

I don't much like the limelight

When I asked Colin Donnelly how he would like to be remembered he hesitated for a moment before saying, 'I am not really bothered about people remembering me at all', before adding the quote in the title of this article. He likes to keep a pretty low profile, but I have a strong feeling that people should know of Donnelly's achievements and be able to assess his place in the fell running pantheon. Over the past few years I have interviewed him for my book research and more recently shared a stage with him at the Buxton Adventure Festival. At this latter event we discussed some of his career highlights and he also nicely illustrated his running ethos which has emerged over his long career.

Colin Donnelly feels quite fortunate about where he was brought up, on the south side of Glasgow. It was a fair way to get to the moors from there, but he used to go out on his bike, even when he was at primary school, and explore the roads towards the moors. That magnetic attraction to the wild places helped form the man he is. He now says he doesn't know why, it was just something in him. Poetically he adds, 'I followed the stream at the bottom of the garden to see where it went. It was the landscape that drew me.'

Colin admits that his father fostered his love of wilderness and reinforced it. 'He would take me off hill walking', he explains. 'It was a while before I got into it. I remember he took me up Merrick, the highest peak in southern Scotland, one autumn day. I sat up at the top eating shortbread and I thought this hill walking is for me. My dad used to say when do you want to go next boys, to me and my brother, but my brother wasn't really bothered.'

As Colin answers my questions to him, I begin to realise from the answers that he has a rebellious streak. One early story illustrates this aspect of his makeup. It was when he entered the Ben Lomond hill race when he was too young to do so. He was 17 at the time and says he did it to dodge a track race. 'The club I was in wanted youngsters to do track, but I hated it. It was like you were a hamster, just running around and round. No one noticed I was under age and I didn't finish particularly well. It was fantastic, combining my love of mountains with running, which I had just started doing. I had started to tick off the Munros, and I realised I could get more done by running them.'



Winner at Ben Nevis, 1979

Colin went to Aberdeen University and competed at cross country and on the road but was beginning to prefer hill running. In 1979, whilst at University, he won the Ben Nevis race on his debut, being the first Scotsman to win there for twelve years. Looking back his main memory was getting down in one piece. He reckons it is a dangerous race, which he never really found enjoyable, despite doing it a few times. 'I certainly didn't expect to win. It was an adventure really. I took the bike on the train and got off at Corrou Station and pushed the bike over the rough stuff to Glen Nevis, to get to the hostel. I did the race the following day. I was just lucky because Billy Bland, who was ahead of me on the descent, pranged himself on one of the bridges. I found myself in second place on the road. The guy ahead of me, Brian Robinson, his legs went, and fortunately with the Ben it is a tough race and even though you have done the training for it the body may find it difficult to cope with. I steamed past him in disbelief. I will never forget the moment when I crossed that finish line, with the pipes blazing, and I am thinking, "what am I doing, I have won the legendary race". Sometimes in life we just get handed a piece of luck on a plate.'

In 1980 due to thick fog, the road crossing onto the Pentlands at the Carnethy race was deemed too dangerous, so it was changed to a cross country race round Penicuik, in which 26 entrants ran. However, many fell runners decided to ignore the police and organisers, and a total of 103 (including high profile runners like Colin Donnelly and Billy Bland) had an unofficial race up on to the hills. That rebellious streak again. No regrets though, as he says he thinks he probably would do the same again. 'Most of the runners ran the unofficial route. The minority did the official route which was a cross country course. Nobody had come for that. We had come to have a go at the hills.'

Colin was now competing in the British Fell Champs events but when in 1981 the system was changed to the best ten from fifteen specified races he became disillusioned as he felt it was heavily biased towards English races/racers. He has mellowed on that matter somewhat now, saying that maybe that comment was a bit too harsh, and that, 'the jury is out on it, I think. Before the fifteen races it was all the 'A' graded races, which was a huge number. I remember Mike Short telling me he was going to Northern Ireland to race as no-one else would be doing so. They needed to reduce it, but even 10 out of 15 was your whole summer, just doing champs races. The championship took a lot out of you.'

So, around this time he became interested in doing the lists: the Munros, Corbetts, Donalds and English/Welsh 2000ers. He set a new record for the Bob Baxter Round in 1982, and also set fast times for other rounds such as the Grey Corries Twelve 3000 footers and the 16 Mamore 3000 footers. To him these were a great challenge. 'It was taking me to all corners of Britain, and it was exciting. You get adrenaline from hill racing, but this was fun. There was no pressure. It was all about challenging myself. I was doing some races, but picking those I wanted to do, rather than being dictated to. I was doing my own thing.'

