



# GAVIN BLAND

## IN PROFILE (PART 2)

*It all really came together for Gavin Bland in 1999. Setting records that still stand at the Carnethy and the Edale Skyline races, he finally achieved his ambition of being crowned as the best fell runner in Britain. But he revealed that he was not happy with the way he had won it, having desperately wanted to win the vital last counter to seal the title in style.*



**G**avin Bland explains his dissatisfaction with winning the British Championship title in 1999: "I have never been so disappointed as I was the day I ran Borrowdale, as I was only third in the race. I had to beat Ian Holmes and then I wouldn't have to go to the last race in Wales. I said to him, 'I am not right.' We were killing each other up the top of Langstrath. He was puffing as well and so we all regrouped. Going into Honister there were five of us. I was still thinking I am going to win as I have been the best runner all season. Then Simon Booth ran away and left us up Dale Head to take the win. I had beaten Holmsey by then, so I knew I had the Championship won. I had thought I was going to win Borrowdale again. I was a seriously disappointed British Champion."

Unfortunately, he never reached those heights again. In 2000 the trial race was held at Keswick for the World Mountain races later that year in Bergen, Germany. Gavin Bland finished 19th that day, just two places ahead of Joe Ritson (who was 1st V40). Having won the British and English fell running titles the previous year and been to some of the earlier World Mountain races, he might have been expected to feature in a race won by Dave Lewis. Joe Ritson recalls that, "When running well, Gavin could certainly do the business across the full range of fell and mountain races. In that race I remember seeing him walking up the steeper part of Jenkin Hill, while I was feeling good by then, and for a time I thought I might have an outside chance of catching him. I did pass a couple of other runners - who then dropped out!"

Joe Ritson adds that Gavin also had some good results in road races in Cumbria, indicating he had good basic speed as well as being a brilliant climber and descender in fell races. "Coming up to 50 and with all those skills and years of experience racing, maybe Gavin could target the over 50s categories at some of the international mountain races. Surely, he could still do the business on the national and international scene," Joe concludes.

The foot-and-mouth outbreak in 2001 was a really difficult time for Gavin on the farm. They lost all their young stock, which were away for the winter, and lost all their tups. The enforced break from running the fells that foot-and-mouth caused that year also signalled the end of a period of good running for Gavin. "But I never really stopped running until I was over 40. I made a big effort at 40, going for the Vet Champs. For me, I have to go running every day. It is psychological. Sometimes it is too hard, but as long as I have been, it is good."

Gavin began featuring less prominently in races but had occasional returns to good form, including winning a counter in the English Championships series at Langdale in 2003. Gavin remembers that win vividly: "I was not very fit and it was a misty day. I said to Scoffer I was going to win, and he said, 'no chance'. We popped out of the mist and there it was. I was against Jebby and he can't run downhill!" In 2004 Gavin raced sparingly but had a good win at the Mountain Trial, which was based locally to him at Thirlmere.

In 2005 Gavin raced a few times, with only a couple of wins. Despite some up and down form, Gavin reckoned that he had won a race every year since he started running: "I don't know when that sequence ended, but it possibly lasted for 15 years." A check of the stats shows that he seems to have won a race every year from 1991 to 2005 (excepting 2001, foot-and-mouth year), an impressive run indeed.

The 2006 season was a virtual washout owing to a foot injury. Gavin had to have a toe operation that year because of it, but not without doing the Borrowdale race a day or two before the operation. "I had a top joint in the big toe that was suffering from wear and tear. I went private and they said they will clean it out and it should give you four or five years more of running. If I was to start running seriously again, they would have to do the other big toe." That Borrowdale race was an example of Gavin seriously under-performing, probably because of the injury. He came 87th in 4:10:53.

Gavin rarely competed in 2007-11, and then tried to come back as a Vet in 2012 but got injured again that year. He tried again in 2013 and did really well for a while, coming in the top ten at Black Combe and winning at the Silent Valley (Northern Ireland) Championship race. "I was the fittest man in the country for about six weeks. I never missed a day's training all winter, and there was loads of snow that year. I lost a lot of weight. Silent Valley was a pig of a day, a man's race. I hadn't had a drink for two years and had a load of Guinness afterwards. Then I had a bursitis and couldn't run downhill. I went to the next Champs race in the Borders (at Yetholm) and I couldn't run."

Gavin Bland just lost interest in being competitive from then on. Gavin admitted that he had run the 2018 Borrowdale fell race when very unfit. He finished 228th out of 239 finishers, in a time of 5:46:10. He got a huge cheer as he came in as the prizes were being given out. "I thought halfway round I should have finished by now!" he laughs.



Above: Billy and Gavin Bland waiting for Kilian Jornet on his BGR, 2018 © Mark Wilson; Opposite page: Gathering on Helvellyn © Landkeepers

Looking back on the records that he set, and still holds, Gavin reckons the hardest to beat would be Carnethy: "It was the first race of the season. There was an orienteer from Norway there called Bernt Bjørnsgaard. He set off like a rocket. I raced for 44 minutes before I caught him and then beat him off the last top. I had to really race. That was a good record."

When I asked him what his favourite races were, he gave three answers and his reasoning in each case: "Borrowdale (because it's local and I have to win it), Ben Nevis (because it is the race to win) and Butter Crags (because it is a classic)."

