

Breadalbane OMM 2011 **Duncan Archer**

It wasn't the most auspicious start. Dark rain clouds obscured the mountains as the dullness of the autumnal morning struggled to lift. Light, but incessant rain and the knowledge of what lay ahead flattened even our usually easy demeanors.

It's the OMM though – Britain's most prestigious mountain marathon and it is held on the last weekend of October just to ensure that the weather adds an extra layer of difficulty – should we have expected anything different?

Last year, Shane Ohly and I had raced together at the Dartmoor OMM finishing fifth. It was a great result for us but even then we felt we could improve. Building on that experience, during 2011 I had won the LAMM, and we'd come second at the BAMB, both with Jim Mann. Meanwhile Shane had come second in the SLMM Klets, and was clearly doing much more training than last year. This year we headed to the OMM as a more experienced and fitter team and whilst we recognised that we were an outside bet for the win, we did realise that we had a chance and both of us were psyched to give it everything. Scanning the start list I quietly thought third place would be very respectable and almost achievable.

We were one of the last elite teams to start, with Oli Johnson and Rob Baker (elite orienteers and top fell runners), followed by Steve Birkinshaw and Jethro Lennox (both huge mountain marathon experience and many wins), starting four and two minutes ahead of us respectively. We'd all shared the same bus to the start and Shane and I had quietly discussed our tactics for the day, whilst we all sat in a little cluster on the back seats. One possibility was that we'd catch them early, stick with them and hold on to whatever pace they were setting. However, we knew that these four were probably the strongest runners in the elite line up and there was a real risk that we'd exhaust ourselves if we adopted this strategy. Of course there was also a risk that these four would exhaust each other in the inevitable head-to-head racing that would develop.

As it transpired, almost our most significant navigational error of the weekend, costing us two minutes, was at the first control. The others were long gone by the time we had punched, and in the undulating mountainous terrain and mist, we wouldn't see them again until the overnight camp.

Running our own race after all, we settled into a steady pace that felt hard but sustainable; it was never comfortable but it never felt like we risked bonking either. We just knuckled down to the hard grind that lay before us, ticking off the controls and periodically passing slower elite teams, as well as scores of teams on shorter courses who seem to stop for a picnic at each control. We concentrated on consistently good micro-navigation, equally good macro route choices, staying warm and eating and drinking enough.

It was essentially an uneventful Day One for us. The only thing we discussed occasionally besides navigation was whether to take off, or keep on our waterproof jackets. Each time we climbed or found some faster running, we'd start heating up, but on the slower sections and during the frequent heavy squalls of rain we'd want our sleeves down and hoods up. We opted to keep the waterproofs on and with hindsight that was a good decision.

As we raced on in isolation, unbeknown to us, a few kilometers ahead Oli and Rob and Steve and Jethro had been setting a blistering pace. They were racing in a pack with two other elite teams that they had hoovered up along the way: John Rocke and Doug Tullie, and Tom Owens and Alastair Anthony. However, I suspect that the poor weather (and some of them we'd seen set off without waterproofs on) combined with the fast pace resulted in the exhaustion experienced as the teams took on the brutal climb on the epic 2hr leg to CP7. This is all from second-hand reports so may not be entirely accurate. But first Steve started to struggle; Jethro carried his pack and fed him Jelly Babies, but despite this no one managed to pass them. Oli meanwhile was developing hypothermia and eventually needed to be led off the hill by his

partner Rob. Alastair apparently fainted, recovered and just managed to make it to the finish, meanwhile John and Doug managed to struggle on but they all lost time.

Once clear of CP7, Steve and Jethro finished in an impressive 5:39. However, the real drama was only just beginning as they were promptly disqualified for punching the incorrect penultimate control at CP10. Steve has written about this incident in detail on his Team inov-8 blog (<http://team.inov-8.eu/2011/10/controversy-at-omm.html>). After protesting that the controls were with 100m on the same stream they were reinstated with a 30-minute penalty.

Meanwhile, we were oblivious to this unfolding drama and finished Day One as we had started, in a little bubble of our own. After downloading our splits, we were delighted and surprised to discover that we were in third place just seconds behind John and Doug, and six minutes behind Chris Near and Tim Higgingbottom who like us had run in relative isolation after starting forty minutes before us.

However, we couldn't understand what had happened to Oli and Rob and Steve and Jethro. It was only later that night when Shane bumped into Jethro as he squelched around the muddy overnight camp that he found out more. So, the Day One results, and order for the Day Two chasing start, looked like this:

Day One

1st Chris Near & Tim Higgingbottom 6:01
2nd John Rocke & Doug Tullie 6:07
3rd Shane Ohly & Duncan Archer 6:07
4th Steve Birkinshaw & Jethro Lennox 6:09
(5:39 + 30 penalty)
5th Tom Owens & Alastair Anthony 6:17
Retired – Oli Johnson & Rob Baker



Certainly Day One had been really hard for everyone out on the hills. Across all the categories the wet and blustery weather had made the risk of hypothermia a real danger, whilst the low cloud had made navigation difficult and taxing. Difficult terrain is a given for an event like the OMM, with most of the running being done in tussocks, bog and deep heather. All in all, it was a classic mountain marathon day.

Initially, saturated, Shane and I had changed into our dry clothes and settled in for a damp and uncomfortable night in the tent. However we were in good spirits (although maybe that was just the solid fuel fumes in the tent?) and mused about how the following day might pan out. Once again, we were drawn by the possibility of joining with Steve/Jethro (we expected them to catch us) and running down Tim/Chris between us. We fancied that if we could hang on to them until the inevitable faster downhill finish, we might just be able to beat them in a sprint finish. Being just six minutes down on Tim/Chris meant that winning was a real possibility and we were genuinely excited about the prospect of getting out there and racing once again the following morning. Neither of us slept that well due to a combination of dampness, the noise of the weather and anticipation of the following day.