The Scottish Hill Runners Association (SHRA) was established in 1983. There was an informal meeting 'in the back of a car' after a race in Glasgow. Those present were the founding members – Roger Boswell, Colin Donnelly, Dick Wall and Robin Morris. I pointed out that it must have been quite a big back seat in this car! 'I think it was Roger's Rover, that was quite spacious', came straight back. 'I did find the FRA quite Anglo-centric. I may have been a wee bit of a thorn in their side at this time as I said things like, "why can't you choose a neutral term like the Hill Running or Mountain Running Association". Fell running is a regional term and it is not inclusive. That was my take. I have always thought small is beautiful. Let's have a small association to cater for the needs of Scottish runners and be Scottish-focussed. That was taken on board by Northern Ireland and Wales too, as they soon followed suit. I think the SHRA has done well.'

There are plenty of Scots who still compete in the British Championships. It is not a protest group, we just wanted autonomy.'

Donnelly joined the RAF in 1984 and was posted to RAF Valley in North Wales. He then came back to championship racing. But he also raised his horizons to the international scene, competing in the Mount Cameroon race, which at the time he said was, 'the toughest and most dangerous race I've yet done. After looking at the course I half-hoped to catch a disease or something, just to have an excuse not to compete!' He had committed to doing the race the summer before, but then suffered a really bad ligament injury and was on crutches for 2 weeks. 'That was in September and the race was in January. I didn't go near any hills until December. I had lost my confidence. I thought I'd give it a shot. I went over, and I saw the thing. I think the steepest slopes in Britain are the Glen Shiel hills which rise about 1000m very steeply. If you just imagine of the Five Sisters of Kintail and then double that and it is Mount Cameroon. It also has very sharp volcanic rock and jungle at the bottom, and plenty of roots to trip over. So that is why I hoped to get ill and dodge it. But I didn't.'



Brough Law race, 2018
[Photo: Martin Ellis]

Colin ran in the 1985 Snowdon race where Kenny Stuart set the course record that has never been beaten. Second placed Jack Maitland charged down the mountainside in a time for the descent 6 seconds faster than Kenny. Fourth place went to Donnelly, who matched Jack's time for the descent. Colin accepts that his descending was always good, although he says, 'it was in those days, up until just before Mount Cameroon! I was never the same since after that injury. I am the very opposite now. The other day at Tinto I was 5th at the top and then lost seven places on the way down. Now I think that if I am going to get injured, it is very likely to be going downhill.'

Talking of Jack Maitland, it reminded me that he won the British Champs in 1986, having gone to Aberdeen University and taken up fell running, being introduced to the sport by Donnelly. Colin describes Maitland as a very interesting person. 'I am drawn towards interesting, quirky people. We used to do a circuit at Aberdeen Uni, and Jack would always make it slightly bigger. He was doing orienteering, and I was secretary of the Hares and Hounds, and I was trying to get them to do something more interesting like running up some hills somewhere. I noticed Jack had a talent for the hills. I invited him down to do Wansfell, which used to be the last race of the year. There were a couple of hundred runners, and some

good ones too, and Jack gave me a right thrashing', Colin recalls, with a chuckle. He had a hat-trick of wins in the British Champs after Jack Maitland in 1987-9.

In 1988 Donnelly set the record of 30 mins 51 secs for Buckden Pike. It is an outstanding one which has not been beaten since. The nearest anyone has got has been 30 mins 59 secs by Ian Holmes in 1995. I suggested to Colin that he had a day when everything went well for him. Surprisingly, he says he does not remember particularly enjoying it. 'It had a steep descent near the end, with a slippery river crossing and a slight uphill finish. I nearly fell at the river and was quite surprised I got the record actually. I was extremely fit, and I would go to a race and had the mentality that it wasn't just about winning. I wouldn't describe myself as a cocky person, but I knew I could win the race, but could I get the record?' He adds, 'another time I went to one of the Highland Games races and Rob Jebb was there, and on the start line he turned to me and said, "do you know what the record is?". I said, "it is a good record, nobody has ever been near it". I thought, he's going for the record, he's not worried about winning it. I think he was two or three seconds off the record. That was also the attitude I had back then.'

