

THE BIRMINGHAM THREE PEAKS CHALLENGE

OFFICIAL SPONSORS' REPORT

7TH–8TH MARCH 2003

IN AID OF



THE ANTHONY NOLAN TRUST

Back in November 2002 I had an Idea...

by Dinendra Gill

...Not the craziest idea that I have ever had, but near enough. The idea was to climb the three highest mountains in the UK in 24 hours – otherwise known as “The Three Peaks Challenge.” Initially it was intended to do things backwards, but careful analysis showed that it would be safer (and easier!) to start with Ben Nevis (1344m) in Scotland then Scafell Pike (978m) in the Lake District and finally Snowdon (1085m) in Wales (i.e. the conventional way). An added element to this challenge would be the time of the year. Early March would represent the beginning of the Three Peaks season and weather conditions would be adverse. Nevertheless we would be raising vast sums of money for The Anthony Nolan Trust, so all in a good cause.

We gathered a team of eleven strong, all medics by trade and all athletes by nature! Some had walking experience, others lacked somewhat but were keen to participate. This followed months of planning with numerous meetings in the medical school. Our immediate objectives were clear: firstly to raise individual/company sponsorships and secondly to acquire a driver and a van to transport us between mountains. Mally and Paul took charge of getting money from local businesses in Selly Oak, Rich approached outdoor shops in Birmingham and I harassed the medical defence unions for sponsorship. A target of £3000 was set.

A group of us also decided to do some reconnaissance on Scafell Pike and Snowdon. This was imperative for Scafell as we envisaged navigational problems climbing over night. We even convinced (poor old) Mally that there was a shop on top of Scafell and that a very devoted

shop keeper trudged up there everyday to sell everything from “I’ve been to Scafell Pike 2003” rubbers through to cherry topped cream cakes. Convinced that the bunker on the summit was a shop Mally walked round it, trying to find the door. Traumatized by the fact there was no shop, he has never believed a word we had said since!

With the reconnaissance missions complete and sponsorship going well we had only the driver and vehicle to arrange. Easy, we’ll sort it! However this was to prove very difficult. Two weeks before the event and our guild registered driver pulls out. Doh! At a tense meeting back in February we put a contingency plan in place. The viability of the trip depended upon Sam’s dad (Jim) becoming our driver, a very experienced chap who would do the whole distance solo. Good news! Sam’s dad is on-board; everything is looking sweet, apart from one thing, the weather on Ben Nevis. This had been a source of great controversy in the group. Heavy snow and ice can persist well into April on the Ben, making the ascent only possible with ice axes and crampons. Some members felt uneasy about this, saying we should abandon if the need arose. In the end Paul and I arrived in Fort William 3 days prior to the event, armed to take on the Ben and to objectively assess the risks. It turned out ice axes and crampons were needed on our ascent and weather conditions were such that I decided to hire a guide to lead us up on the big day. All that remained now was the logistical nightmare of hiring kit for everyone, eventually achieved by approaching three different shops in Fort William.

With everything set, we waited for our team to arrive. 2200hrs on Thursday 6th March: team arrive in a flash Ford Transit van packed with food for the challenge. With everyone in need of a pre-challenge drink we head down to Fort William for the briefing. Back at the Youth hostel, sandwiches were made efficiently, kit was inspected and everyone earned themselves 7hrs of rest prior to the big day.

After a hearty English breakfast we headed for Fort William to pick up the hired kit, and then back to the Youth hostel for a carbohydrate loaded lunch plus a radio briefing from Jim. With kit packed, chocolate in our pockets and water bottles filled to the brim we waited in anticipation for our guide, Don King (no, not the boxing promoter but the other one). Months of preparation and we were ready. Bring it on!

Here follows a report detailing events on each mountain and each leg of the road journey. Respect!

The Mighty Ben

by Paul Aron

Soon after Donald arrived, we had a briefing on the use of our equipment, while the hostel cleaners grudgingly followed our footprints on the dining room floor. Having packed all our belongings into the van, we bid a final goodbye to the pre-challenge phase with a group photo and set off up the path. Time check: 12:52pm.



My fears about worn-out legs - from the reconnaissance mission on Wednesday - soon faded as we settled into a steady pace ascending the stony pathway. The weather was mild and damp with a light wind. Very soon, our view over the glen grew ever more picturesque as we

made the initial ascent. Visibility was good and our progress was marked by the lengthening thread of footpath far below us.

