“A fully trained athlete is on the verge of illness all the time. Someone once said this when asked how much training you should do: “it is a bit like blowing up a balloon. You blow, you blow a bit more and then POP, back to square one”.

These were the words of Dave Cannon, when trying to describe the situation that top class runners find themselves in when trying to balance hard training against possibly over-training and becoming ill. Cannon was a runner who trained hard, but unfortunately had illness issues that curtailed his running career. He was arguably the best fell runner in the UK for a couple of years in the early 1970s. He was also one of four athletes who were interviewed in the very first typescript FRA newsletter in 1971. I met him earlier this year, when he was working as elite athlete coordinator for the London Marathon, and had a long and fascinating chat with him about his running, on the fells in particular.

Dave Cannon was born in Appleby in August 1950. He went to the local primary school and then on Appleby Grammar School. He remembers starting running there at the age of 12, saying, ‘I became Westmorland Schools cross country champion, because it was Westmorland then, only becoming part of Cumbria later. I left school at 14 and went to work on a farm, as a farm labourer. I was living in at the farm.’ That was in 1965, which was also the year his mother died, with his father already having died when he was 7 years old.

He explains: ‘I had four brothers and a sister, so we all stuck together. Although I was working on the farm, the only thing I had going for me, if you know what I mean, was my running. That is what made me what I was. I carried on there for three and a half years and the job was fantastic. I had learnt the trade so to speak.’ It was a hard life, from 6-30am in the morning till 6pm at night, with training to do after work. ‘Sometimes I would try to do a little run of a lunchtime. The money was not very good so I took the chance to go and work in a steel bending plant at Shap.’ They were making reinforced steel for all the bridges on the M6. Stuck in a shed, after being outdoors on the farm, he says it just ‘did his head in.’ In 1970 he got a job at NORWEB, which was based in Appleby, as a trainee linesman (working up a pole). He is still there, after 47 years, now working part-time, which he says is better than stopping altogether.

Cannon had a forceful games master at school and he said he wanted him to run in the county schools race. Cannon said he wasn’t sure, recalling, ‘Saturday going in? Five days at school was enough for me.’ He was persuaded though and he won the under 12s race. It just went on from there. At that race he met the Secretary of Kendal AC and he said they would like Dave to run for the club. ‘I did and went up through the age groups.’ But Kendal was predominately a fell running club, so he started doing the Junior fell races, like Ingleborough, Whernside, and Latrigg. He had to make a decision about being pro or amateur at 16 years old. But he was ambitious from the start, explaining, ‘it was run for 7/6d at Grasmere or a canteen of cutlery as an amateur. I wanted to run for GB, which I couldn’t do if I had gone professional.’

Cannon’s first fell race was the 1965 Dales Boys Fell Race at Burnsall in which he finished 4th, aged 14. The next year he won that race in a new record of 6:55. The Whernside Junior Race, going from the Hill Inn to the summit of Whernside and back, was instigated in 1969 and Cannon came 3rd in that race. He then won the race in 1970, and the following year set a new record of 36:23.

He was a contemporary of Tommy Sedgwick, who was the only one who could beat him on a steep descent in those
days. In an article in the (now defunct) Up and Down magazine Cannon describes competing in the Whernside Junior race: ‘You have a wall to get over when descending. Well I was coming down so fast, I was not going to stop to climb it, so I took off a few yards from the wall, got one foot on top and over! There was a fell race follower watching the race at this point and he said to me afterwards that he had never seen anything like it before. I hadn’t the heart to tell him it hadn’t been intentional.

Cannon precociously won several senior amateur races while still a junior, including Ben Nevis in 1971. He had a considerable number of victories in shorter fell races, and despite his later marathon prowess never really encompassed the very long fell events. He was a daring, breakneck descender and specialized in shorter up- and-down races, claiming Burnsall and Thieveley Pike as two of his favourites. In the same interview he claimed: ‘The race my descending skills most helped me to win was the 1970 Burnsall. Harry Walker pushed me all the way to the summit, but even with two falls on the way down, I won by over a minute …… A few people remarked to me after the race that I must be crackers to come down that fast. As you know, they can see the whole course from the village green.