With the end of British Summer Time overnight, we were sentenced to an extra hour in our damp abode and our 04:45 alarm couldn't come quickly enough. Once up, we started our routine of eating, drinking, packing and toilet queuing that always seems to take longer than expected, and not helped by Shane's homemade solid fuel stove (an empty tin of tuna) not performing, hence the very early alarm.

It was still sufficiently dark that we needed our headtorches for the walk to the Day Two start. We watched Tim/Chris set off at 07:00 just as the dawn gained sufficient strength to light up Glen Almond. Seven minutes later we were off ourselves.

From the start we went off hard and quickly caught Doug/John (20 seconds) moving us into second position overall. However, soon after CP1 Steve and Jethro caught us and although we ran together in loose formation to CP2, it was clear that they were gradually pulling away from us - we were therefore now in third place. We all caught a glimpse of Tim/Chris as they left CP2 as we approached it from the same direction; clearly we had already cut the six minute deficit a little and Jethro was relishing what was to come: "Race on boys!"

On the long track run to CP3 Steve/Jethro consolidated their lead over us, gradually pulling away. Before long they were out of sight and, based on the speed that they had pulled away, we assumed it was the last we would see of them, they might catch Tim/Chris, but if we kept steady then third place was ours.

As we'd done the day before, we settled into a steady and sustainable speed that always felt hard but never felt like we were in danger of blowing up. However, despite thinking we had been dropped by Steve/Jethro and Tim/Chris, we heard the TV commentator (showing on BBC 4 Scotland in the New Year apparently...) saying to camera that we were just four minutes behind as we punched at CP4... we started to get excited but didn't change our 'steady' approach just yet.

However after a straight route choice aided by contouring in the mist on the altimeter, we dropped into CP5 and suddenly were with Steve/Jethro and Tim/Chris again (it later transpired they'd taken a worse indirect route). We briefly ran together as a group of six and although there was some banter between us, it was abundantly clear that racing was now serious with less than 10km to the finish.

At first Shane and I were just amazed to have caught the leading two teams. I'd said before the race I'd be happy with third. However, now there was a paradigm shift in our mentality - we could actually win this!

After slotting in behind the others for five minutes, it became clear that the other two teams were finding life tough, the pace was marginally slower than we had been going previously, and no-one was actively taking charge. I was feeling good and happy with the navigation, so exchanged a quick glance with Shane and made a silent decision to move to the front and up the speed. Tim/Chris didn't follow and Steve looked to be struggling a bit too.

I mostly led from the front and took charge of the navigation, but we continued to discuss route choice options and occasionally confer to agree our position.

Throughout the weekend, I mostly led from the front, set the pace and took charge of the navigation, but Shane also contributed a lot and we both stayed 'in contact with the map', so were able to discuss route choices and detailed nav. However, heading into CP6 I was happy it was just round the next small hill, but Shane became convinced we were about to overshoot and shouted a warning. He was wrong but caused Steve to pause and check his map as well. I just set off assertively but Steve seemed to hesitate just a little longer, and it gave us the clean break we needed as we slipped into CP6.

A little giddy with excitement we started to realise that we were leading the OMM.... Holy F***ing Shit!!! Suddenly we were 300+ metres ahead with relatively simple navigation and

then track running to the finish and glory! We started to get very excited but I was also tiring now, whilst Shane kept pushing the pace hard. And then of course, we missed at CP7! We realised we had contoured in too low but caught ourselves in time, and as Shane was carrying the SI card, he pounded up the hill in search of it. Fortunately, he guessed right and found the control after only a minute of raising panic.

Pushing ourselves really hard, we raced through CP8 and on to CP9 at the start of the forest track. There was no sight of any chasing teams, but by now I was seriously bonking. I hadn't been eating or drinking enough since catching the other teams. I felt light-headed, I needed to walk on even the gentle rises on the tracks, and suddenly the water in the stream at the last checkpoint looked tempting! We joked about walking to the finish, it certainly wouldn't be the most dramatic way to win the OMM.... or so we thought. Shane had been nervously checking over his shoulder as I staggered along the track, and fortunately looked back with 200m to the finish line, as Tim/Chris suddenly appeared from nowhere and were rapidly chasing us down. The adrenaline kicked in, we drew on our last reserves and we beat them to the line to win by thirteen seconds! WOOHOO!!!

Day Two (and overall)

- 1st Shane Ohly and Duncan Archer 4:48 (10:56)
- 2nd Chris Near & Tim Higgingbottom 4:55 (10:57)
- 3rd John Rocke & Doug Tullie 4:55 (11:02)
- 4th Steve Birkinshaw & Jethro Lennox 4:57 (11:06)
- 5th Tom Owens & Alastair Anthony 5:13 (11:30)

Looking back now I like to think that winning by just 13 seconds was much more exciting and headline grabbing than sailing to a 5 minute victory. However I've since found out this was not the closest in OMM/KIMM history. Once two teams finished together and collapsed in a heap... only to discover neither had punched the finish! And another time two runners finished exactly together.... but with their respective partners strung out back up the track.

Of course the fact that Steve/Jethro had a time penalty on day 1 still niggles. Sure, they didn't punch the correct control and some penalty was appropriate, but I can't help thinking they were clearly a strong team. That just means we'll be back for more next year 😊

