

Peak performance



IT ALMOST didn't happen. A fine first night had been followed by increasing tiredness as we had all been on our feet for almost 36 hours; we made the decision to take the "safe" night-time option of travelling via Jiri and along the road to Kiratichap and this turned into a nightmare as we lost the route to Jiri in the dark and took more than four hours to cover what should have been a comfortable two-hour section from Shivalaya.

Arriving in Jiri at 11 pm, totally exhausted, we abandoned the project and sought somewhere to sleep. A hay loft provided the answer. After a scant five hours, we awoke and Spyke and Lizzy decided they could carry on, although a record time was now going to require some extremely hard work. For me, though, it was the end as I simply knew that the massive ascents and descents of the previous 40 hours had taken enough out of my legs to make contemplation of the remaining, flatter, 95 miles unrealistic at the speed necessary.

Back to the beginning. Thick frost on the inside of the lodge window at Gorak Shep (5200m altitude) in the pre-dawn greyness at 4.50am confirmed that our start would be a chilly affair. We gulped down hot tea and tsampa porridge in the lodge before setting off toward base camp with the dawn. We had decided that staying in the lodge the night before

Earlier this month, a trio of British ultra-runners, including 2006 world 100km champion Lizzy Hawker and Stephen Pyke, attempted to break the record for running the 188 miles from Everest Base Camp to Kathmandu. The third member of the team, MARK HARTELL, chronicles this epic feat of running endurance



The trio at the start of their 188-mile adventure

the attempt was our only option, even though this meant having to endure 90 minutes of scrambling over the glacial moraine to base camp even before we started the run. Members of the Thai expedition were just surfacing as we SMS messaged our start position and time to our support crew and to the president of the Nepal Olympic Committee and quickly took our start photo. A 7.30am start was planned, but this was no place to hang around so, at 7.16am, we were off, breath rasping in the thin air at 5400m and about

minus 10 degrees Celsius. The views were incredible with cloud filling the lower Khumbu valley and the sun now hitting the tops of Nuptse, Pumori, Thamserku and Cholatse.

Much of the first 100 miles of the route is unrunnable due to the steep ascents and boulder-strewn descents. Ironically, some of the few easy stretches occur in the early miles, but as you are still above 4500m the air is painfully thin and, for Spyke and myself, even mild exertion brings on spasms of bronchitic coughing – a legacy of Ama Dablam, the mountain we had climbed before we started our run.

There was milky tea and lemon tea waiting for us after the first two hours and, with the sun up, we were down to shorts and thermals rather than the duvet jackets, balaclavas and gloves we started with. As the day warmed up, the trail became incredibly busy with tourists, porters and numerous yak trains. Some of these porters were carrying loads equivalent to our own bodyweight so it was only fair to

give them the right of way. As for the yaks, the fine pair of horns each one carried ensured they gained our respect so we were often forced to wait on the trail or detour up the hill to continue our progress.

It was all such a contrast from when I was there in 2002 and the Maoist troubles were under way. This time it looked as though the Khumbu was being loved to death like the Lake District and we had to remind ourselves that, away from this honeypot, there was incredible poverty in the country that we hope to help put right through our fund-raising efforts with Community Action Nepal.

We chose CANepal because of their approach. Rather than doing projects "to" people – the results of which are often left as white elephants, unused and rotting in the countryside – CANepal work with local communities, ensuring they want the project, raise some of the funds for the project and are intimately involved with the design and construction. The results, in terms of schools, water, health facilities and sanitation are much more closely attuned to the needs of these local communities and much more sustainable.

We were around one hour down on schedule on reaching Namche but, when the run is over three days, this was not a real concern. Here, our climbing leader, Victor Saunders, was

■ The team

Lizzy Hawker: The former world 100km champion is a 2:47 marathoner, experienced rock climber and top mountain runner.

Stephen Pyke ("Spyke"): The 2006 UK ultra-running champion and earlier this year set a new record for running over all the Scottish 4,000ft mountains.

Mark Hartell: current holder of the Lake District 24-hour record

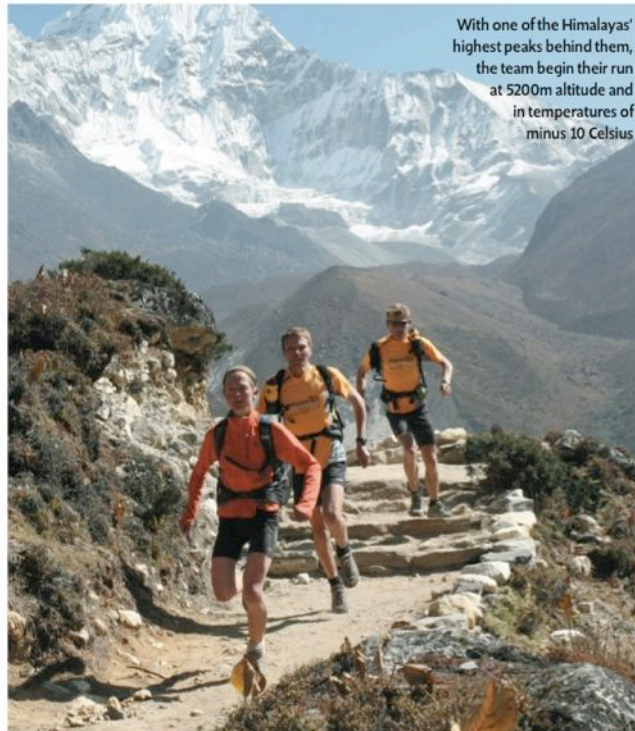
■ The target

The trio were chasing the three days seven hours 10 minutes achieved by Nepalese runner Kumar Limbua in 2000.

waiting for us with hot tea, cake and pizza! We were down to 3500m now and the air was thickening so that it was the legs that had the workout rather than the lungs.

