

Mourne Mountains - the Denis Rankin Round A Fell Runner's Dream

by Dean Russell



- *Mourne Mountain by Emily Gordon*

Having a significant birthday just around the corner, I had been researching ideas for something special, memorable and maybe a bit grueling. Having never visited the Mourne Mountains in Northern Ireland, the idea of turning up and running all the Mourne Mountains in under 24 hours with no recce are what dreams are made of for a couple of trail runners like Bertie Goffe and I. Standing under the entrance to Donard Park at 0200 with 90km and 6500m of ascent ahead of us, I started to wonder if going out for a nice meal with friends would have been a better idea than attempting the Denis Rankin round.

With very little sleep, our head torches shining their narrow beams into the distance, over roots and rocks and through the trees we got off to a good start, albeit a bit fast in the still night. Descending from our first peak, the highest of our round (Slieve Donard at 853m), Bertie's head torch started to flicker, a tell-tale sign of the batteries running low. Putting it on a lower setting and running next to me to utilise my narrow beam, we managed to continue without slowing.

Going through the bog of Donard I jumped on to the impressive wall, that stretches for 35km and passes 15 of the Mourne Mountains, to run along the precarious 8-10ft high wobbling stone structure, hollering at Bertie to join me. Normally we would always run on soft ground, even boggy ground, but the longer we could keep our feet dry the better.



Although we had been going a bit faster than expected we had settled into a good rhythm and, with dawn fast approaching, we saw the most spectacular sunrise. With hues of pink and purple, clouds covering the view one moment and clearing the next it made the early start more than worth it.

- *Dean Russell (Left) & Bertie Goffe (Right) starting the 3rd Leg by Emily Gordon*

The pace naturally slowed over the next leg due to the boggy ground underfoot, a running theme for a large proportion of the day. The summit of Ben Crom had some grueling peat hags. The hags were sometimes 5-6ft high and either you choose to weave in and out of them, try and hop between the tops, or more often than not, climb (with hands and knees) up and down them. It was hard work either way so we were glad to be back on to the Mourne Wall for a couple of peaks before dropping to meet our support for the round. Three other teams were out attempting the round and their support teams gave us tremendous support and guidance. One of the locals offered the best piece of advice as we left for Pigeon Rock, describing it as “a wee bit damp” the understatement of the day.

We paused to give a thought for Denis, whom the round is named after, on Slievemoughanmore, where he sadly passed away on the 16th May 2013 competing in a fell race. After getting to Shanlieve, our focus was on the tough navigation leg to Finlieve through more peat hags and low visibility.

We knew the next section was going to be the toughest and local knowledge really would have helped. The tussocky slog up to Crenville was slow and, thinking we could pick up paths in the forest, we wrongly decided to bushwhack through windblown trees. In total we spent 20 minutes getting scratched and frustrated, crawling through the tight web of trees. Finally back on track, we continued up to Slievemeel before we hit a good track through the beautiful Kilbroney Red Bog. Halfway to Cock Mountain we met Rick Cowan and his support, an amazing man to be attempting the round at 70.