Our spirits were anticipatory – so little distance covered; so far yet to go. Already the air temperature was lower than before – the few hundred metres gained made sacrifice to a few degrees centigrade. But our efforts kept us warm – often too warm, as I perspired under my few layers.

On sighting Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe (a small lake suspended in a neighbouring valley), and to the relief of our legs, the path levelled out as we crossed the ridge toward the start of the ascent of Ben Nevis himself. A short break by a freshwater spring, as instructed by our guide, restored our energy and hydration for the next uphill climb. Kit-Kats consumed and gloves donned, we marched on.

By now, the view of Glen Nevis was awesome, bounded by rolling hills in all directions. We soon approached the clouds above and the patchy snow that was visible from below. No more was the path lined by grass, but pink granite rocks and increasingly large stretches of ice.



From around 800-metres altitude, the snow patches were no longer separate patches but united as a thick wind-swept covering. We took hold of our ice axes and trudged up the blanketed path, which took zigzag turns to lessen the gradient. The group kept closer together, with Donald's lead. The wind was chilly but our activity warmed us.

In parts, the snow had formed huge drifts – potential sources of avalanche in worse conditions. Our footprints made knee-depth perforations in the pristine cake-icing while we stabilised ourselves with our ice axes. Single file, we each followed our predecessor's footprints. The visibility diminished into a homogeneous white surround – the ground and sky indistinguishable – punctuated by occasional rocky outcrops. By now we had negotiated the plateau and reaching the summit was within our conception. Only time and perseverance would let us find our goal.

Passing the 900-metre gully only ten metres to our left, visible only as a hazy grey abruption to the smooth white scene, we traversed the plateau. Through the small gap between my hat and tightly closed hood, I saw the summit fade into view as we approached. Icy gales blew at 70 mph while we all clambered up the summit to unite at the triangulation point, 1344 metres above sea level.



One peak conquered, one-third triumphant, we briefly sheltered below the observatory from the wind. No longer walking, our bodies cooled, awakening an urgency to press on. So we returned, now with the wind in our faces, along our trodden path to descend.

As recommended by Donald, we would take the path down Red Burn instead of the zigzag – a more direct route and therefore steeper. Indeed, so steep that we could slide down the snow on our backsides, steering with our ice axes like rudders. Sledging without sledges, one-by-one we took to the slopes making short work of the descent. At one point I gathered too much speed

and narrowly escaped a buttock-shearing collision with some protruding rocks! It was great fun, all the same.

Below the snowline we scampered down a fairly steep scree slope, eventually reaching a soft grassy patch that took us back to the original path. By now, some of us had aching knees but there was still some distance to cover. This final journey was a test of patience: the glen below was in sight but the winding stone-laid path was deceptively long.

Perseverance paid off and the home straight rewarded our legs on the level as we approached the minibus. Time check: 17:45 – five hours up and down. With military speed, we sorted our crampons and ice axes into labelled bin bags for each of the three hire shops, which Donald volunteered to return for us. One peak down – two to go, we bid farewell to the mighty Ben.

Motorway Madness

by Jamal Khan

Still going strong, we piled into the minibus for the 290-mile journey down to Scafell Pike, the highest mountain in England. The highest and worst mountain of the three was out of the way, and we were rearing to tackle Scafell. We were slightly behind schedule, and needed to stay within our six hour driving target down to the Lake District. It was here that Jimmy illustrated just how crucial a good driver is to this challenge, and drove us superbly down to Scafell well within our target.

The journey was a great laugh, with plenty of banter and fooling around keeping our morale high. Don't ask why, but we became locked into conversation about "fights between animals". We decided that "four chickens versus a turkey" would be a fight to remember!

Doomed to Darkness on Scafell

by Paul Aron

In the darkness at the foot of Scafell we set off with head torches in convoy up the path into the night. Maybe it was a bad omen, or

perhaps just food poisoning, Matt felt unwell then vomited up the small amount of food he had eaten. Afterwards he felt a little better but we all kept a watchful eye on our sickly comrade as we continued on our mission.

No matter how familiar any of us were with the mountain, under the cover of darkness the route often eluded us and a sharp eye on the map was essential. However, despite our best efforts, the lack of long-range vision hampered navigation and we all-too-easily lost track of the path, which was poorly demarcated in parts. On several occasions we had to backtrack and re-establish the correct route, but each time being aware of losing the battle against the clock. Meanwhile, Matt's stomach started to turn and we waited while he yakked up again.

Having ascended for 2½ hours we reached a point where discrimination of the true path from several other path-like grooves in the grass was too difficult. Night-vision would have been a godsend. With each stop and readjustment we made, the group's enthusiasm waned, while the cold wind that had picked up urged us to keep moving.

