



Andrew Knight

The World's First Vegan Ultramarathon

Andrew Knight, the Founder of the Extreme Vegan Sporting Association, shares with us his nail-biting account of the Vegan 3000s 2012 Ultramarathon.

An unknown direction

The nearest shelter was several kilometres away somewhere below these smooth summit ridges. **With visibility down to 50 feet through driving rain, I could barely navigate to find our trail.** Next to me, Kate grimly hobbled on, supported by Simon. Her old ankle fracture clearly disliked the punishing terrain.

From bad to worse

The shivering was becoming uncontrollable, and my movements fast and jerky. I sensed the onset of hypothermia. **Another hour of this and I'd be dead, or at least wishing I was.** I just had to run to generate some heat. But Kate could no longer run, and neither of them could reliably navigate through the near-featureless murk.

How had I gotten into this mess?

It all began back in 2009, when two other vegans and I thought it might be fun to climb the highest mountains in England, Scotland and Wales, in the same day, using only vegan food, boots and equipment. And thus the **Vegan 3 Peaks Challenge** (www.vegan3peaks.info) was born. The next year, we decided to climb all 15 Welsh summits above 3000 feet, again in a single day. This became the **Vegan 15 Peaks Challenge** (www.vegan15peaks.info) - notwithstanding that we accidentally climbed one of them twice!

After surviving this, we had little choice but to try to run all 15 summits. Thus was born the **Vegan Welsh 3000s**. To the best of our knowledge, this is the world's first vegan 'ultramarathon', covering **30 miles/48 km, and 14,921 feet/4000+ m of ascent.**

The last attempt to weather the storm

Six weeks prior, a similar group of 12 had first attempted the course. However, Welsh summers are not to be taken lightly, and **one of the worst storms to hit the British Isles centred itself 1,000 odd feet above the course.** With torrential downpours transforming small streams

"A spasm of shivering penetrated my exhausted haze. My lightweight running jacket had been soaked inside and out within five minutes of the storm's onslaught, one hour ago. Parts of the mountainside, including 150m of trail just ahead, were now completely underwater, flooding my running shoes with every freezing step."



Andrew and Kate about to be hit by torrential rain on the final mountain range.

into impassable torrents, a back injury when someone was blown off their feet by 50 mph winds, and one possible finger fracture, the course was closed early for safety reasons.

Britain's scariest ridge by torchlight

And so it was that I found myself at the ungodly hour of 4.30am last August, in the midst of a band of six unsuspecting vegans and one vegetarian (albeit vegan for the day), running up Mt Snowdon in the pouring rain. As I looked at this latest

group of happy faces posing for starting line photos six weeks later, it was clear we had no realistic appreciation of what was about to hit us. **In 30 minutes we would face an ascent of Crib Goch, the most precipitous knife-edged ridge in the whole of the British Isles – in darkness and cloud, cutting visibility to 30 murky, torch-lit feet.** If not blown off the edge we would then have to climb Mt Snowdon, Wales' highest summit, rising to 1,085m. Welsh summer downpours had rendered the rocks lethally slippery, and my running shoes had no grip.

The wrong way up

Aided by previous familiarity with this wonderful mountain range, however, I just managed to keep up with frontrunners Kate and Steve, by sliding down its steep grassy slopes on my behind. Together we ran into the first valley checkpoint just after 7 am, keen for a ten minute rest. Foolishly, I then took my eyes off Kate for a few short minutes, in which I lost her. An extremely competitive runner, Kate used to race for Scotland. **Horrified to discover she'd left us all behind, I charged off so fast I raced up the wrong valley.** I was half way up the next mountain range before realising my mistake.

Too high to descend

I was then forced to **cross a precipitous gorge, climb a 20 foot steep bank on the far side, and cross a dry stone wall topped by a barbed wire fence**, which then collapsed under me. I then had to rebuild the wall, and contour for ages through thick heather, past some very surprised sheep, before I finally emerged into the correct valley. Kate, of course, was long gone.

