

Mourne 2 day mountain adventure

Every year the first event I pencil into my running calendar is the Mourne Mountain Marathon. It's the only event in Ireland of its kind. Teams of two have to navigate to different checkpoints throughout the Mourne Mountains to a campsite... which is top secret until you are given a card with 6-figure map references on the Saturday morning. There are four different classes of various distances and difficulty. The D class is 35km with less climbing and easier route choices than the C class which is the same distance but with more climbing and navigation skills required. The B class is 45km with even more navigating and climbing and the Elite class is 55km and even harder again! Every team is required to be self-sufficient for the weekend – this means carrying all food and equipment to last the weekend, including camping overnight. There are so many aspects of the event that can go right or wrong which makes it interesting and very challenging.

My dad, Deon McNeilly has been a regular competitor in the event since it started 36 years ago so I was always aware of the event. In 2009 I completed the 2 day for the first time with my brother, Wills, in the D class. The weight of our rucksacks reflected our inexperience! On the plus side we had lots of extra clothing to keep warm at the campsite and our tent had lots of room. I think that's the only time I have ever slept well at the overnight camp! I have memories of Wills and I running to the finish on the second day in hiking boots I had borrowed from my mum! After that I was hooked.

The following year I entered the C class with my Auntie Gwenda. The weather was miserable – torrential rain, zero visibility and freezing cold. A not so perfect start. I was having my doubts about the tent I had purchased for £15 from Lidl when Gwenda fell on rock and spilt open her knee. Luckily we were close to Ott car park and managed to get a lift with a Duke of Edinburgh group back to Tollymore. While waiting for a lift Gwenda was still considering continuing although she later needed stitches so dropping out was definitely the right decision. Besides, I don't think we would have survived the night in the £15 tent!

I competed the following 3 years in the C class with various partners and ever improving kit. In 2013 I teamed up with Patricia McKibbin in the C class. We had several comments from people impressed with how light our rucksacks were. It has become tradition in the McNeilly household to weigh our bags on the Friday evening, every pound is vital! 2013 will always be remembered for the luxurious campsite located at Silent Valley. The grass was so soft you could have got away without a sleeping mat, or the balloon beds that we spent the entire evening blowing up.

At the campsite every year the sound of balloons popping can be heard all over the campsite and is one of the only forms of entertainment unless you have been invited to Eugene's camper/party van. The weather was amazing all weekend and Patricia and I won the ladies category, so there were smiles all round!

started well. We made our way and chatted along route – Patricia’s previous weekend had been spent at the Galgorm, this weekend couldn’t have been any more different!



Photo - nirunning. Patricia and I setting off at bloody bridge

Our route choice took us round the front of Slieve Donard to Commedagh and down towards Ben Crom reservoir. We crossed over the reservoir and climbed up Ben Crom. As we worked our way through a bouldery part covered in wobbly rocks, we could see Phil and Simon Hodge who had caught up with us and seemed to be moving a lot quicker below. They started climbing and caught up with us just before the checkpoint. We found the next few checkpoints easy enough and made our way down to a checkpoint at Ott car park where Frank Morgan was taking snaps with his iPad. At this stage we were starting to get tired and the pot noodle in my bag was calling my name. We had run out of water at this stage however the next checkpoint was at a river so we decided to fill up there. I filled up the bottle and added a zero electrolyte tablet and started to drink. I never thought anything of it until Simon Hodge told me about a time he had drunk water up the Mourne and ended up sick... the water I had just necked didn't smell the best and I started having my doubts... thankfully I survived.



Photo - Liam Smyth. Nearly at the campsite on the first day

Finally we made it to the campsite and were greeted by the organisers and as we dibbed in the final checkpoint we were relieved to find out we hadn't missed any checkpoints. As we were walking round the campsite to find a spot to set up the tent we noticed a sign for a "foot spa" – it wasn't quite Galgorm – a small stream to wash the ground-in muck of your feet. And the water was ice cold.

After a night of very little sleep we set off again for another day of torture. The first few checkpoints were found without drama. Then we moved on to a "cluster group". This is a group of checkpoints that can be found in whatever order you choose. We thought we must have went for the checkpoints in the opposite order to most of the field as we didn't see anyone from the B class for a while.



Photo - Terry McQueen. The second day at a checkpoint at Fofanny Dam

We bumped into some of the other lady teams going the opposite direction at one point. We found a checkpoint near a small pond near Meelbeg and then we had to navigate from there to the next checkpoint at the Hare's Gap. We got a bit lost here... not sure how we managed but I think we must have went round in a circle so Bearnagh (that was meant to be on our left) was on our right. Although we didn't know this was Bearnagh until we reached the wall and knew where we were again! I knew this part can be a bit disorienting when visibility is poor however Patricia was confident with the path round the front of Bearnagh so we followed it and finally we reached the next checkpoint. We should have took this path to start with and lost a bit of time here!

We were on the homeward straight now after a final checkpoint at the side of Commedagh near the Pot of Legawherry. Initially we intended to follow the wall over Slieve Corragh and then drop down the side of Commedagh however our legs were starting to tire and we decided to drop down sooner and avoid some climbing. On hindsight it may have been better to stick to our first choice as we ended up in some precarious crags and ended up having to lose all of the height we had gained! When we were descending we could spy the checkpoint on a crag on the opposite side of the valley so we knew where to aim for. When we got this checkpoint we knew we were on the homeward straight. The final checkpoint was in the forest near the finish. We headed towards Tollymore which seems to take ages to

get to. We could see the outdoor centre amongst the trees – so near yet so far! We found the last checkpoint in the forest with ease and stopped to have a chat with some ladies who were out walking. We made use of our local knowledge to choose the shortest paths to run/hobble to the outdoor centre. Running along the forest paths made me realise how tired I really was. Just last Tuesday we had been doing a pyramid session and I had been sprinting down the same steep track and now it was taking all my energy to put one foot in front of the other and not fall over!



Photo - niurunning. Dibbing in for the final time at Tollymore National Outdoor Centre

We made it back in one piece and were greeted by my mum, dad and cousins Lucy and Eve. After a few quick pics we dibbed in for the last time and confirmed no checkpoints had been missed. We were first ladies team to finish the B class on the last day, however another team had over an hour on us from the first day and they won overall.

I would like to say a big thanks to all the organisers and volunteers who year on year make the event such a success. I would highly recommend the event to anyone who wants to challenge themselves – mentally and physically. It is the only event I am aware of where you get to really experience the Mourne and the routes take you to places you would otherwise have no reason to go to!

Every year I think never again, but the pain in my legs is starting to wear away and the blisters are healing up... as for next year... I already have it penciled into my calendar.