With no sight of a correct route forward, our only option was to retreat, having made a group decision to return to the minibus and re-attempt the peak at first light.

The descent took a surprisingly long time – the darkness had shrouded the scenery, precluding our perception of how much altitude we had gained. This time the route was easily negotiable. The path seemed to fork only in an upward direction, leaving only one obvious path back down.

Back at the minibus, somewhat shattered from the three-quarters of Scafell, the lack of sleep and the disappointment with our failure, re-attempting Scafell did not seem like a viable option for most of the group. Now that the '3 Peaks in 24-hours' challenge was unattainable, the majority group decision was to press on to Snowdon and attempt its completion within the 24 hour boundary.

Weary and disheartened, we began our next journey south to Wales. The atmosphere in the minibus was notably downbeat compared with the previous stint, and sleep was nothing short of obligatory.

Snowdon – Always Expect The Unexpected **by Chris Brewer**

Well rested and with a new determination we approached Pen-Y-Pass the start of our final climb-Snowdon, each filled with anxiety and something to prove; we *were* going to go out in glory but there were a few surprises left for us yet!

In the planning stages we had billed Snowdon as the 'easy-climb', oh how wrong can you be. On disembarking from the minibus we realized that was going to be no push over. Our old friends wind and rain had decided to pay us another visit. With the wind whistling through our hair we started the climb, gradually getting our aching limbs back into action. Dindi was our paceman pushing out a great pace to get us up this mountain in record time. This was real heads down stuff, everyone had their own personal aches and pains but the group pulled together keeping morale high and speed up.

After what seemed like a week of climbing over uneven rocks and endless 'stairs' we made it up on to the Pyg. The wind was really getting up now and after a quick break we pushed on. Keeping the quick pace we had started with we soon gained some decent altitude. But with the altitude came something none of us had expected. I joked to Bigzy that it looked like snow up ahead. It was. Patches of frost turned to patches of snow. The patches turned to a blanket of slush and soon we had snow up to a foot and half deep in places. The Pyg track is renowned as being well marked out but add a foot of snow to that with decreasing visibility and it's not so simple. Our front men (and woman!) did well to keep us on track and before long we were starting the final slog to get up onto the ridge. This was not the easy climb we were expecting! With strong winds and slippery going underfoot it took all the energy we could muster to keep on going,

but still with the determination that we had at the start, we were going to do this and do it well.

The push to ridge was met with another surprise – the strong winds that we had been experiencing on the way up seemed like a gentle breeze compared to the ‘hurricane’ we were faced with on the ridge. The gale force winds made the going really tough and it was all we could do to stay upright let alone climb as well! But the tough got going and after some super human efforts we made it to the summit. The climb had taken it out of us and we all needed a well deserved rest. Using the train station as shelter we hid momentarily from the relentless conditions to get some food and water on board before starting the decent.

After a short rest we started the decent we knew that the worst was over and it wouldn't be long before we could have a hot shower and some good old pub grub! We dropped down onto the miners track and after a bit of a tricky decent- lots of streams and swollen rivers to contend with- we made it onto the gentle pathway that skirts the lakes. We were out of the terrible conditions that we had got so used to over the last twenty-four hours and conversation flowed as we kept up our brisk pace. There was talk of the events of the last twenty-four hours: the sliding down Ben Nevis, the nemesis that was Scafell and the famous DJ Guff Deep Singh. But sooner or later it resorted to one thing from which there was no escape, that we *were* going to eat when we finished!

A truly unforgettable climb and twenty-four hours. But don't just take my word for it, try it yourself. Only if I were you, I'd try it in June!

From start to finish, the whole event took a total of 24 hours 37 minutes.

The Group

The Birmingham Three Peaks massif comprised:

Paul Aron, Steve Aston, Chris Brewer, Dinendra Gill (Dindi), Jamal Khan (Mally), Dave Lissauer, Matt Lloyd, Neil Metcalfe (Bigzy), Sam Pollock, Barney Stephenson and Rich Turner.

With special thanks to our driver, Jim Pollock.

Our Sponsors

We would like to thank our official sponsors:-

- Medical Protection Society
- Medical Defence Union
- British Medical Association
- Medical Sickness Society
- The Gun Barrels
- Liquor Locker
- Café Eastern Delight
- OMCO Convenience

We also thank our friends and family for individual sponsorship.

We have raised a total of £2532 for the Anthony Nolan Trust.