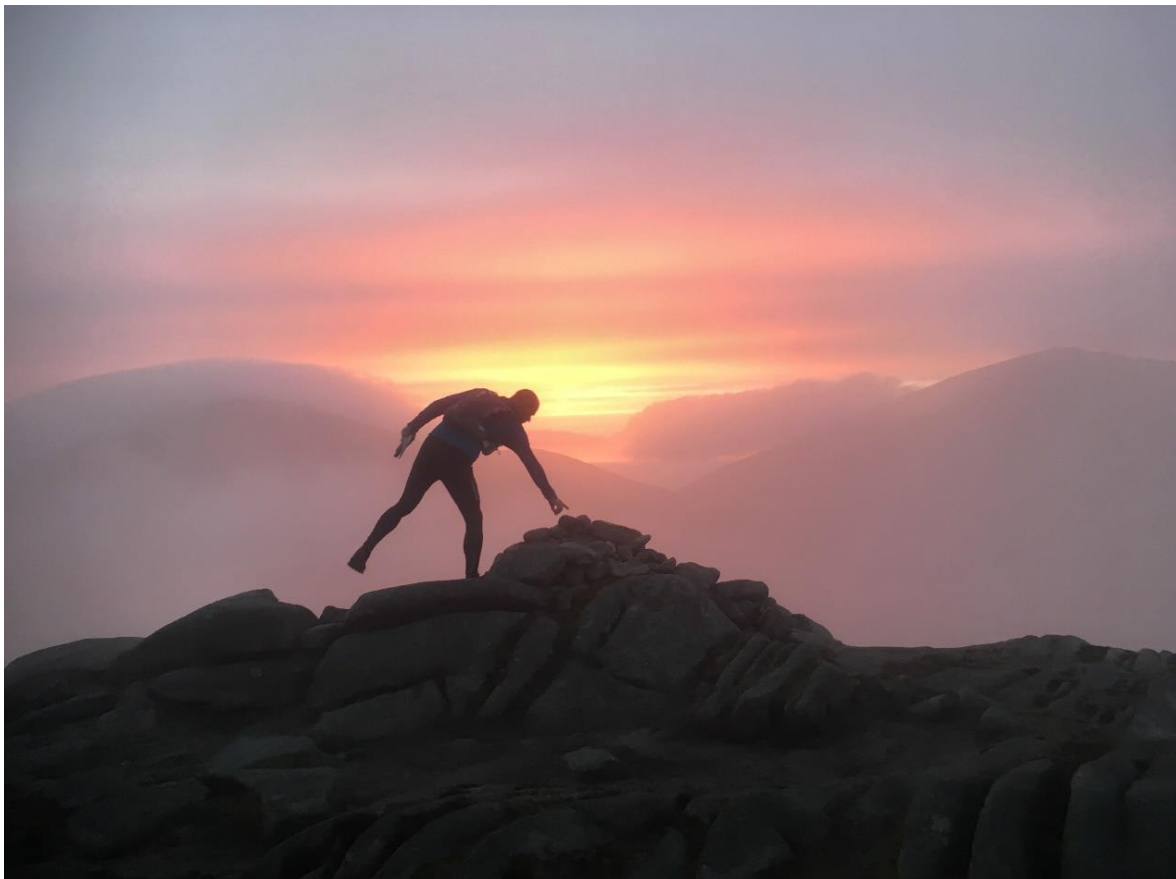


- *Bertie Goffe descending Slievelamagan by Dean Russell*

As our legs were tiring and discomfort surfacing, on the top of Ott Mountain we knew from here we just needed to follow the Mourne Wall for most of the way back home. Down Slieve Meelmore and back up to Slieve Bearnagh was steep, technical and particularly tough so late in the day. Darkness and fog came in, the wind rose and, as the temperature dropped, we traversed the last three summits.

One of Rick's two supporters was kind in showing us the quicker, direct route off the last summit Slieve Commedagh. We had planned to play it safe, stick to the wall and go the longer, safer way round, but he led us safely out of the clag and back through the forest. Approaching the arches of Donard Park was incredibly satisfying with a large crowd clapping and cheering us over. To date less than 50 people have completed the round. Now Bertie and I have joined this small group at numbers 45 and 46, coming in at 21.28 hours.

Fell running is the kind of sport that only attracts people who do it because they love it, with no fame, no money, no big egos. The numbers that attempt rounds are small and the DIY nature of them with no formal start time or date, self reliance and support crews of your own make them special in so many ways. The Denis Rankin was everything that we had hoped it would be. Our support, Emily, and the local supporters out for their own teams were so kind to us and that made it all so satisfying.



- *Morning Sunrise on Cove Mountain by Dean Russell*

Dean Russell is a trail runner, climber, mountaineer and AAC(UK) member. For more information please see www.adventure-awaits.com/about