating insight into what drives Steve to push himself quite so incredibly hard. A must-read this summer!'

CLAIRE MAXTED, TRAIL RUNNING MAGAZINE

'The book is a fascinating account of what makes Steve tick and I am seriously impressed with both Steve's determination and the book. The book is a compelling read by a nice but extremely tough person that has pushed his body to the limit of what it can take.'

BILLY BLAND, BOB GRAHAM ROUND RECORD HOLDER AND FORMER
CHAMPION FELL RUNNER

'There is no Map in Hell is a frank, personal, yet inspiring account of an ultra-endurance feat few could comprehend. Steve's book is a tour-de-force of the Lake District Wainwrights, detailing a once in a generation record, which was only possible thanks to Steve's lifetime of mountain running experience, and the strength of personality to suck up suffering like few could imagine.'

SHANE OHLY, RACE DIRECTOR – BERGHAUS DRAGON'S BACK RACE

'This is a captivating account of a seriously extreme journey. The tales of preparation and recovery are as fascinating as the meticulous detail of the record-breaking run itself.'

DAVID MCCABE, EDITOR OF *THE FELLRUNNER* MAGAZINE

'I found the book fascinating from start to finish. Steve's writing style is genuine and matter of fact. He doesn't hide any details, from stresses as a child, to his suffering and emotion during the Wainwrights challenge. Nor does he embellish the narrative with unnecessary self-promotion. Instead he tells it like it is, from the heart. This is an awe-inspiring account of an amazing achievement, and an inspiration for what is possible doing something you love. Definitely worth reading!'

DUNCAN ARCHER, ORIENTEER AND MOUNTAIN-MARATHON RUNNER

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First published in 2017 by Vertebrate Publishing. Reprinted in 2017, 2018, 2020 and 2021.

vp Vertebrate Publishing
Omega Court, 352 Cemetery Road, Sheffield S11 8FT, United Kingdom.
www.v-publishing.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

978-1-910240-94-6 (Paperback)

978-1-910240-95-3 (Ebook)

978-1-911342-92-2 (Audiobook)

10 9 8 7 6 5

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vp Design and production by Jane Beagley. Cover design by Nathan Ryder.
Vertebrate Publishing
www.v-publishing.co.uk

Vertebrate Publishing is committed to printing on paper from sustainable sources.

Printed and bound in the UK by TJ Books Limited, Padstow, Cornwall.

PROLOGUE

I'm standing on the steps of the Moot Hall in Keswick. It is a few minutes before nine o'clock in the morning and the market traders are setting up. I have about twenty friends ready to cheer me off on the biggest challenge of my life. For the last year I have been preparing to run round all 214 Wainwright fells in the English Lake District as fast as possible, a massive route of 519 kilometres with 35,000 metres of ascent. With a plan of completing the route in under seven days, I will need to run the equivalent of around two marathons and four times up and down the UK's highest mountain, Ben Nevis, every day. However, I have really been preparing for this moment all my life, from when I started orienteering at age seven until I have reached the point where I feel I can take on this enormous challenge.

After all the preparation I am desperate to set off. Sorting out the route, support, food and logistics has been very intense. However, I'm also scared. Scared of the pain I expect to push myself through over the next seven days. The accounts of the people who have completed the challenge – Alan Heaton and Joss Naylor – as well as showing a love of the fells, are accounts of suffering and of pushing themselves through enormous amounts of pain. I hope I don't suffer like them.

The clock strikes nine and I set off down the steps, a twisting route past all the market stalls, a quick wave at my family and friends and down a little alleyway towards the fells. If all goes to plan, I will return to the Moot Hall in just under seven days, elated at having completed my challenge. However, if it goes wrong and I go through hell will I be strong enough mentally and physically to push through it and carry on?



**1 I Have
Always Run**

Overleaf: Orienteering on the North Yorkshire Moors, 1977 (aged nine). Photo: Steve Birkinshaw Collection.