Also in 1988 Donnelly took on the Welsh 3000m challenge and recorded a mightily impressive 4 hrs 19 mins. He wasn't entirely happy with his run though. In Clayton and Turnbull's book *The Welsh Three Thousand Foot Challenges* he commented that he "shouldn't have been so tired on the Carneddau, really should have knocked a further ten minutes off." A film reconstruction of the challenge was made, which is beautiful to watch. Colin adds now that he was taking that challenge very seriously, although he had had a crack at a lot of the long rounds and had not bothered to recce them. 'That is part of the fun, just to challenge yourself to do them. But I wanted to go for the record for the Welsh 3000s. I had pacemakers, the whole gamut. I spent a lot of time recceing the routes and taking people with me. Alan Hughes, who made the film, was insistent that in the film that I ran down the north ridge of Crib Goch, which I didn't do on the record attempt. I like things being as they are, but he said "no, it looks better on camera, if you are bombing down the screes". He was making the film, so I let it go. On the record effort I sent my pal down the north ridge, as Joss had done, and I went over the pinnacles and down to the bwlch, I think it is Bwlch y Moch, and down to Cwm Pass via a narrow gully. The pinnacles are a bit slow, but the gully is fast. I felt it was a better way. Joss got crag fast on the north ridge by going too far right, which didn't help his times. I lost time later with cramp and tiredness. I didn't go well up Pen yr Ole Wen. I am quite bemused that no-one has done the time since. There are guys that could do it, Finlay Wild for instance.'

Obviously, records get beaten. An interesting comparison is given by figures produced by Andy Walmsley in 1989. He counted the number of course records held *at that time* for all the races in that year's FRA calendar. The results are pretty startling. For the men, Colin Donnelly had sixteen, to Kenny Stuart's twelve and John Wild's nine. Donnelly puts those figures (for him) down to those few years doing the British Championship races. 'You try and run as hard as you can for as long as it is going to last. It is not going to last for ever. Then you become an also-ran. Now I am aiming to win the v50 category, but always I have got out there and taken part. It is me against the hill anyway now, and really it always has been. What time can I do against that hill. When I first started training on the hills, I got a job as a waiter up in the Highlands and started running up a 3000-footer behind the hotel. This was magic, but again just me against the mountain. Can I get a faster time on it? I still like exploring, remote corners of Scotland and that. The Secret Glen I have not been to yet. I issue myself new challenges. You have got to have some objective to keep you going.'

In 1990 the Ben Nevis race was included in the FRA Championship roster, yet the need to impose an entry limit (which was reached 5 days before the advertised deadline for entries) restricted several top runners

from gaining entry. One was Colin, which meant he was unable to defend his title. 'I reacted very unfavourably, and I didn't really get much support from the FRA', Colin says now. 'They knew there was a problem with the Ben. It was a bunch of businessmen running it, and they did things their own way. At that time, they were charging an extortionate amount to enter. You had to enter in June for the race in September, so they were banking your money and earning interest. I was quite resentful about that. The FRA made it a championship race which I think was a bad idea. But the Ben accepted entries on a first come first served basis. They didn't say to the organisers it is a championship race could you save maybe a hundred places for people that might win the categories in the champs. The Ben was the last race of the year in the champs. Nothing happened about that and the Ben race rejected quite a lot of people, not just myself. The FRA had a committee meeting about it and there was a proposal to change to a different race, but they didn't. I have always wondered why they didn't.' Colin goes on to acknowledge that this year's plan to offer places in champs races to contenders is a good one, but that it has come nearly 30 years too late. 'Why not be radical? Why don't the FRA organise races? On the same courses, everyone knows where they are at. They could show some leadership. They have stepped into the GPS controversy, which I don't think they needed to.'

Warming to his theme of radical change, Colin says he wishes the FRA would push for more uphill races in Britain. 'The top runners here go over to races in Switzerland, Austria and Germany, most of which just go uphill. These guys are competing on the international scene and having to get their experience by going abroad as they can't get it in the UK. I remember going to Switzerland and their races are so well organised. There was a guy there who had never done any downhill running whatsoever, even in training. What he does is run uphill and get the cable car back down. There is a lot of interest in uphill racing which hasn't been tapped. We need some lateral thinking.'

Colin Donnelly's Bob Graham Round experience says a lot about himself and his attitude. In June 1991 he did a solo, unsupported Bob Graham Round, which by its nature would not be 'counted' as a round by the Bob Graham Club. He said to me in research for one of my books, 'I just wanted a good day in the hills'.

