

# Pete Bland

## THE EARLY YEARS

**P**ete Bland is a well-known name in fellrunning, mostly for his shop in Kendal and the 'Pete Bland' van providing last minute kit or reduced priced X-Talons at races up and down the country. But Pete also has a life as a competitive Fellrunner. Steve Chilton talks to Pete to discuss his early career.

Seeing the short piece about Pete Bland in the last *Fellrunner* prompted me to dig out a recent conversation I had with him about his early years in the sport. It gives his perspective on the sport at the time, which was divided between the pro scene and the amateur. What follows is a short profile of Pete, and some stories from his pro days.

People may have forgotten, or maybe never knew, what a good runner he was in his day.

I walked from my friend's house, where I

was staying at the time, down the back alley of a row of neat terraced houses in Staveley, in the southern Lakes. Past Rob Jebb's house, and in through Pete Bland's 'yard' to their comfortably appointed house, to interview him for a writing project I am just embarking on. An hour and half later we had put the fell running world to rights, having chatted about way more than is presented here.

Pete Bland was born in 1941. His grandparents were from farming stock in Troutbeck, near Windermere. Pete was born in Windermere, and his wife Anne is from Levens. Like Kenny Stuart, Pete went from school to pro races as that was pretty much all there was at that time. He started running aged about 12 at Windermere Grammar School in cross country, like all Grammar Schools used to have. Pete was entered in

the school race and he won. He thought he might be quite good at running. He continued at school, winning all the cross-country races, and the mile in the school sports.

Looking back on those days, he recalls that, 'When I was about twelve or thirteen I told my dad I wanted to be a fell runner. My dad had been following races right back in the 1940s at Grasmere and Ambleside, and he said, "you are not going with them buggers, they are all bent, and they take bribes. You'll have nowt to do with them." He did let me in the end and was very supportive.'

So, Pete moved into fell running as there were one or two lads a bit older than him on the estate where he was living who were already into fell running. He met them and got introduced to one's father, Mr Jimmy Hicks, who became his trainer. He joined this

*Winning Ambleside in 1968*



group of fell runners and started running locally. There was usually an under 17s race at the pro events, and at Ambleside Sports there was an under 14s too. 'I remember as a thirteen-year-old coming second there. I won a table lamp which is still going in this house. As a junior you didn't get money, it was a prize. In those days you might win cutlery sets as well as money.' Weird presents for kids so young, mind.

Unfortunately, Pete had a bad accident when he was 14. That curtailed his fledgling running career for quite a long time. He was a pillion passenger on a motorbike and as he puts it now, 'had an argument with a lorry, and the lorry won. I had a double compound fracture just below the knee. They told my mum and dad that I wouldn't ever run as well again, but it was decided that if I wanted to carry on it probably wouldn't do me any harm. The guy who was coaching me at the time, Mr Jimmy Hicks, had a house that backed on to a football field and I used to go along to his house and he would stand in the back garden and he would make me run around and around this football pitch. He would shout at me "Pete, stop limping!". Day after day I ran around that football pitch before going back onto the fells.'

Pete managed to get quite fit and by the time he was 16 he finished fourth in the Junior Guides race at Grasmere, he wonders sometimes if he hadn't had the broken leg what he might have achieved in those early days. Nevertheless, he did well as it was. 'I had won my first Senior race by the time I was 18. Another two years and I was starting to run really well. That first win was at Knock, near Appleby, of all places. Knock Pike is the fell it went up.'

Over the years, Pete performed consistently on the pro circuit. I asked him what he felt was his best performance in the pros. 'I didn't win Grasmere, I got one second and three thirds. I was always the bridesmaid really. My biggest and best achievement was winning at Ambleside Sports in 1968. Ambleside was almost on a par with Grasmere then. If you couldn't win Grasmere, then Ambleside was the one to win. When Tommy Sedgwick was in the Junior ranks my coach was working with him when he was just 14 years old. We saw the potential and Tommy and I trained together. In 1967 Tommy had come straight out of the Juniors and won the Senior Guides race at Ambleside. At 17 years old that was unheard of. But in 1968 Tommy was the favourite again, along with Reg Harrison. I just had one of those days, no pain or anything. It is one of those occasions where you felt like you were floating on a cloud. You don't get many like that. The Ambleside course went towards Low Pike, but not as far. It went to a little crag south of Low Pike really, on the tree line. It is a sort of non-descript summit. You can see it from the field. The problem with Ambleside now is that there are so many trees that have



grown over the years that you can't see any more. And they have had to alter the course because of new fences that have been put up. So, not that good to watch at now, unlike Grasmere which is brilliant.'