Confusion in the mist

However, she clearly felt sorry for me, because she nobly decided to get lost herself in the cloud a couple of mountains later. It turned out Kate didn't really know the way, which can be problematic when you're leading through a whiteout.

To allow the others to catch up we then decided to get lost together. **For the next couple of hours we wandered up, down, and in circles, through thick cloud and rain.** At last, a peak rose invitingly from the mist! After making some headway towards it, however, we realised it was not our target summit, but Mt Snowdon, 180 degrees in the wrong direction.

Tongues lolling from exhaustion

At least we managed to find Simon soon after, who was then following us the wrong way up Mt Tryfan. Meanwhile, Roger, who was actually smart enough to have mastered his GPS, marched straight past us in the mist, arriving at the second valley

checkpoint two hours ahead. We charged after Kate again, who snuck away from the checkpoint early.

We soon lived to regret catching her however, as she insisted on eschewing the easy path, instead climbing straight up the face of the third mountain range. This required all hands and feet, and the discipline not to look down.

Staggering across the finish line

Eventually, Roger (first, in around 13 hours), Simon, Kate, Ray and myself all made it to the end. Four of us had managed to climb all 15 peaks, while the brutal course knocked the others out with injuries. **My whole body hurt for days afterwards, but it was an adventure I'll never forget, as long as I live.**

Congratulations!

Daf Davies, Kate Fitzgibbon, Ray Hasler, Scott Hudokovich, Steve Jones, Marcus McTurk, Roger Mills, Joe Sawyer, Andrew Taylor, Aubrey Thomas, Mark Thomas and Chloe Vincent all survived the first attempt at this event in June, and Simon Dally, Kate Fitzgibbon, Karl Garside, Ray Hasler, Steve Jones and Roger Mills survived the second in August. **I'm grateful to Kirsch Bowker for organising both, and to her band of dedicated volunteers who provided the priceless hot drinks at checkpoints.** More photos of this event can be found at www.AndrewsAdventures.info

But... why?

These vegan events help settle any doubts that vegans can be seriously fit (not to mention masochistic!) They're highly entertaining, especially for those wise enough not to actually participate. **They introduce non-vegans to the concept of veganism. And they've raised many thousands of pounds for a variety of non-human animal charities.** In short, they're hard to resist for the unwise.

Inspired by Andrew's journey? Visit (www.extremevegansports.org) to discover more about vegan fitness and adventures around the world.

Up for a challenge?

This year, the Vegan 3000s or V3K will take place on the 15th of June 2013 and athletes will have the choice of two routes: either 55km with 4500m of ascent or 80km with 8000m of ascent, as solo runners or in relay teams.

The race looks to be a large scale event. Even non-vegan marshals have volunteered their time, to sit on Welsh mountainsides and eat only plant-based food for the day. The event has also been accredited as a qualifying race for the Mont Blanc Ultra Marathon.

Kirsch Bowker, V3K organiser explains that *"the ethos behind the race is to raise the profile of veganism amongst ultra runners and to raise the profile of fell running amongst vegans. We hope that for some competitors this may be their first step towards veganism or at least eating fewer animal products."*



For more information or to make a donation, go to:

www.vegan-welsh-3000s.co.uk
info@vegan-welsh-3000s.co.uk
www.justgiving.com/V3K

Be inspired by other vegan runners

A number of top endurance athletes are now extolling the virtues of veganism, including Scott Jurek (winner of the Western States 100-miler for seven consecutive years) and Catra Corbett (the second American woman and 19th woman overall to finish the 2002 Marathon des Sables).

Taking veganism to the coolest extremes

Fiona Oakes (Patron of The Vegan Society and holder of the woman's record for fastest marathon in the Arctic Circle), has made some phenomenal achievements with her running and is an incredible inspiration to vegans everywhere. This year, Fiona will be running in the North Pole marathon in April, and the South Pole marathon in October. Show her some support by making a donation at: www.fiona-oakes.com/northpolemarathon.html