Cannon set a record of 13-29 that day, and then won in a new record of 13-20 two years later. His liking of Thieveley Pike was shown by his performances in racing there early in his career. In 1967 he had come 3rd, then in 1969 the course had been lengthened slightly and in 1970 Cannon beat Harry Walker with a time of 20-01, and came back in 1972 on a good running day with a new record of 19-55, which stood for 6 years.

As he progressed in fell racing he found he couldn’t do the long races, as he couldn’t handle the distance at that time. But he is convinced that eventually it was fell running that made him the endurance runner he became. ‘When I left school I was 5ft and three quarters of an inch, and about 7 stone. I kept getting tonsillitis, and taking anti-biotics to get rid of it. This may well have the root cause of the fatigue problems I had later.’Eventually the doctor said the tonsils had to come out. So at 18 years old he had them out and grew six inches in 6 months. It was holding him back physically, ‘The running went to crap. I was rubbish, because I was too weak. It took me a long time to be able to build back up again. I started working on my strength, but after 2 years I still looked about 15 and I still couldn’t handle the distances. I tried. I tried Ennerdale and did finish, but I finished third and thought never again. I could hardly stand up at the end.’

He used to develop his descent speed and technique by doing downhill repetitions on Dufton Pike and Munton Pike. He used to train about 70-75 miles a week when fell racing, but did have some injury issues due to turning his ankle a couple of times. Despite having a slightly limited race range he was the first British Fell Running Champion in 1972. He is 6 feet tall and weighed 9st 7lbs when racing.

When asked early in his career about any particular targets, he said that they were ‘to break all the fell race records and to run for England’. In the early 1970s Cannon had a purple patch, and he set course records in several classic races. I was recently discussing Dave Cannon with Jeff Norman, who noted that, ‘In 1970 we were so closely matched, it was difficult to predict who would come out on top in each race. Dave was better than me on rough descents. The funny thing was that, despite me being totally devoid of raw speed, I always considered I had the edge on Dave on fast descents and on the flat. Funny that, because when he turned to marathons he was a much faster 10k runner than me.’

That 1970 season started badly for Cannon, as Jeff Norman explained. ‘At the Fairfield Horseshoe race there is no doubt he should have won. It was the week after my first Three Peaks win and I’d been out on the town till 4-30am and had 6 pints, so struggled to keep with Dave on the climb. He broke away going up Greatrigg Man and was soon 100 yards up on me. I arrived at the finish to be told I had won and that Dave had failed to check in at the summit.’

Dave Cannon takes up the story. ‘I think it was the first time I ran Fairfield, and we got up and it was so misty that I failed to see it and got disqualified, having won by over 2 minutes. Jeff Norman was second and I went home pissed off. Then through the post came the prize, and he said this is rightfully yours. That was a brilliant gesture. We became really good friends.’

That, and the following story about training together, shows the true spirit of fell runners. ‘Jeff Norman and Dave Cannon went on a training weekend together in the Lakes. Jeff Norman recalls that they, ‘stayed with one of Dave’s Kendal club mates, Alan Ladro. On the Saturday we went on a run over Ill Bell and stayed that night at Black Sail Youth Hostel, where another Kendal club mate, Jim Strickland, was warden. Then on Sunday morning we ran over to Wasdale and met up with Joss Naylor who took us up to Dore Head and showed us how to run down scre.’

It is worth noting that 1972 was Cannon’s first season as a Senior, and at Fairfield that year he literally ran away from the field to win by almost 4 minutes in a record of 1-08-30, a record which has been superseded by later course changes. In 1973 he beat Jeff Norman’s Skiddaw course record, with a new best time of 1-02-30, which lasted until Kenny Stuart set the existing record of 1-02-18 in 1984, something Cannon is very proud of.

Cannon came second in the Ben Nevis race in 1970 before winning the race 5 times between 1971 and 1976, and setting the then record of 1-26-55 in that last year. Jeff Norman remembered that first race in 1970 well. ‘It was a classic duel. Dave had forged a good lead by half way up, but while he took the direct route up from Red Burn, I got into a good rhythm on the zig zags and gradually pulled him back. By the summit I had a lead of about 60 yards, but descending the steep grassy bank he overtook me. I dug in and held him till we hit the road, then gradually forged ahead (the race finished in the town in those days).’