In our discussion we covered prizes and I wondered what might have been the most unusual prize Pete had won. He chuckled, 'I do remember one. It was at Mungrisdale and it was an old pound, split three ways. Something like 6s 8d each for 4th, 5th and 6th, or somesuch. An Ambleside win in those days was worth about £20. They were good with me there, when I won they actually doubled my money and gave me £40. They gave me an extra £20 as a special prize. I had run it eight times before that, but had only managed 2 seconds and 3 thirds. I think it was a reward for like an outstanding performance of the day. It might have been something like a reward for coming back from that awful crash.'

As well as Tommy Sedgwick, Pete's career in the pros overlapped with people like Bill Teasdale, and Pete acknowledges what a good runner Teasdale was. 'Now Bill is a great guy, and someone has just written in *The Fellrunner* that he was my hero, but I am not quite sure that I ever said that.'

I took the plunge and asked about underhand behaviour. Pete reckons that there were lots of weird things going on, particularly as there was betting on the races. 'There was fixing of races, without a doubt. You would do it by letting somebody else win. I was asked not to win once when three guys were working together on fixing races. [Pete hesitates] I was the black sheep of the four top runners, which we were at the time. I was the one that could always split them up. If I had fixed a race my dad, who went everywhere with me, would have killed me. But, I have been in races where I could tell the race had been fixed.'

One of the races was at Ambleside and

Pete actually finished third, and he explains the way it went. 'Now these three guys were in it with the bookmakers for one of them to win, because he was a bit of an outsider whom they could get a good price on. The ironic thing was that the runner used to always run in all white, as did one of the others, and a third would run in red, with me in my usual black. We were going up the fell at Ambleside and one in white had got into the lead and I was pushing him really hard. He panicked and went hard. The one who was supposed to win was off the back of the four of us. We turned at the top and the order stayed the same. Coming down the last bit of fell to the arena the leader was well away from me and I was lying second. The third runner came flying past me, realising that it wasn't the 'correct' white vest that was leading, it was the other one and he was cussing and swearing. The wrong man won. When we got back my dad was in the arena waiting for me and he was laughing his socks off. He came up to me and said, "you've sorted them buggers out today!"'

Another occasion was when they used to have a sports gala at Kendal on the old rugby field. It was called Kendal Gala and it was always on a Tuesday after Keswick Gala had been on the August Bank Holiday Monday. Pete recalls that, 'the fell race went up Benson Knott. One of the top pros got the fell race stopped there, I was told once. He was leading coming back down off Benson Knott and he blatantly sat on a wall and let someone win, whoever it was, because he had backed him. He had to have a police escort off the field because the crowd weren't happy. They never had a fell race up Benson Knott again, only a Junior one.'

Knowing that Billy Bland had run as a pro for a while I asked Pete if he overlapped with him, and if he had any memories of Billy from those days. 'I didn't know Billy Bland particularly well in the pro days', he replied.



'He is quite a few years younger than me. I knew him as a competitor, but he didn't run that regularly then. He was certainly dabbling as he was very much into football. Running was a secondary thing, and he might correct me on this. He did a bit of running in summer and played football in the winter. You never used to see him running in the early season. From July he would be more regular. I do remember running against him a few times. In particular once at Mungrisdale, the race went up the side of Souther Fell. I was first and he was second. I can just remember the headline. It was a really thick cloudy day and it said something like *Blands running in the clouds* or somesuch. With it being a guides race it was only a fifteen minute run through the bracken and straight back down again. I think it was connected to the sheepdog trials.'

I asked Pete if he and Billy are related, or was that a myth. Pete says he knew Billy Bland's dad in the early days and his mum. He adds, 'the one that I knew best was Uncle Billy, who was his dad's brother. His son would be Anthony Bland (and Chris). Even I called him Uncle Billy and he was the one that used to turn up to support Billy. Well, this is the thing. Uncle Billy always told me that we were related very distantly. You know what old people are like about families. He'd say there is so and so and that we were related. He is probably the only one who knew, and nobody would know now, so I don't really know.'

I was interested to know if Pete was a very dedicated trainer in those days. He says he always looks back now and wishes he had trained harder. 'I wouldn't consider myself to be a good trainer. I didn't particularly like training. I loved racing though. I would always have at least one day off a week. I had to step up though when I went into the amateur scene, because you might have to be out for two or three hours, rather than 15 minutes.'

Pete was also working very hard in his pro days, to earn a crust. 'We came to live here (in Staveley) in 1964/5, and I was working at K Shoes at the time. I worked there for 20 years and then I branched out when a friend of mine invited me to join him in his business. It was a kitchen design and fitting firm originally. We eventually had a big showroom in Kendal on the waterside where the wholefood café is now. As a business we bought all that property, built an extension and we actually opened a wholefood café, with Anne doing all the baking. That was in about 1978 I think. As well as the kitchen stuff we also had a sports shop, which was called Waterside Adventure Sports and was not just running but also climbing, cross country skiing and all that sort of thing. In 1981 it went bust and I was a 12% shareholder, who was first to get hoofed out, and lost a good deal of money. All I had was my car! I started my own business, with

Anne, from the house. My front room here was the shoe fitting room. To start with it was heavily based on Walsh trainers, although I was selling Nike trainers as well. I like to think I made a success of that venture, as we have built our reputation.'