Once again, the trail was incredibly busy down towards Lukhla (where more than 95 per cent of Western visitors start and end their journeys at the town's little airstrip). Immediately beyond the Lukhla turn-off, however, we were instantly back to 'real' Nepal – simple lodges, porters carrying heroic loads of everyday necessities and a much quieter trail.

We stopped in Chaurikharka for some much-needed soup and noodles and headed off into the night. The first few miles weren't so bad as we were still following the drainage of the Dudh Kosi river downwards, but as soon as we reached Jubing Bridge, we turned west and headed across the grain of the land with five passes in quick succession. Although we were all feeling quite strong, the scheduled times we had set ourselves were proving demanding. By dawn we reached Junbesi, a delightful village below the Lamjura La – a high pass at 3520m. More tea and tsampa porridge fuelled us for the ascent, which was enlivened by watching the antics of the local monks making their



With one of the Himalayas' highest peaks behind them, the team begin their run at 5200m altitude and in temperatures of minus 10 Celsius

noisy way up the valley to visit the pass and replace the colourful prayer flags that adorn all the passes, bridges and sacred spots.

The other side was a brutal 2100m descent and the knees were really starting to feel the strain so that by the time we reached Kenja we were all feeling a little jaded. The rollercoaster continued, however, with more steep up-and-down sections over the Deurali pass to Shivalaya. With the second night rapidly approaching, the team made the decision to take a "safe" route via Jiri and the road to Kiratichap as our reconnaissance of the direct line some three weeks earlier had proved that the maps are unreliable, the paths are tricky to find and the leeches are dreadful and numerous. Frustratingly though, a

new track had been bulldozed over the hill between Shivalaya and Jiri and what should have been a simple two-hour jaunt turned into a four-and-a-half-hour epic in the dark as we repeatedly lost the old trail and had to resort to map and compass work.

At Shivalaya, I had made the reluctant decision to quit. It's daunting to run for 36 hours non-stop and know that less than half the distance has been covered. I also knew that we would have to move a lot quicker once we reached the road sections and believed that the other two could better achieve this without me. By the time we reached Jiri, however, mind-altering fatigue had overtaken the whole team and sleep had become an overwhelming priority. Surrounded by a cacophony of stray dogs barking, we attempted to contact our support and call off the whole attempt.

At 11pm, all lodges were shut for the night so we found a simple hayloft, put on all our spare clothing and, with no sleeping bags, just curled up in the hay. A few, cold hours later and it was clear that Spyke had a different perspective on life. He quickly worked back from the required finish time and established that a record was still possible – albeit tight. After a rushed breakfast of more milky tea and some deep-fried batter things, he and Lizzy were off, leaving me to

catch a bus to our waiting support crew in Muldi and help them over the remaining miles as best as I could.

After the frustration of the journey over to Jiri, they had a boost as the next section went more quickly than anticipated and they were through Kiratichap by midday (two days five hours gone). Once again, however, they had to deal with setbacks as they lost almost two hours on the next section to Muldi – descending too soon to cross the river on a section we had reconnoitred four weeks earlier.

Nevertheless, they arrived to the waiting support by 7pm and were encouraged on their way by around 40 members of the local sports club. Things were looking up as most of the remaining miles would be on road and we had three Nepalese runners who would help them on the remaining 63 miles. At this point, I chose not to tell them that they were two hours behind where the current record-holder had been at this point on his run – I was confident that he had slowed down a lot on the final day and that my pals would draw on our support to keep up their speed.

Sure enough, working in relay and providing inane chatter to help pass the night-time hours – the English and Nepali support teams helped Lizzy and Spyke to stay awake and on target for the record. As Sunday dawned, the outskirts of Kathmandu beckoned and by 8am we were fighting our way through gridlock to reach the finish at the national stadium. Miraculously, a police motorcycle escort appeared and swept away the traffic like Moses and the parting of the red sea. Lizzy and Spyke were grimly focused on the finish, no longer eating or drinking and with a fixed 1000-yard stare and just gritting out the pain in the hope that the finish was just around the corner.

Finally, the gates of the stadium came into view and at 9.52am – after three days, two hours and 36 minutes – a new record was set by Lizzy and Spyke to a reception of around 30 to 40 journalists and the president of the Nepal Olympic Committee. The whole episode was a triumph for co-operation between English and Nepalese, our different sponsors and, hopefully for the poorer hill people of Nepal, who will benefit from the fund-raising efforts.

■ THE trio were raising funds for CANepal, see www.justgiving.com/run-everestbc-kathmandu



Stephen Pyke and Lizzy Hawker cross the finish line at the national stadium in the Nepalese capital