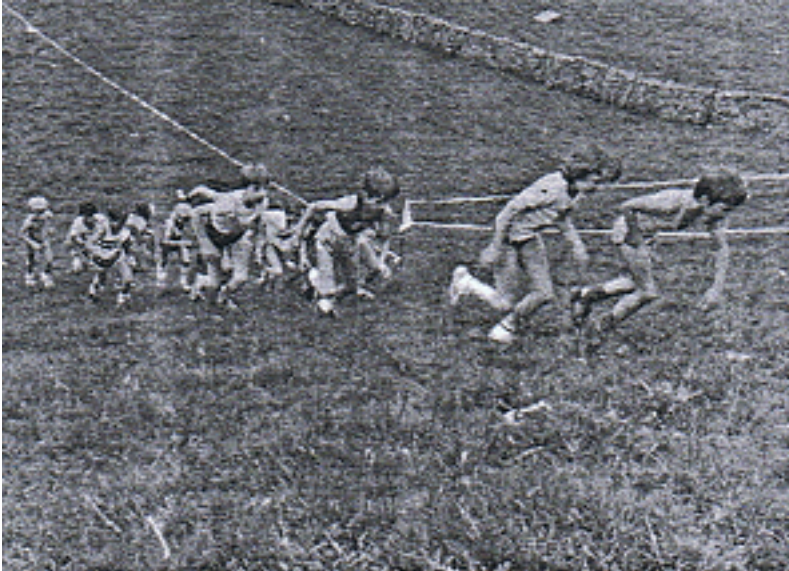


On Steep and Lofty Hills

The fell race has become a great social event where people can compete in a friendly atmosphere amid the splendour of the dales country.

"The Dalesman", April 1985



A steep and lofty hill

A steep and lofty hill, a field and a few flags - these are all the ingredients required to stage one of Craven's oldest traditional sports, the open fell race. The sheer simplicity of the sport makes it a popular attraction for dozens of village sports and shows staged throughout the Craven Dales and Lakeland. Many Highland Games throughout Scotland would be incomplete without the traditional hill race.

Over the recent years, the sport has recovered from near extinction in some places to become once again one of our top local sports. From under ' 12's to over 40's the enthusiasm being generated from within the sport has brought it to the dawn of a new golden age.

Before the 1939-45 war, almost every village in Craven had a race of some sort. Burnsall usually springs to mind, although it's annual Feast Race has been under, A.A.A's laws for many years and the real spirit of the event has to a certain extent been lost. A new open event was staged at Burnsall to commemorate the Silver Jubilee in 1977, and with the introduction of races for all age groups has since flourished.



Other races' in the same locality that have been revived in recent years are Embsay, Cracoe and Kettlewell, with totally new events being introduced at Gargrave, Cray, Hawkswick, Bolton Abbey and other places. When these are added to the extensive list of Show, Sports and Gala events such as Kilnsey, Malhamdale, Hebden and Sedbergh, the fell racer is often spoiled for choice during the busy summer months.

A Few Enthusiasts.

Most of these races have only survived through the perseverance of a handful of hardy enthusiasts, such as Roger Ingham of Skipton. Known throughout Craven and beyond as "Mr. Sport", Roger has done so much to encourage open rural sport, especially fell racing.

During the 1970s, when the fell racing revival was in its infancy, Roger, along with the great Lakeland runner Fred Reeves, introduced a Fell Runner's Championship. This was originally a very humble affair but, nevertheless, was the seed from which the Northern Sports Promoter's Association was to develop.

The main aim of the N.S.P.A is "to encourage and promote traditional open rural sport". Despite some early teething problems, the Open Fell Runners' Championship has now become a worthwhile event for runners of all abilities and, with the introduction of races for under 17's and 14's, the sport is now regarded as a truly family affair.



Traditionally, a fell race should be run from a fixed point at the bottom of a fell to a fixed point at the top. The runner can then make his own way between these points. Unfortunately, due to modern farming methods, this is now rarely possible. Nevertheless, high stone walls, fences, rivers and even rock faces add to the flavour of the event, and for the real connoisseur these obstacles are almost a must. For example the Hebden Sports Fell Race, held on August Bank Holiday Monday, includes 13 walls, five gates and a river.

The above mentioned obstacles make fell racing a good sport to watch, and any spectator hardy enough to venture on to the fell can witness some breath-taking action, especially on the steeper and more, rugged sections of the course.

Record-Breakers.

Today's fell racing stars are extremely fit. Over the last decade or so, the record books have been re-written almost yearly. Notable modern day record breakers and champions include Fred Reeves of Coniston, in Cumbria, and Ken Stuart, the current AAA's champion from Threlkeld, nr. Keswick. Just beginning to make an impression on the record books is Yorkshire's own super star, Mike Hawkins from Grassington.



Mike, the current 'open fell runners' champion, became local hero in 1982 when he smashed the record for the Kilnsey Crag race. Since then he has won almost every major fell race and in 1984 became only the second Yorkshireman to win the world-famed Grasmere Guides race. Further afield, Mike further distinguished himself when he broke the record for the run up and down the 3,000 ft. Morrone Hill at the Royal Braemar Highland Gathering.

New records will doubtless be set during the 1985 season as junior champion Richard Drinkall moves up to senior level. Richard remained unbeaten throughout the 1984 fixture list. The "Wennington Wonder" is quite capable of pushing some of his more senior colleagues to their extremes. Competition is just as keen at younger age group level and several talented runners are emerging from the under 17's, under 14's and under 12's age groupings.

Fell racing was largely a male-dominated affair, but through popular demand a girls' championship at lower age group levels has been formulated. Perhaps a ladies open fell runners' champion will emerge in the not too-distant future. The N.S.P.A. will be there to encourage it and even promote it.

Written and illustrated by Trevor Bachelor