

TRAIL BLAZERS

A team of six Black runners climbing mountains in the Scottish Highlands is unusual, unheard of even. Assisted by an all-female team of guides, **Sabrina Pace-Humphreys'** Black Trail Runners group turned heads. They were clearing a path for more to follow...

Words Keri Wallace Photography Inov-8/Black Trail Runners/Johnny Cook, Girls on Hills

There are three big mountain rounds in the UK, which are usually tackled as 24-hour fell running challenges.

These are the Bob Graham Round (England) and the slightly less well-known Paddy Buckley Round (Wales) and Charlie Ramsay Round (Scotland). Each is an ultra-distance challenge of 90-100km with 8000-9000m of ascent. Together, they comprise the so-called 'Big Three'.

The first of these was first completed by Bob Graham, a Lakeland guesthouse owner, in 1932. It was the product of a growing appetite in the fell running community for long distance challenges, including the Lakeland 24-hour challenge (the most summits completed within 24 hours). In this respect, the Bob Graham Round was a natural

progression within fell running at that time. It has since become famous as one of the most well known British ultra-distance challenges and there are now over 2470 sub-24-hour finishers on the official list.

The other two big rounds have less well known pedigrees, which is a shame because they have the power to inspire under-represented demographics within our growing running community. Paddy Buckley devised his round (with input from international runner Chris Brasher) to be a Welsh equivalent to the Bob Graham Round – but it was actually first completed by Wendy Dodds in 1982, in a time of 25 hours 38 minutes. Not many people realise that this round was first completed by a woman (the third complete finisher was also a woman, Sue Walsh in 24h 52mins). The same note of



surprise also surrounds fell runner Charlie Ramsay, who first completed his sub-24-hour Scottish Classic Round in 1978. The fact that Charlie Ramsay is a Black man came as a welcome surprise to Sabrina Pace-Humphreys, Inov-8 ambassador and co-founder of the charity Black Trail Runners (BTR).

"I took up mountain running a few →

Reaching the top of Munro Stob Coire Sgriodain, the first summit on day two of the challenge



Descending steep ground below 'Charlie's Notch' on the final day of the challenge

years ago and, in that time, have been aware – not surprised – but aware of the lack of Black representation I saw and see”, says Sabrina. “So to find out that Charlie is Black was a game-changer for me. But why isn’t this Black man’s accomplishment more widely known? Charlie is an example of the representation that is desperately needed by countless Black trail runners in the UK, wondering where they fit in and seeking a sense of belonging in the trail, ultra and fell running scene.”

Being half-Scottish herself, Sabrina

found a new affinity with the Ramsay Round and reached out to Charlie himself. Charlie is an advocate for inclusivity and was already working with Scottish trail running company Girls on Hills to encourage more women to take on the round, as well as to promote the route to walkers and runners of all abilities, endorsing the round as a multi-day challenge, fast-packing adventure or ‘summit bagging’ tick-list over a longer time period.

“Inclusivity should begin at a grassroots level”, says Charlie. “And

acceptance should not be based on ability, age, gender, background, race, sexual orientation or class.”

When Sabrina got in touch, Charlie was impressed by her excitement and enthusiasm, and offered his support to the Black Trail Runners team in planning their challenge.

“My ultimate aim was to raise the profile of Charlie’s achievement and his round”, says Sabrina. “And do something massive and inspirational in terms of addressing the barriers of access, skills and representation of Black people on UK trails, fells and mountains.”