Colin ran in the World Mountain Running Trophy races for Scotland every year between 1985 and 2002. He obviously liked the events, as he explained. 'It was usually towards the end of the season and it was the icing on the cake. I would do the trial, try and get into the team and just give it my best for my country. It was something I got my head round and wanted to do every year.'



Medal winners for the 55-59 age group at the World Masters hill running champs, Slovenia 2018

In 1980 Colin had produced the best performance ever in the Manx Mountain Marathon, of 4 hrs 2 mins 11 secs. He returned in 2002 to win for the 3rd time, 21 years after his first two wins. His time of 4 hrs 39 mins 27 secs was a record for the new course. 'I had always wanted to do it again, because it is one of my favourite races. It has got everything in it, beautiful. I thought why not do it as a Vet and see if I can win it. Sometimes it is good to have an aim, something that you really want to do, and go for it. You should challenge yourself.'

When he mentioned that he hadn't been doing particularly well recently I asked when his last win was. He swiftly came back with having had couple of wins in September/October. 'I did the Penchrise Pen Hill Race, which is only five miles from where I live. I won that and did the record, which I am a bit bemused by as it was unexpected. I won another cracking race in the Borders, an area which has many great races. This was the Yetholm Borders Shepherd's Show race. My main rival is Brian Marshall, who is a bit of a character. He turns up at races and you wouldn't think he is a runner. He wears a scruffy t-shirt and shorts you wear for cycling, those that you wore 30 years ago. Nobody takes him seriously, but he often wins. Two or three years ago he decided to run races barefoot, for whatever reason. He must have feet like leather. He even did Glamaig, in Skye, which has a considerable screen run in it. He tells me that he thinks this barefoot running has caused calf tightness with him. So, he had a bad race at the Shepherd's Show that I won. He might normally have beaten me', adds Colin modestly.

We strayed into talking about modern races like the Dragons Back. Colin reckons that twenty years ago he would have been looking out the details, and very keen to do it. 'Nowadays I am not the person I was 20 years ago, I struggle sometimes. When I did a 50 mile ultra in the summer my longest run in preparation had been 12 and a half miles. I thought I might have bitten off more than I could chew. Dragon's Back is a serious outing and a cracking race. I remember the inaugural race when Helene Diamantides and Martin Stone won it, that was a quite phenomenal achievement.'

Colin categorises what he does now as just running, with some biking. He also says he has never been to a gym in his life. 'I went on a treadmill once and it was the most boring thing on earth. Running is about the experience, the wind in your hair and the different seasons. I have gone back to my first love, which is the bike. Nowadays these mountain bikes are great fun. A few years ago, I had a serious cartilage injury and I thought that was the end of running. I got it operated on and I have now come back. Doing the mountain biking while injured kept me about 80% fit. There is something to be said for mountain biking, indeed cycling in general. Look at Rob Jebb, he is probably as much a cyclist as he is a runner. A fantastic record of winning the Three Peaks Cyclocross event. There a lot of runners that incorporate cycling into their schedule. I have gone back to cycling a lot now. I live in a town and don't like running tarmac, so I cycle out a few miles and go for a run and cycle back. I probably cycle every day and run every day. Someone asked if I had to run every day. I don't have to, but I like to.' He says it is about deeper things than just running. It is for his mental health as much as anything else. Thinking time, as he puts it.

He then tries to explain his running ethos, competing against himself. 'It is back to what has always been there in me. It is that urge to explore, to go to the wild places. I am very competitive right enough. But where I am most at home is going on a trip to a remote bothy, and then going out to do a five-hour run the next day over some new hills that I have not been on before. Again, challenging myself. Doing something new.' When seeing a draft of this article Colin also noted something else new that he is doing,

saying, 'since moving to Hawick I have started writing poetry, mainly landscape related and I considered reading some at Buxton'.

He then referred back to a previous conversation we had had, about Billy Bland not running so much after he became a Vet. He had given what he thought was Billy's take on NOT running any more after becoming a vet, which was: 'First is first, second is nowhere'. He went on to talk of his own, Billy's and other's approaches to aging as a runner. 'I think with Billy, if he wasn't winning the race it wasn't good enough. He didn't like to be chasing the win. To get around that you must deal with it in your head, and people like Rob Jebb and Homesy they will be dealing with that as well now. They were winning races, and maybe they are not winning now. They are not far off and are probably in a chasing group. Going for the v40 or v50, they are new challenges mind. You must accept you were right up there, but that is finished. I think next year I am eligible for the v60 category at the World Mountain Running Trophy, so I think I will have a wee crack at that and see if I can do something here.'