01 STARTING OUT

'I did it!' Crossing the finish line of the 1976 British Orienteering Championships, I say these words to my mother and then burst into tears. It is just before my eighth birthday and I have completed my course in Cropton Forest, North Yorkshire, in two hours and twenty-four minutes. I am in the M12B class, M12 being for boys younger than twelve and B (as opposed to A) being the less-good class. I come in last by twenty minutes, but the important thing is I have completed the course. This means that my club – the West Anglia Orienteering Club – have won the team competition. Even though we were the *only* team. As well as me, there is my brother, Julian, who finished in the middle, and family friend, Alan Braggins, who finished second to last. An hour later we go up on to the podium to collect our certificates. I am so small I trip trying to get up the step.

I have only vague memories of what I did in the forest to take two hours and twenty-four minutes. My two-kilometre course had ten controls or checkpoints which I had to navigate round in sequence, and which the winner completed in thirty-six minutes. As it was an easy course for young children the controls were just off paths and tracks and I seem to remember I found most of them without too many problems, but one of the controls I just could not seem to find. I would leave the track and go into the forest, but I wasn't leaving the track at the correct point. The frustration of not being able to find the control meant I started to cry. A passing walker saw me crying and tried to help but was not much better than me; I think the orienteering-specific map, rather than the

standard UK Ordnance Survey map, confused her. Eventually I followed someone else on the same course into the control. This was usual for my orienteering at this time; I got round by a mixture of asking people, following people and trying (but usually failing) to make sense of the map. There were lots of tears but I was never forced to go orienteering, in fact I was desperate to go out and determined to get round the course, however long it took.

It's funny that determination in an adult is seen as an attribute, whereas similar characteristics in a child are seen as stubbornness and awkwardness. I did have plenty of stubbornness and awkwardness, and it obviously helped me get round orienteering courses, but it also drove my parents, my older siblings, Karen and Julian, and my younger sister, Hilary, mad. I would regularly fly off in a rage or a tantrum. I was known by my siblings as the 'Special Case', 'SC' or 'Swimming Club', as my parents always had to deal with me differently and carefully. The few times my parents argued it was all about how to deal with my rages. On one occasion after a particularly bad rage, my dad, Ian, wanted me to promise that it would never happen again. I refused as I said it was impossible to promise such a thing but that I would do my best, and my mum, Sue, took my side as it seemed like a logical argument.

Part of my frustrations came from the difficulties I had expressing myself. I started off being barely able to talk until I was three years old as I was tongue-tied, a condition where there is a tight piece of skin between the underside of the tongue and the floor of the mouth. This required an operation in hospital and my first ever memory is of being in hospital just before this operation. After this I still struggled really badly with my reading and writing. As a seven year old these were well below average for my age and so different from my excellent mathematical and logic ability that my parents went to see a specialist. They were told I could probably be classed as dyslexic, or they could just let me get on with life, without such a classification, and see how I coped. My parents thought it

was best that I just coped with it, so that is what happened. My reading gradually improved, although it is still very slow, but I still have problems writing. I have these thoughts in my head but transferring them from my head to a piece of paper is something I struggle with.

My awkwardness extended to my diet. I refused to eat most foods and ended up living mostly on breakfast cereals, toast and fruit. Unlike many children I refused to have a story at night before I went to sleep. Instead, I wanted to play a game. So every night my mum would play a game with me, but the difficulty was that I would only go to bed when I had won the game. Even harder for my mum was that if I saw that she was deliberately letting me win I would get very cross. So she had to work out clever ways of letting me win without me noticing.

I was very attached to a puppet rabbit called 'Haddit'. It was black and white and fitted on my child's fingers perfectly, with holes for the legs and arms and one for the head. The head was really hard which was important. When my siblings started to annoy me, I would get really cross and say 'you've Haddit', then I would put the rabbit on my hand and try to hit them with it. On one occasion Karen and her friend, Karen Burns, went into the shower cubicle in our house to protect themselves from me and Haddit. They were standing there scared while Haddit was banging and banging on the cubicle door. But no one could ever get cross with me as it wasn't me hitting them but Haddit the rabbit.