Back in 2005, Brian Martin did some statistical analysis of the Lakeland Classic races, as part of his drive to spotlight the Lakeland Classics Trophy. At this time Billy Bland held the record for three of the six races (Duddon, Wasdale and Borrowdale), Andy Styan held the Langdale record, Kenny Stuart the Ennerdale, and Gavin Bland the Three Shires. Of these, only the Duddon has since been beaten - by Ian Holmes, back in 2007. Gavin Bland had got within 70 seconds of both the Duddon and Langdale times, whilst Simon Booth was even nearer to the Ennerdale and Borrowdale times. In this era of fast times across the board, Gavin was second fastest at Duddon, third fastest at Borrowdale, fourth at Langdale, and fifth at Ennerdale. However, he was only 15th fastest at Wasdale, admitting that he had never run well there. These are just some statistics that to me show what a consistently excellent runner Gavin was at his peak.

Recently I asked Gavin to analyse why it might have been that he couldn't beat Billy Bland's times for any of the Lakes Classics, except the Three Shires: "Because I very rarely had to really push it. If I had been in a race with Billy Bland and we had both been in our prime I would have run faster than I ran against others. Does that make sense? In my time we were all fairly evenly matched and it was rare that anyone thought they were going to run the legs off everyone. Because if you did you would get beaten, wouldn't you? I

would rather mooch round and win, than race round and finish fifth because I'd misjudged it."

When he was running well, he admits that he won loads of races by five yards or so. "I am a carthorse but at the end of a fell race I was the fastest of the carthorses. Do you know what I mean? Ian Holmes was a better runner than me but over the last field I would beat him. But I am not a sprinter - and would get beat by the bigger guys in a sprint as a pro. If I wasn't going to win or do myself justice, I would never screw myself into the ground to finish eighth or something. I would run in and that would be fine. One or two races you come second, and you think, 'What could I have done differently?'"

He also says he was too slow to do a decent marathon. "All the top 20 or so people I could beat in a fell race, nearly all of them would beat me in a road race. I used to do the Derwentwater 10 and the Dalston 10k. I could run 32 minutes for 10k on the road. I sometimes did them just to get fit. Some years more than others."

Gavin readily admits to having been a lazy trainer, and even a lazy racer, liking to do just enough. When profiled in 1993 he admitted that he did no speed work in his training: "I sharpen up by racing regularly. My work on the farm keeps me fairly fit all year round so I don't need to train as hard as someone with a non-physical job. I train on the road in winter, but my legs can't take a lot of miles due to getting sore shins, so I run on the fells as much as possible to.' He adds that he knew he could never race well at lambing time, saying that sheep-shearing and running don't mix: "From the middle of April till the end of May I was on my feet too much. Long days and my body couldn't cope with it. I could go to a race and run but unlikely to be winning."

In his periods of top form, he would sometimes recce race routes. "Billy once had us go halfway round the Peris Horseshoe course the day before, because not knowing it was not good enough for him. Most folk would say you don't want to be doing that the day before a long race. But we were all used to strong walking and that is how we would do it."

One time we were talking, Gavin's father David joined us for a while. He commented on the family genetic influence that Gavin inherited: "It is still all down to your grandfather, Joe Bland. His heart rate was never above 40, often mid-thirties and he was the father of Billy, Stuart and me." Gavin follows this by saying that he could run races and have lads running beside him who would be "puffing their guts out. I couldn't do that. Ian Holmes is an example. If you are running with Holmesy and he was gonna beat yer you could tell by how hard he was working. If I was gonna beat him I would cruise away. I wouldn't beat him because of the effort."



I have asked several people to analyse Gavin (and Billy) Bland. Most recently I had a discussion with Shaun Livesey who recalled the first time he came across Gavin. "It was one year at the Langdale Fell race on a fairly tricky decent between Pavey Ark and Esk Hause. Gavin passed me with ease looking almost casual as he strode away. I remember thinking 'he's good' [surely an understatement]. Having since come across Gavin many times I would say, like his uncle Billy, he is a quality runner, straight talking, one of those people you respect for their intrinsic values. Both were natural descenders, great characters, and very much fell runners."

But was Gavin as good as Billy Bland? Broaching this with Gavin himself, he replies quietly to me "On rough stuff I would say yes as I was as good as Billy. I was just the same on that stuff." At this point in our chat his son Alex pops in. "He doesn't believe I was a good runner!" laughs Gavin.

His friend Scoffer argues that there can't have been anybody like Gavin - who was unbeatable one week, then the following week back running with me, then the week after unbeatable again! As evidence he cites the time "a few years ago at Ennerdale when he was beaten by Wendy Dodds and a week later he came 4th at Duddon!! How can he do that!?"

Scoffer then tells a tale against Gavin, which still makes him laugh. "Once we went down to do the Rossendale relay and the night before we were given 'accommodation' in the First Rossendale Scout hut.

Having had an Indian and a few beers as pre-race preparation, we went back to the Scout hut for bed which was by now a balmy -40 degrees!!! Gavin rolls out his sleeping bag and his blow-up mattress which he proceeded to blow up with a foot pump. He then declared that no matter how cold it was he always slept naked so stripped and got into his sleeping bag. He lasted about a minute and a half before he put all his clothes back on, and shortly afterwards there was a loud hissing noise. Gavin's much envied blow-up mattress had sprung a leak and was now a plastic bag - much to the amusement of us all!"

Gavin's own conclusion is that he did make the most of what he had, but that it was all in fits and starts: "When I was at my peak I was as good as anyone. But I sometimes would go into a trough and finish 20th in a race and think, 'well that is alright'. When I wasn't fit, I still enjoyed going to races. That was slightly different to Billy. If he wasn't fit, he wouldn't go. Looking back, I shouldn't have played any rugby when I was 19 and 20, and if I could do it all again you would do it completely differently."

As I got ready to leave, I thanked him for spending so much of his valuable time with me on our two interviews. Gavin replied, "It was nice to sit down, I enjoyed it."

Then, as I walked across the farmyard to my car, he yelled after me, "I might go on a massive diet and make a big comeback!"

