



THE PENNINE WAY

THE MONTANE SPINE RACE

Our intrepid reporter Kerry Sutton took on one of the most grueling races of all time, and lived to tell the tale. The question is: would she ever do it again...?

Why? and 'Are you utterly mad?' are two of the most common questions I fielded after I had clicked ENTER on the Spine Race 2020. Spine Race race is a 266-mile ultra, which takes you along the Pennine Way in some of the most inhospitable places in England. On top of which, the run is undertaken in the depths of winter starting on 12th January. I guess people are justified asking those questions.

We lined up under the start gantry as the light started to appear on the morning of the 12th. The klaxon sounded at 8am on the dot. From now on, the clock was ticking. It would not stop until either I did, or you timed out at 168 hours.

The first 16 hours seemed to have a sample of everything I would encounter multiple times over the rest of the race. I got lost, I chafed, I ran in silence, I fell into bogs, and got rained on (a lot). My liver seemed never to be out of mud or water... and then I slipped and fell.

The check points, of which there were five, were a buzz of activity. As I arrived I was sucked into a well-oiled system. My muddy shoes were removed, poles stowed and my drop bag put next to a chair for me to access. No sooner had I shown signs that I might like food than I was presented with a menu. There seemed to be no end to the patience of the volunteers as I asked for my 4th round of sugary tea.

Darkness falls

I didn't stop long at that first one: time can disappear when you are warm and dry. Everything seemed to be going well. I was enjoying myself, and there were definitely some sung along moments as I entertained myself over the moor. The Pennine Way isn't the most scenic of routes, as most of it is moorland, but with the majority of the run taking place in the dark, I didn't worry about that too much.

I had spent a lot of time in training working out where to put all those



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things I would want to access quickly, and I was so glad I did. Everything was second nature and meant the chance of losing items was diminished. I was pleased with my kit too. In fact I wouldn't change a thing. A big tick in the planning box.

One of the wonderful things about the race is the support you encounter. Deep into the hills and at 2am I climbed on top of a stile where I was greeted with little fairy lights around a large bottle of water and a tub of sweets, with a message attached: 'for the Spomers'.

The route is tough. None more so than from the third to the fourth checkpoint, and where my race eventually unravelled. This was down to a combination of being in a GPS black spot and sheer fatigue. The result was I found myself on a very dangerous cliff, utterly terrified and very cold. I was stuck, and the only way off was by mountain rescue.

And rescue me they did. I made it to just over 165 miles. This year, nine women completed the race, out of a field of 21 women, with Sabrina Vierge coming in first woman in 108 hours 7 minutes 17 seconds.

So would I do it again, 100%? Why? Because I have a screw loose and because this race tests you in every single way. Mentally, physically, psychologically. Weakness of any sort is not an option. It's the ultimate test.

The Winter Spine 2021 is still out, but you can add yourself to a waiting list or enter the summer Spine Fusion. responserace.com.



BERKSHIRE

LOVE LUTON HALF

Laura Fountain packed her hand luggage and was cleared for take-off in a very scenic half

A lot of people will know Luton for its airport that's a gateway to their European holidays. But the 500 runners huddled at the start of the Love Luton Half Marathon were hoping for a short-haul around the town and no turbulence.

Both the 10K and Half Marathon start on Stockwood Park athletics track. The 10K runners start 15 minutes ahead while the half-marathoners cheer them on nervously waiting for their turn. Both races start with 200 meters on the track that could find you into a speedier than scudible pace out of the blocks.

After following a similar route through Stockwood Park and down a stable hill in the first mile and a half, the two races go their separate ways ensuring the lead half-marathon runners don't get caught up in the 10K. The half turns right at the bottom of the hill into Luton Hoe, a huge country estate.

The next mile was a long leg-burner uphill to the house that has now become a hotel and spa - it does leave you questioning your choice of weekend activity. Once at the top the route heads down the other side of the

hill with the sight that you really don't want to see: runners ahead of you come back up towards you.

By the time you exit the park, you're more than half way through the race, and heading into town. It was a small field with around 500 finishers (135 of them women) in the half and yet the race takes place on entirely closed roads and parks.

At 8 miles the route goes through the town centre and passes the finish line where the 10Kers were crossing the line. The last four miles took us north through a residential part of Luton, until you're rewarded with a downhill sprint towards the finish.

The race organisation was faultless. Collecting my number took seconds and there were plenty of toilets with fast-moving queues. Water was available every three miles and the finishers t-shirts were a great size for women. The start and finish are around a mile apart, and if you've parked at the start or left your bag there there's a shuttle bus to take you between the two.

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2020's Love Luton Half Marathon is on 25 October. love-luton.org.uk/lovelutonhalf