Although I was often cross and angry, I was happy and my stresses went when I was out orienteering by myself. There were no people to annoy me, nobody around telling me what to do; it was just me trying to complete the challenge of finishing the course as fast as possible. I would quite often cry, but these were frustrations at my own lack of ability and my determination to get round the course as fast as possible.

The first British orienteering events took place in the 1950s and 1960s, and by the 1970s there were regular events throughout the country. My whole family (apart from Hilary, who preferred team sports)

enjoyed orienteering, due to the combination of an individual running sport together with the mental challenge of navigating. So if an event was organised within a two-hour drive of home we would attend – for the big events we went even further afield. Eventually my map-reading skills improved, although I was very unreliable and would still have some disastrous days.

The 1977 British Orienteering Championships were in Cannock Chase, Staffordshire, and I was delighted to come third in the M10 class – a class for children ten and under that had just been introduced. I went up to collect my prize from Denis Howell, minister of sport, and my picture appeared in the *National Orienteering* magazine.

However, I missed the next year's championships as I was recovering from a bad mastoids infection in my ear. For years I had been taking regular courses of antibiotics due to really painful earache. They helped for a bit then the earache would return, keeping me awake at night, and making me even more temperamental. Eventually it blew up into a full infection; for several days I was throwing up anything I tried to eat or drink and the room seemed to spin round and round. I said to my mum 'Will I die?' which was a possibility, especially as her sister had died from a mastoids infection when she was a child. I was rushed to hospital and had an immediate operation to release the pressure in my head and two more operations to sort it out. I spent ten days in hospital and lost a third of my body weight. Afterwards, I was still desperate to go to the championships but my parents wouldn't let me. In fact, I cried more and was more upset about missing it than being ill in the first place. Clearly, not going was the right thing to do as it took me a long time to recover. For six months I could not manage a full school day; I used to arrive a couple of hours late every morning. It was over a year until I could run as fast as I could before my spell in hospital.

As a result of all this I ended up being nearly deaf in one ear. This deafness has made social situations with background noise difficult, and

I think it has made me even quieter in large social groups, as I always have to concentrate really hard to keep up with the conversation and I often miss quite a lot. It also means I have no idea where a sound is coming from, which is hard when someone calls out my name. It can look a bit funny when I have to turn all the way around until I see someone waving or smiling at me. The one advantage of my deafness is that I am better at sleeping in noisy rooms – by putting my good ear to the pillow almost all sound disappears.

My first experience of endurance walking/running was when I was aged eleven. My brother Julian and a friend had decided to do the Chiltern Marathon, a Long Distance Walkers Association (LDWA) marathon-distance walk/run around the Chiltern Hills north-west of London on footpaths and bridleways. I wanted to do it, but my mum said I was too young. After a lot of persuasion she said I could do it if we did it together. So that's what we did. She and I ran the descents and some of the flat sections and walked the rest, working out our average speed and expected finishing time as we progressed, to keep us entertained. Eventually we finished in seven hours and twenty minutes. We had to navigate a bit, and at one point a huge group of people followed us the wrong way across a field. I don't remember it being that hard, just a bit tedious, but my mum suffered with her toenails, which turned black and fell off a few weeks later. It's still the furthest she has ever run or walked in a single day.

In 1981 my dad changed jobs, becoming a director in a chemical company, so we moved from near Cambridge up to Altrincham in south Manchester (my mum gave up her job, which was right at the forefront of computer-software development, just before my sister Karen was born). In many ways the move north was good as we carried on orienteering, and we went up to events in the Lake District National Park in the north-west corner of England. The Lake District is often known as the most beautiful corner of England due to its lakes and mountains, or fells. I enjoyed orienteering in the rough conifer plantations, the beautiful deciduous

forests and best of all on the upland fells, with their mix of rough grassland, heather, boulders and bracken, and of course the amazing views.