Pete Bland ran as a pro until 1972. As he was then aged 31, I wondered why for so long and why change then. 'I was getting bored with the pro scene because I had been going to the same places for 20 years virtually to run short 15 minute races. In the 1970s the race scene was expanding, like Ennerdale, Wasdale, and there was also the Three Peaks, which goes back to the 50s. Fairfield came along, and Skiddaw. I started running some of these while I was still a professional, unofficially. I did quite well and really enjoyed doing the longer distances.'

He then tells a story of the difficulties his slightly maverick approach produced, with the frankly ridiculous double standards of the pro and amateur scene at that time. 'I went along to the first Wasdale race and

when I went to enter and the people on registration said, "can we have a quiet word". We went around the back of the climbing hut at Wasdale. They said they couldn't allow me to run officially, because they had had a complaint, as I was a professional and this was an amateur race. They said it is not us, it is somebody who has complained and we have to uphold it. "You can run but unofficially with no number. We will keep track of you, take your time through every checkpoint, and we will put your name at the bottom of the results sheet with your time." It was Joss [Naylor] that got me to do this long race. It was the first Wasdale race, but Joss never ran because he had an iron bar drop on his foot, so he couldn't run. We were into the race and Joss was up a fell in the bracken and he knew what had happened and I am going up through the bracken and he says, "go on Pete, give it some welly". He told me then and there who it was who had complained and it was a guy who is still around I think. He is older than



me, and he was a runner. The ironic thing is that when I got to Sty Head stretcher box this very person was there giving drinks out. He offered me a drink - but I won't tell you what I said to him!

If you look at the results archive on the CFRA website you will find that for this 'amateur' race in 1972 the first five prizes consisted of: an original oil painting of Wastwater, a salver, a Phillips Dryshaver, a wooden tricket box and a track suit – all donated by local individuals or businesses. No mention of Pete Bland running though.

So, at the end of 1972 Pete Bland wrote to the AAAs and asked to be re-instated as an amateur. He had to sign a declaration that he wouldn't accept any more money prizes. 'If I did I would be banned for life. I had to pay £2 to the Northern Counties AAA and I have still got the letter. It came through fairly quickly. It was in November when I wrote the letter and I was running as an amateur for Kendal AC in the new year of '73.'

We finished our chat by me digressing to ask what he felt was his best amateur performance. Pete thought for a while, then replied. 'That is difficult, I have never really been asked that question. *[thinks again]* I have so many great memories. Probably finishing third in the Welsh 1000m Peaks race, which was one of my favourite races. I loved that event as it always seemed to be

a bit of an adventure, as it was somewhere different. I think I was beaten by Dennis Weir and Pete Walkington. It was the first Welsh 1000m race in 1971 and had 19 starters. I had never been to North Wales in my life. I didn't have a clue where I was going, but what I did was use Poucher's book on North Wales instead of a map and looked at all the photographs and read it and read it. I have still got it in my bookcase.'

Pete Bland had a long and relatively successful career as an amateur, as the sport eventually came together\*. Finally, I asked whether Pete had run for pleasure when his performance level dropped off. He explains that he stopped because of serious knee problems. 'I finished at 50. I was still doing a bit of running after that. The crazy thing is the last race I ever did was in America and it was a road race. We were on holiday in the States for a month and entered this race in Colorado. It was at about 6-7,000 feet above sea level, so it was tough even though we were a bit acclimatised. I went really badly, and Anne went well and beat me! I came home and thought, "right I really have retired now", and that was it.'

Pete is still very involved in the sport, although no longer managing the shop, he has handed that over to his son Matt. 'I still go to races with the van sometimes. I have just come back from the Ben. Since my first

race in 1973 I have been to the Ben every year as a runner and with the van as well. Finlay Wild has won it 9 times and did so by about 5 minutes this year. He hasn't beaten the race record, but has he really been pushed? Victoria Wilkinson is beating some great records at the moment. Her Ben was amazing as it was her first time there. The day before she went halfway up to see what it was like, and that was the only time she had looked at it. She had an amazing run. It was misty and foggy, but not too wet underfoot. Hence Finlay doing his fastest time.'

I walked back up the alleyway reflecting on a fascinating conversation with a lovely man, who has given so much to the sport of fell running, both as an athlete and by his support of athletes and races over the years.

**Steve Chilton** is the author of 3 fell running books: 'Its a Hill, Get Over It'; 'The Round: in Bob Graham's footsteps', and 'Running Hard: the story of a rivalry'. He is also a UKA distance coach, an OSM mapper in his spare time, and Chair of the Society of Cartographers. He blogs on this at: <https://itsahill.wordpress.com/>

*\* for the full saga of the coming together of the pros and the amateurs see Steve Chilton's book, 'It's a hill, get over it'.*

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