By the time Cannon set the record in 1976 he had virtually given up the fells for his move to road running. It was an ideal day for running, and he put on a great show for the crew filming the event for BBC TV. In later years Billy Bland came within 1 second of this time (in 1978), and Bob Whitfield was 2 seconds off in 1982, both seeming to not know how close they were to the record. John Wild brought the time down to 1-25-35 in 1983, and Kenny set the current best time of 1-25-34 (just 1 second faster) in 1984.

However, looking back at Cannon’s career he never really realised his potential as a long distance fell runner. Actually, he only competed in three of the really long events. In 1972, the year he was British Champion, he retired in the Three Peaks, came third in the Chevy Chase, and also third at Ennerdale, having blown up in the latter stages.

Cannon noted that he, ‘didn’t win the fell champs again as by the next year (1973) I was sort of dabbling with the marathon. I ran the Huddersfield Marathon, finishing third in 2-21. But I was absolutely wrecked at the end! He waited a while, and just picked carefully what races he did. ‘So I went back for the Ben, Skiddaw and the Fairfield Horseshoe, which I won a few times.’

By then Jeff Norman was dabbling in marathons too. It came around to the trials for the Olympics in 1976. Cannon had run three marathons already and had always finished on his knees because he had tried to go with the leaders. ‘I thought I would run the trial. I said to my coach I was going to set off and run within myself. I sort of sat back in the thirties, and then from about 18 miles I decided to push on to see where I could get. I got all the way up to 10th. The first three were selected of course, but I had finished
full of running and had run 2-21.’

Recently Cannon, in an interview with Alistair Aitkin (which is published on the Highgate Harriers website), rationalised his change of focus thus:

Because there were no international honours to be gained from fell running, I decided to take a new challenge and see if I could run for Great Britain and took up the marathon. In 1977 I became British Champion at the Marathon. It progressed from there.

He expanded on this to me, ‘In them days fell running was fell running. There was no international honours to be gained from it. You couldn’t go any further than every year: win the Ben, win Skiddaw, win whatever, and I was doing that, but I wanted to run for Great Britain if I could. There was Pike’s Peak in America but no internationals really. I decided, with my coach, and my brother who had a big influence on my career that I should leave fell running alone. I actually gave up fell running in 1976 at the age of 26, having already won Ben Nevis five times. I was 20 when I first ran the Ben and finished second to Jeff Norman. But the following year I went back and won. On the third year my shoes came to pieces [laughs] and Harry Walker won it, and I finished third. But I went back for the next three years and won it. It was the highlight of the season for me. It was such a demanding race, but it suited us. I didn’t like all the rocks though. There were a couple of times when a lad called Brian Finlayson was in front of me when we hit the road and I got him each time.’

He then aimed for the 1980 Olympics. Despite registering great performances, the selectors still made him run the Olympic trial race, but he was ill and finished fifth Brit, missing out on selection. In the Aitkin interview he takes up the story.

‘Then because I did not go to the Olympics they invited me to the Montréal International Marathon in 1980 and because a lot of countries had boycotted the Moscow Olympics the field in Montreal was exceptionally good. My best time of 2 hrs 13 mins 29 secs was only the thirteenth fastest in that field for that day but I managed to win it. A lot of determination for being left out of the Olympics and a natural progression and I ran 2 hrs 11 mins 21 secs. After that I ran another couple of 2-11s, one in Paris and one in Japan.

Cannon adds now that, ‘the GB marathon lads that went to the Olympics didn’t even finish, as it was quite hot. I was 13th fastest on paper at Montreal and I was thinking top 10 would be good. As the race progressed we got down to 5, then 4 and I started thinking I might win. Which I did in the end.’