At home I also started to do some running training, as I wanted to improve my orienteering. This included training every Wednesday with the local Manchester and District Orienteering Club (MDOC). These training runs started from people's houses over the south Manchester region, and I found running with other people a great way to push myself. As I improved I was selected for the North West Junior Orienteering Squad, with weekends away in the Lake District. I was part of a great group of orienteering friends: Brendan Bolland, Killian Lomas, Chris O'Donnell, to name a few. We obviously all enjoyed running, navigating and racing against each other. We even had training weekends just for our small group, which Brendan organised at his home in Formby, north of Liverpool. Although we were competitive and wanted to beat each other, I don't remember any nasty rivalry between us. It was all very encouraging and in national competitions it was more important that we beat people from other regions rather than each other. I normally ended up behind Killian and Brendan, and this made me determined to do more training and improve.

The fact that the orienteering was going well for me was important, as I didn't fit in at school. When we moved to south Manchester I changed schools to Altrincham Grammar School for Boys, the local selective state school for the top fifty per cent of boys who passed an entrance exam. Moving into a new school in the middle of year 8, or year 2 as it was called back then, was always going to be difficult. This was especially true for me as I immediately stood out as different. I had a posh Cambridge accent, I was exceptionally quiet and shy, I had greasy hair in a bowl cut and I was also one of the smallest in my class. In each year the classes were streamed for academic ability and I was put in the second highest of five classes. Unfortunately it was probably the wrong class, as at the end-of-year exams, after I had been there for just a term, I finished

top overall. I was well ahead of everyone in maths, science subjects, geography and even history (I have a good short-term memory) and about average in English. People started to make fun of me.

Unfortunately it got worse the next year. I remember in particular one incident in music class. We were all sitting on the desks so we could see. One of the other boys in the class decided to annoy me by deliberately sitting in front of me so I couldn't see. I should have pushed him away but I didn't want to make a fuss, so I sat behind him, gradually becoming more and more bored. The pocket of the jacket he was wearing was coming apart a bit and had a loose thread, so I sat there playing with the thread. After the class had finished some of the other boys said I was feeling his bottom and that I was gay. It was obviously not true and I'm not sure if they actually believed it, but it was another excuse to pick on me. For a while this made me sad; it was hard being in a class without any real friends and with some people making fun of me. But I thought about it quite a lot and I realised that in a group of children there is often someone picked on or teased. Unfortunately it was me. But I knew that as well as being different I was partly being picked on because they were jealous of my academic ability. I decided I could not change, I would just be myself and that I was tough enough mentally to take it. I knew in the long term I would probably end up with a happy life, which some of those being nasty to me would never achieve. So when I went to school I would speak very little, ignore any nasty comments and just get on with doing the work. Luckily I had the weekend and orienteering for my freedom and happiness.

Despite being small for my age I was still achieving good results against my peers in orienteering races. The biggest UK orienteering event of the year, the JK, takes place every Easter and in 1984 took place in North Wales. The course for that year was on rough open fell with lots of climbing, and this suited me. I finished fourth alongside the top orienteers in the country of my age group. Soon after the JK, Killian

and Brendan – despite finishing behind me – were selected for a British junior team development tour to Ludvika in Sweden. I wasn't selected, and was extremely disappointed. So I wrote a letter to the chairman of the selectors explaining why I thought I should go. They were really surprised to receive a letter from a child rather than a parent, and my determination and commitment obviously made a good impression. Soon after I also had a reasonable run at that year's British Orienteering Championships, and so I was given a last-minute place on the tour. I was delighted and enjoyed the first of many great orienteering tours to Scandinavia. Although on pure speed I was slower than most of my contemporaries, I seemed to be able to train harder and go for longer over rougher terrain than almost anyone else. It was gradually dawning on me that I was suited to the longer competitions with rough forests, rocks and hills – the tougher the better.

