



Tackling the Three Peaks Challenge

There's a bizarre and increasingly brutal list of extreme events out there designed to punish the legions of endurance athletes. Join one team as it painfully tackles Britain's three highest peaks. / By Jonathan Green / Photography by Mark Wagoner

AT THE BOTTOM OF BEN NEVIS, THE TALLEST mountain in the UK, Nick Stokes hops from foot to foot like an excited kid. The 51-year-old financial sales rep, who looks like a 6-foot-2 Dustin Hoffman, is one of the most competitive men you're likely to meet. Cruising thousands of miles every year in a BMW while working 80-hour weeks as a salesman has earned him trips to Jamaica and Monaco. "People say I am like Jekyll and Hyde," he says. "I'm a lovely bloke, really. I just want to win everything at all costs."

If anyone would triumph in the National Three Peaks Challenge it would be Stokes. The premise of the annual UK charity race sounds preposterous: Hike up the three highest mountains in England, Scotland, and Wales, drive five to six hours between each, all within 24 hours.

We British don't have 35,000-foot peaks, so we make do with what we have. We cram in several smaller summits to get the same effect. Ranging from 3,208 to 4,409 feet, not one of these mountains would be considered a challenge by mountaineers. But add the climbs and descents—and factor in the ruggedness of these summits—and you have 22,352 feet of serious hiking. And, oh yes, add 670 miles of driving on Britain's smallest roads.

The arduous enterprise benefits a good cause. Teams raise money for Action Medical Research (action.org.uk), an independent charity in the UK.

Nevertheless, the idea to compete in the Three Peaks Challenge is often hatched in a drunken fugue in the pub, among those with little outdoor experience. So it's appropriate that I find myself one summer morning at the base of Ben Nevis in Scotland at 5:22 a.m. Nick and I are part of one of the 26 teams competing. Taking part was the idea of my brother's boss, Stuart Doughty, another highly competitive man. As team captain, he charges up the mountain in voluminous shorts and antiquated hiking boots with the slightly eccentric look of a rampaging Victorian explorer. My brother, Edward Green, gave in to Stuart's drive to recruit teammates from work and brought his wife, Alison, as well. Me? I thought it would be a good excuse for fraternal bonding, a little fun, and a chance to see England again since my home is in New York.

With mud-spattered, aching calves, soaked in sweat and fatigue, one of us now has to get behind the wheel for the five-hour drive to the second peak.

Tips for Reaching the Finish

- 1 / Have a designated driver who isn't climbing.
- 2 / Drink lots of water—not just power drinks.
- 3 / Take plenty of nutritious energy bars.
- 4 / Exercise cold limbs in the car before the next mountain. There is little time to limber up at the trailhead. In-car exercises like those used in flight (see page 164) are very beneficial.
- 5 / Try only organized events. These peaks can be deadly on your own if you don't know the terrain. Check out 3peaks.info, merseyventure.com/threepeaks.htm, and actionforcharity.co.uk.

But once we start climbing, the fun stops. Nick had been training, going up and down a thousand-foot hill behind his house four times after dark most nights. But this isn't ►

walking; it's hand and foot climbing. Cresting each ridge reveals not the summit, but just another spread of steel-gray boulders.

The team finally hits the peak—an apocalyptic-looking plateau—three hours after starting. At the top is the Texas Toms team, a bunch of 40-ish men with red, sweaty, beery faces. They belt out a tone-deaf rendition of "Viva Las Vegas."

We check in with race officials before Stuart commands, "We haven't got time to lie around." He inhales and sets off on

his own down the mountain. We follow on his heels, irritably. One crop-headed soldier from another team runs past. "Me legs are like jelly," he howls. Nick gamely plods on, his smile withering.

Teams have gotten backed up trying to get down this first mountain. The popularity of the event means it has become a victim of its own success. Volunteers who rescue people from the peaks say the contestants are generally ill-equipped and lack the necessary physical fitness and mountain expertise.

The race was originally the idea of Maj. H.W. Tilman, a British adventurer and war hero with a waxed moustache atop a very stiff upper lip. His original idea was that teams would sail between the peaks down the western coast of the country. The first race, in 1977, quickly became a fixture with the British army and RAF. The redoubtable Tilman never got to see its massive popularity. He is thought to have perished while sailing to Antarctica for his 80th birthday.