Having moved to the present day we came bang up to date with the GPS debate. 'I heard about it earlier on this summer. I did that ultra in the summer just to challenge myself. Just to see if I could get around the thing. There was a cross country section and I knew some of it wasn't going to be that well waymarked. I was hoping just to follow someone. There were guys with GPS devices in it. I was following two guys with their devices and we got to this junction and it wasn't obvious which way to go. The two guys started having a conference with each other. One says my GPS says that way, and the other says mine says this way', he chuckled.

He had heard about the GPS controversy and was thinking, "why is there one? Is it not just levelling the playing field?" He expanded on his thoughts. 'I would go to the Lake District and race Ennerdale or Wasdale say, and I am not going to know the long routes there. Some guy like Billy Bland, for instance, or Joss, they know the best lines intimately. So, I might follow them, which neither of them liked. To me it is non-controversy as it just evens things out. If you are running around the hills in fog and mist with your GPS which you are staring at, surely it is going to slow you down somewhat anyway. If I was in Wales, I could run around the Peris Horseshoe or the Welsh 3000s without a map and compass, because I know the area. I hear there is to be a GPS category and a non-GPS category. But do they [*the FRA*] need to get involved, surely it is up to race organisers. When I was at the AGM of the SHRA after Tinto recently there was no mention of it, so I don't know what is going to happen in Scotland.'



**'Feel the Burns' hill race,
January 2018**

Being a coach and a former borderline obsessive trainer myself, I wondered what Colin had been like with his training. 'When I was at Aberdeen University there was a theory that you had to do 100 miles a week to be any good. That lasted 4 weeks before I was injured. I tried it again briefly and it didn't work for me. I think everyone's body has got a certain tolerance. David Bedford could do 200 miles a week and he got fantastic results from that. But most people can't do that mileage, they would be crippled. I then aimed more for 70 miles a week. Now 50 miles is just right for me. There is still much more running to do though.'

One thing Colin did admit to was being nervous. 'Even when I am not bothered about a race and have nothing at stake, just doing it for the crack, I find I go to the toilet 3 times beforehand, so inside I am nervous. I do remember Andy Styan, who was British Champion one year, he had an interesting way of trying to psyche out the competition, and maybe this was dealing with nerves for him. He liked to turn up at a race and he would puff away at a cigarette on the start line. I don't know if it was to psyche us out or calm his nerves, but it was a great technique.'

I tried to tease out what had been Colin's most satisfying performance. 'I loved all the big rounds I have done, the Bob Graham, Charlie Ramsay, Paddy Buckley, and South Wales Traverse. One year I heard of an ultra-race in Reunion, that was like running the Bob Graham, slightly more distance but the same amount of climbing. I did that race and it gave me an immense amount of satisfaction. I didn't do particularly well actually.'

He then gives another example, which neatly illustrates the fierce determination he could summon up when needed. 'Another one I was very pleased about, as I didn't think I was going to finish it, was when I had a crack at doing the Scottish 4000s one year. I set off from Fort William and my dad was supporting me at the road sections. I got to Glen Feshie and I was limping badly. I was going to carry on anyway as I was ahead of the record schedule. I may not get the record, but I am going to finish it. I will crawl over that finish line if necessary. I got to the roads off Cairngorm and my dad was there. I had five miles or so down the road. He said, "well you have done all the 4000s now son. You are limping along and in real pain. Just finish here and we will be in the car and off." I said, "dad, I am going down to Loch Morlich and I am going to touch that hostel door, whether I manage it within the 24 hours or not. I have come here to do it and I will." And I did.' But he suffered for that for quite a while afterwards. 'You have got to keep up your standards and do things properly', is how he categorises that effort.

We finish by going back to what Colin said when he was asked how he would like to be remembered. It is never an easy question to answer, but his response nicely encapsulated this many faceted person. 'I'd like to be remembered just as a guy that was good in his day and got a few records and did a few things, and that was that. My youngest girl runs, and she was complaining that she didn't do well in some cross-country race. I said, "it is not about how well you do, it is the taking part." That is the thing I would like to leave people with, it is about challenging yourself. It is not about winning, and it is not about sitting back on the couch and saying I am 60 so I am too old for all this. It is about trying to explore your horizons, and never giving up.'

Steve Chilton

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