Karen and Julian started to do the Karrimor International Mountain Marathon (KIMM) when they were eighteen. This event takes place annually at the end of October and involves two long days of mountain navigation, running with a rucksack containing everything needed for the hills and an overnight camp. In those days this was the only event of its kind, whereas nowadays there are lots of similar mountain marathon events (it's now called the Original Mountain Marathon, or OMM). With up to 2,000 pairs taking part it was a prestigious event to win, and the elite class is still the blue ribbon event for mountain marathons in the UK. I was desperate to join my siblings in competing but the minimum age was sixteen with one of the pair needing to be eighteen. So as soon as I turned sixteen I asked my dad to run with me. Luckily he agreed, as that year it was nearby in the Peak District between Manchester and Sheffield. We entered the 'score' class, where the aim was to get as many checkpoints as possible in six hours on the first day and five hours on the second day. Over the two days we reached fifteen checkpoints and scored 340 points, and that put us in the top twenty

per cent in the score class. We both carried heavy rucksacks and had a lot of very unsuitable clothing. I ran in tracksuit bottoms, which got really heavy when wet, and I remember spending much of the weekend pulling them up. I had a great time, but my dad hated it (especially the camping) and never did anything similar again. I took part in each of the next three years' events, with a second place in the B class with my brother and a third in the A class with an orienteering friend from university, Neil Conway. Although they were hard work, on each occasion I was the stronger member of the team and I always enjoyed the whole weekend. The wind, rain and navigation added to the fun and made the weekends really memorable. When I ran with my brother it was in the Galloway Hills in Scotland and it rained heavily for much of the race. My main memory of the weekend was coming to a slow-moving but very deep river just before it flowed into a lake. Many of the teams were just standing about wondering what to do. We gained lots of time as we just jumped in and swam across without any hesitation.

One thing really affected my running during this period of my life, both my enjoyment of running and my performances. This was that sometimes I would get really sore bowels while running, which could be agony when I finished and for several hours afterwards. After one orienteering event, the pain was so bad I went to hospital with suspected appendicitis. The problem was that as I ran I would get a build-up in pressure at a particular point in my bowel. This would get more painful until I could do a big fart, and then there would be relief for a couple of minutes before the cycle started again, but with more pain than the previous time. Visits to the doctors didn't help, as it was a problem that occurred only while running and only sporadically, so was not high on their list of priorities. However, I thought I could work out what the problem was. I needed to if I was going to compete and enjoy running at a high level. With this determination I wrote a diary of what I ate and when over an entire year. Gradually it became obvious that, as well as

an egg intolerance, the time at which I was eating was also really important. The problem normally occurred when I ran in the evening, and earlier in the day it only occurred if I ran more than four hours after breakfast. So it seemed that with the food at a particular place in my bowels, the shaking around and the diverting of the blood supply to my muscles was causing the problem. Ever since, I have avoided any big meals between four and twelve hours before a long or fast run. This generally seems to have worked, which is an amazing relief. The problem also seems to have got slightly better as I have got older, which I think is because I'm generally not eating as much.

By my final year as a junior orienteer I had moved to Nottingham university to study for a mathematics degree. I was one of the top-four junior orienteers in the UK. We had a great group of us: Neil Conway (who was also at Nottingham), Simon Bourne, Richard Baxter and Steve Nicholson (who were at Cambridge university). The best thing was our monthly trip up to the Lake District to stay at Ambleside youth hostel for training weekends. We really enjoyed running through the forests and fells, training hard and just messing around. Despite injury problems with one of my calf muscles, I managed a third place at the British Orienteering Championships and a thirty-second place at the World Junior Orienteering Championships in Belgium.