Trudging along, I cannot help but wish that his demise had happened before his twisted mind had devised this outing. After 10 miles and five hours and seven minutes of knee-jarring hell on Nevis, we reach the parking lot. With mud-splattered, aching calves, soaked in sweat and fatigued, one of us now has to get behind the wheel for five hours.

Nick jumps behind the wheel and whisks us away. The race rules call for a minimum travel time between peaks to discourage dangerous driving. "I'll make time," says Nick, as he grits his teeth and drops the van into a howling third gear before swinging out around a blind bend and overtaking an older couple in a red hatchback. I tense up in terror in the front seat as he redlines the protesting van, flinging it down the winding roads around Scottish lochs like an ambulance containing a heart attack victim.

Most entrants speed just a little in the quest to finish the race within the allotted 24 hours, but stories abound of cars crashing in the challenge. In a stench of rubber smoke, we roar down the M74.

We reach Scafell Pike in England's Lake District at 4:45 p.m., which is excellent considering our 3:59 p.m. start time. Nick's driving has jumped us from 15th place to eighth. Around us are prehistoric stretches of mauve water surrounded by purplish peaks, scarred with spurs and crevices. The mountain drops sharply at a 90-degree angle into the inky black 260-foot depths of Wastwater Lake. Above, the fish-belly sky begins to turn black as we stagger out of the vehicle, grimacing, trying to warm up deadened muscles.

"This is the shortest one of the lot," offers Stuart. True. But it is also the ►

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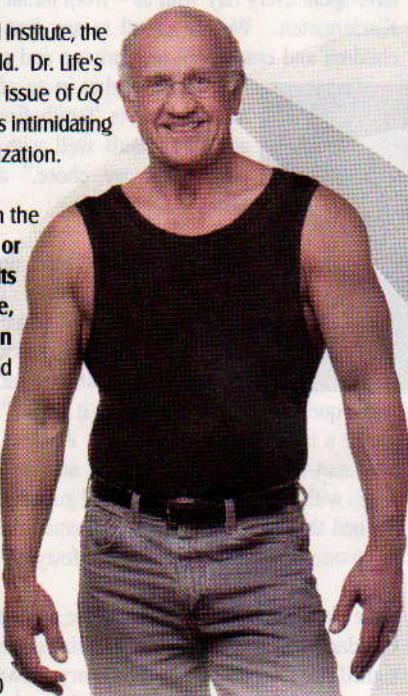
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steepest. The scree-covered slope has a merciless gradient. For every two steps forward we slide back one. Previous groups, stuffing carbohydrates, had dropped banana skins all over the trail.

Nick, for the first time, starts to drop back as we start to pull ahead of other teams—past the Texas Toms, now heaving for air. As the light begins to fade, the race to the summit becomes a battle of attrition. The view at the top is spectacular, but who cares? Breathless and blistered, we give our names to the marshal and abruptly descend. Or, rather, tumble downhill, pulled by gravity.

My brother's left knee begins to give out. He stops only at the insistence of his wife. Nick, desperate to get down the mountain without delay, grabs his rucksack. Painfully, we shuffle back to the car. "I'm knackered," Stuart says as he tears off his hiking boots.

Nick insists on driving again. He charges off, the floor of the car an inch high in power-bar wrappers and energy drink packs, as our heads snap around.

No one says anything for a few miles as we speed toward Wales. I try to break the tension. "Look," I say, "it's not the finishing in 24 hours that's important. It's just finishing." Shock contorts Nick's face. Illuminated by the dashboard light, his knuckles turn white on the steering wheel. "Nice if we could though, eh?" I manage.

As we race through North Wales at midnight, the hum of the tires lulls everyone, bar Nick, to sleep. After another 200 miles and 4½ hours, we reach the foot of Snowdon. "Let's just go to the hotel and forget the last one," Edward feebly jokes. No one laughs. Tired and desperate, we continue.

As we stand at the base, our headlamps throw out pencils of light, shining off coal-black rock. The mountains are forbidding towers above us; the night is eerily still, mist obscuring the moon.

