

## Tough Guy Challenge – 31 January 2010

We thought the coldest part of the winter was over, but as we drove from Birmingham to Perton the temperature gauge in the car gradually dropped from 3°C to 2°C to 1°C. And then the snow began to fall... I texted Paul with this weather news and received the reply "Aaaaaagh!".

We parked in a large field, along with several thousand others, and made our way to the start area. As we walked past the "Killing Fields", with their wooden-framed obstacles climbing up into the cold air, we saw divers in one of the ponds, breaking a thick layer of ice. "I'm glad I'm not going in there", I said. "Me too!", responded Mark.

The start area was chaotic. Tough Guy takes place on farmland, where the owner keeps retired horses and a collection of similarly "retired" Citroën 2CVs in advanced states of decay. There are barns where contestants store their warm clothes, and some portaloos and open-air showers, but it's all pretty basic. The stalls selling hot drinks and burgers were already doing a good trade as the contestants gathered. I remarked that the "Pound Shop" must have done well out of the event: there were lots of brightly-coloured costumes on view, of varying degrees of practicality. These included a small collection of Roman legionaries, complete with capes, helmets and spears; some super-heroes; a couple of bunny girls in fishnet tights; and the almost inevitable man in a mankini.

We saw Paul – sensibly dressed with hat and gloves firmly in place – on his way to the start, and wished him luck. Then we found a vantage point on a muddy slope from where we could watch the start of the race, which involved a cacophony of fireworks and adrenalin-fuelled roars.

The challenge consists of a 6-mile (or so) cross-country run, including several zig-zags up and down hills and the crossing of a stream – backwards and forwards several times. A video posted on YouTube shows the race leaders breaking the ice on the stream on each crossing. At the end of the run, contestants reach the "Killing Fields" area with its 20 or so challenges, including:

- 40-foot tall A-frames with ropes strung between them
- crawling under barbed wire
- crawling through concrete tunnels or tubes made from tyres – inevitably emerging into muddy water
- progressively higher vertical walls (2m, 3m and 4m) to be scaled
- tyres strewn across the race course – and no way round
- dangling wires providing electric shocks to the unwary

There was a lot of mud! The organisers pride themselves on the quality of their mud, saying that they spend "weeks mixing 'oss muck, spring water and a couple of secret ingredients to get just the right consistency". Probably best not to ask about the secret ingredients...

Mark and I stationed ourselves by the "Firey Holes". Here, members of the Fire Brigade had set bales of hay alight and spread them across the course. Many of the competitors took the opportunity to warm themselves briefly at the fire, before running through the flames and plunging into a pool of muddy water about 3ft deep, gasping with shock as the cold penetrated their clothes and soaked them through. Having waded across the first pool – about 4m wide – they climbed out, only to repeat the process in the next pool, a few metres further on. Just to complete the

experience, there was a further fire wall to run through before moving on to the next obstacle.

The pictures of Paul show him crossing from the first pool to the second. We stood by this obstacle for some time, waiting for another group of friends to come past, and watching the pools gradually becoming more and more muddy, and their sides more and more difficult to scale. It was here that the instinctive teamwork of the event became evident: everyone was in the same state and willing to help each other get through. Complete strangers offered a hand to pull another competitor up out of the water; or from behind to help push someone out.

Possibly the most brutal obstacle is the “Underwater Tunnels”: wading through chest-high water, competitors find their way blocked by telegraph poles, which they have to duck under. A friend said that putting his head in the icy water completely took his breath away: another friend was so dazed after the first ducking that the stewards pulled her out of the water to recover. Paul’s verdict on this obstacle: “My word, that water is really freezing!”

The course ends with a scramble up a slippery, muddy hill. The organisers provide ropes for people to pull themselves up, using whatever strength they still have left at this stage. I guess it would be impossible to scale the slope otherwise, as it soon became a muddy quagmire with no visible means of finding any purchase underfoot.

At the finish, the Tough Guys had a pale, haunted look. Most of them were shivering uncontrollably, even though they were wrapped in foil covers. Many had bruises on their legs caused by the chunks of ice floating in the water. Most were unable to make much use of the cup of tea which was given to them: one friend said he found it so difficult to drink the tea, as his hands were shaking so violently, that he briefly considered throwing it over himself to get warm!

We met up with Paul, who looked remarkably well and was delighted to have got round the course quickly, knocking over an hour off the previous year’s attempt. We said “hello” to some of his friends, who were refuelling with hot chocolate and doughnuts. They left soon afterwards for the long drive back to Cambridge. Paul was looking forward to a few more days at home before resuming the “day job” by flying to the US on Thursday to start the next tour.

So why does he do it? I’m not sure (I wouldn’t!), but I can offer some reflections on the qualities required to be a Tough Guy:

- physical fitness
- mental preparation
- the right clothes and footwear
- courage to do something relatively few others would even contemplate
- perseverance to keep going whatever happens
- teamwork

In other words, not so different from the qualities required of a King’s Singer.

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