Around this time I also did my first Lake District fell race and my first week of fell running in the Lake District. My regular group of orienteering friends and I were spending New Year in a camping barn at Derwent Hill outdoor centre (thanks to Richard's dad) near Keswick. We did the Wansfell Race up and down from Ambleside. It was great fun: sixteen minutes of pain climbing up to the top of the fell, and then six minutes descending at full speed where one misplaced step would result in a very nasty fall. With my background of many years' orienteering through rough forests and fells, I found I was good on the descent and overtook quite a lot of people. Although, as I was used to only short bursts rather

than a 300-metre descent, my quadriceps were agony for the next few days – the first time I had suffered from the classic DOMS (Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness). Later in the week I also tried to jump over a fence, but failed. My foot got stuck between the top two wires, leaving me dangling from the fence with some nasty ligament damage. Despite this I still enjoyed a long run on the fells every day. Over the week there was also a lot of drinking, and I managed to get thrown out of the nightclub in Keswick for some mad dancing and was nearly arrested for trying to roll up the white lines in the middle of the road ...

At university I became a vegetarian. As well as being fussy about food I also never liked eating meat or fish. I didn't like the taste of it, or the thought of eating dead animals. But for many years I was persuaded to eat meat by my parents as I was told it was good for me. Then I read a study in a newspaper that said vegetarians live longer than people who eat meat, so the argument about meat being good for you seemed to be false. However, it felt like a major step to become a complete vegetarian. The final straw was when I was back at home in the Easter holidays after two terms at university. For our meal one evening my mum prepared some spare ribs. The fact that the meat was so obviously taken straight from an animal meant that while I was eating it I could not get the thought of this dead pig out of my head. I didn't say anything at the time, but when I returned to university at the end of the Easter holidays I changed to the vegetarian meal options at the hall of residence and told my family when I returned home at the end of that term that I was a vegetarian. I haven't deliberately eaten meat or fish since then (apart from a piece of snake meat!) and I have never felt like I wanted to. Being a vegetarian has certainly made me think carefully about food, so I always look at the ingredients and the nutritional content of everything I buy, which is obviously no bad thing. Whether I run faster because of a meat-free diet I don't know, but it doesn't seem to have done me any harm and it feels the right decision for me.



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04 Elite win with Mark Seddon at the Karrimor International Mountain Marathon (KIMM) in the Howgills (known as the Howling Howgills that year due to the extreme wind and rain), 1998. Photo: Steve Birkinshaw Collection.

05 Trophies for winning the 2009 Lake District Mountain Trial in Eskdale, Lake District. Photo: Steve Birkinshaw Collection.

06 Crossing the finish line to win the 2012 Berghaus Dragon's Back Race. Photo: Rob Howard.

07 Climbing towards Loft Crag on day three of the Wainwrights. Photo: Steve Ashworth.

08 Descending from Pike of Stickle with Ben Turner on day three of the Wainwrights. Photo: Steve Ashworth.

Map overleaf Lake District Ordnance Survey 1:250,000-scale map showing the route.



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- 09 Climbing to the summit of Pike of Stickle with David Armstrong on day three of the Wainwrights. Photo: Steve Ashworth.
- 10 Gavin Bland and Andrew Davies bursting one of my blisters on Mardale Ill Bell on day four of the Wainwrights. Photo: Steve Birkinshaw Collection.
- 11 Emma helps with my asthma inhaler on day five of the Wainwrights. Photo: Steve Birkinshaw Collection.
- 12 Contouring back round below the summit of Skiddaw on day six of the Wainwrights. Photo: Steve Birkinshaw Collection.
- 13 In extreme pain with Mel Culleton-Wright sorting out my feet while Phil Davies gives me a massage. Mosedale Road End on day six of the Wainwrights. Photo: Steve Birkinshaw Collection.
- 14 Having a five-minute powernap on the summit of Great Cockcup on day six of the Wainwrights. Photo: Paul Dobson.



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