The race route came on to the F1 motor circuit, and Cannon had 2km to go and had a weird experience: ‘From the crowd came a distinctive Cumbrian voice: “Go on Dave Cannon, you can do it – use your experience of running up them fells.” That was nearly 30 years ago and to this day I don’t know who that man was – but I reckon he won me that race. I still wonder who he was and what a Cumbrian was doing there.

He says it lifted him no end, and gave him the best day of his racing life. ‘They should have picked me for Moscow, but by the next Olympics in 1984 I had an injury to my ankle. That took so long to recover from after two operations to remove a piece of loose bone in my ankle. I had orthotics made and coming to the back end of 1985 I could run again.’

By February 1986 he had trained well so he entered a 5 mile race at Lancaster. He had been 2 years out of racing and he finished third. He adds, ‘I built to a 10 miler and was doing well. I got another invite from Montreal Marathon having seen my results. It was in October so I said yes, and finished 5th in 2-21. I came home thinking, right another 6 months training, and I’ll be back. This is where things started going wrong. I was 35 years old. I decided to jack it in and start coaching.’

Cannon was doing a build-up period of training when the illness hit. For Montreal he was probably up to what he used to do, around 70-80 mile a week, but maybe not with the full depth of training. He got ill at that stage though, and that was it. So, sadly Cannon had to cease racing in 1986 because of a serious illness that was later diagnosed as ME or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (the full story of which is told in the Summer 2017 issue of Fellrunner).

Cannon had stopped training on the fells completely when he moved to marathon running. His rationale was that it was using different types of muscles. He also gave this as a reason he took so long to really make his mark as a marathon runner. Strangely for someone who was reckoned to be one of the sport’s greatest ever descendents he eventually took to road racing remarkably well. He also found that the flat road stretch at the end of the Ben Nevis race, for instance, played into his hands when racing there. In fact he won Ben Nevis three times after he had virtually forsaken fell running for the roads.

He took to coaching with some considerable success, claiming to have five athletes faster than 1 hr 3 mins 30 secs for the half marathon at one stage. Significantly he guided Kenny Stuart in his transition from the fells to marathon running. Cannon commented, ‘When Kenny Stuart decided to finish with fell running he asked me to coach him for the marathon. By then I had my career at marathon and was almost at the end of my running. I was coaching other lads too. He may have first realised Stuart’s road potential when he lost to him in the Derwentwater 10, a tough course that Stuart completed in just under 50 mins.

Ironically Stuart achieved a very similar marathon PB, travelled to North America to achieve it, and had to end his career in similar circumstances.

Cannon described the training setup and his philosophy. ‘I had Paul Taylor, Kevin McCluskey and Kenny Stuart, then later Paul Dugdale and Martin Jones. This was the 1990s and was coaching about 10 athletes, all running really well. Other guys were doing 120 mile a week and I used to do about 70, and I used the same ideas with my athletes. I had a full time job as well. So we may not have trained as much as other people but we trained in a structured manner. We would sit down and say what is it you want to win, so you would pick races and work backwards, including heavy work and a slackening off period before the main event. Someone like Paul Dugdale could only run about 50 mile a week at best without getting injured.’

I ended by asking Dave Cannon a couple of questions, including what his favourite race on fells was. ‘I always got a big buzz at Ben Nevis, because that was my highlight of the year,’ he replied.

Cannon also used to do plenty of cross country races for his club. ‘The National cross used to be class. I think the best I ever finished was 24th at Parliament Hill, and we won the team gold, with me third Gateshead counter. My best road memory? I ran a 30km race in Japan and ran 1:31 which is basically 30 mins per 10km. I came 4th in the Northerns at Leeds once and realised I wasn’t quite fast enough so went to the marathon.’

In conclusion, I asked whether he thought of himself as fell or marathon runner? ‘I have got to say marathon runner. However, if I hadn’t done marathons and stayed on the fells longer I think I could have set some more records.’

Cannon added that towards the latter part of his time of running marathons he was sponsored to wear ASICS shoes and that after he finished he then got a job as a talent scout for them bringing in good athletes, and did that till two years ago. So, another top runner who put back into the sport by coaching and helping athletes get sponsorship and good elite level support.

But most of all a precocious talent who always ran hard and who left a significant mark on the road and fell running scene.