Though glow sticks have been left to mark the trail, it's almost impossible to see where it leads in the dark. Obstacles constantly clutter the path. The only sounds are the crunch of hiking boots on shale and grunts of pain. A mile ahead, headlamps glow faintly on the steep path.

At about 3,000 feet, Edward collapses

on a rock. He has hardly eaten and hasn't drunk any water. "There's no point killing yourself," Stuart says. Alison puts her arm around him. I offer him a Mars bar. He tugs on it, slowly chewing. After a minute or two, he mumbles, "I'm going on."

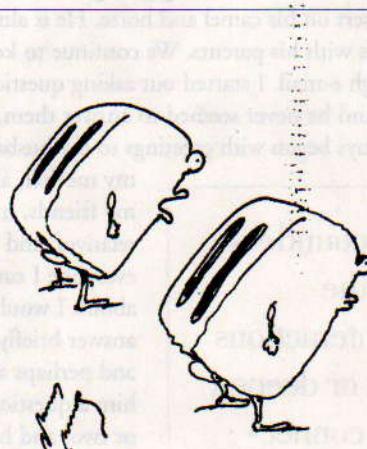
Forget speed—it's about 1:30 in the morning and we have less than three hours to reach the summit. Each lungful of air is cold and damp. About halfway up, a tent sits near a precipitous drop in the darkness. "Team 15!" we shout. A gray-haired man in a woolen hat sticks his head out and blearily does a head count.

"How much farther?" gasps Nick.
"A good hour I would say," he answers.
Nick exhales and grunts.

We stagger on. Team 14, two tired guys in their 20s, draws alongside. It's 2 a.m.—15 hours since we started. We've walked 20 miles up and down boulder-strewn gradients and driven 400 miles.

Nick, the aggressive salesman who wins at any cost, his body cramping with lactic acid, stops and thinks about quitting—maybe for the first time in his life. This is beyond bad. The visibility has withered to 5 feet, obscuring the treacherous path ahead. A gusting 30-mph wind rips at Nick's Gore-Tex jacket. Misted breath jets from his nostrils into the glow of his headlamp in a fast, halting rhythm. There are dark hemispheres under his eyes. "I feel dizzy," he wheezes. "I gotta stop." He slumps into a slimy rivulet and drops his head in his hands.

Jonathan Green is a widely published British adventure writer who writes for The New York Times, Men's Journal, Esquire, GQ, Best Life, and others.



"Honey, I think it's time to tell Junior he was adopted."

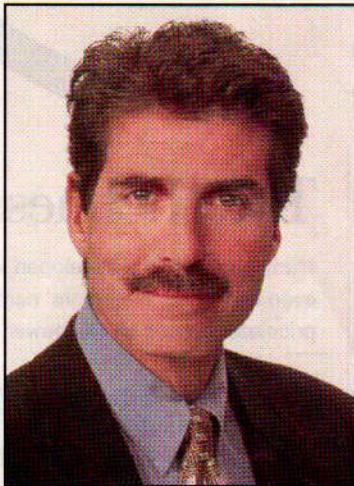
Somehow Alison manages to coax him up, and he staggers forward. Twenty minutes later we reach the summit. We can't see the marshal a few yards ahead, but we can hear him shout on his radio. He's had to weight down his tent with rocks to keep it from blowing away.

There is no elation because we dread the climb down. Alison tells Nick to follow her down. We all want to stop but time is draining away fast. Dawn light begins to steal over the mountain. We make out the scattered buildings in the valley at the start of the trail. Hobbling, we give our names to the marshal.

It's over. Champagne is offered to us, but no one accepts. Our seventh-place team collapses into heaps on the concrete. Eventually we pick ourselves up and find a hotel where we sleep for 24 hours straight.

For Nick, things have never been the same again. His 80-hour work weeks have evaporated. "I have mellowed," he says. "Not completely, mind you. I'm still driven, but I now enjoy my life more." Every opportunity he has to leave the seat of his BMW, he heads for the hills. He has tackled Snowdon twice more and Ben Nevis, too. Every time he goes, he tries to make it up and down a little faster than he did before.

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