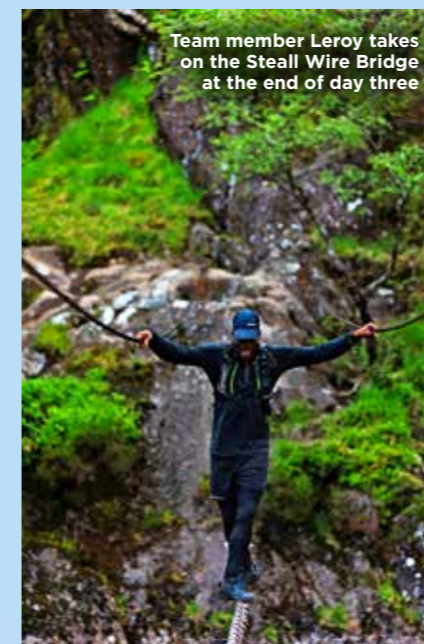
The six runners in the BTR team were from all over the UK and included

‘The fact that Charlie Ramsay is Black was a welcome surprise!’



The BTR group sends out a vital message at the summit of Ben Nevis

BLACK TRAIL RUNNERS’ RAMSAY ROUND



Team member Leroy takes on the Steall Wire Bridge at the end of day three



The group was led by guides from Girls on Hills

Nethlee La Croix, Simbarashe Mugomba, Leroy Valentine, Deo Kato, Mzukisi Tandathu, and Sabrina herself. All team members were new to the Scottish Highlands and represented a wide range of abilities, with some never having tried fell running before.

Therefore, the itinerary had to be designed to suit a variety of runners.

The challenge was sponsored by Inov-8 and the team had received training and nutritional support ahead of the

event. Girls on Hills volunteered to plan the schedule and work

through the logistics. A team of female guides would show the Black Trail Runners the way through the hills and enable them to run in Charlie Ramsay’s footsteps.

The Ramsay Round is a circuit of 93km, over 24 summits and with a total climb of 8800m – which is higher than Everest! The round is by far the most technical of the Big Three and includes Ben Nevis and 23 other Munros (mountains over 3000ft), including the so-called the Mamores, Fersit Hills, Grey Corries and Lochaber 4000ers. The BTR challenge was to climb as many of these as possible, with a view to completing

the round over three long days. Due to the remoteness of the Ramsay Round, it isn’t easy to break the route into three single-day stages without wild-camping or using bothies (maintained shelters that are not permitted for use by large groups). So the decision was taken to leave the mountains each night and return the following day, maximising the runners’ chance for rest and recovery.

The three ‘legs’ of the proposed route were approximately 40km each, and had between 2500m and 3800m of ascent. For those who are familiar with the Lochaber hills, they were:

Leg one Ben Nevis to Fersit – 10 Munros →



Ascending steep terrain between Carn Mor Dearg and Aonach Mor, two of the highest summits on the Ramsay Round.

Descending out of the mist on Ben Nevis to climb the technical Carn Mor Dearg arete



Leg two Fersit to Kinlochleven – five Munros

Leg three Kinlochleven to Glen Nevis – nine Munros

Following a great deal of planning, preparation and training, the runners arrived in Scotland – some of them meeting each other for the first time. What ensued was an epic journey in more ways than one.

The weather forecast was unfavourable on day one of the challenge, so the decision was taken to begin with the shortest leg (leg three), setting out early to beat the storm. Usually runners would start and finish the Ramsay Round at the Youth Hostel in

Glen Nevis but with gale-force winds forecast from midday, the plan was amended to work with the weather, rather than against it.

“This challenge was never about completing a purist’s 24-hour round”, explains Sabrina. “It was more about sharing this journey with other Black trail runners, following in Charlie’s footsteps and showing that ‘representation matters’ in the mountains of the UK.”

Starting out from Kinlochleven, the team worked hard to maintain a fast pace against a deteriorating forecast. Running from east to west along the Mamores ridge, they managed to ascend all of the nine Munros on the schedule,

with the weather only making things difficult for the final summit. The group jelled instantly, working well together, with strong runners holding-back to support the team, less-experienced runners stepping aside to let others succeed and some stepping up to discover energy reserves and mental strength they didn’t know they had.

“Having experienced life-threatening situations on exposed terrain and narrow ridges before, I found the scrambling on An Gearanach ridge (and later on the Carn Mor Dearg arete) pretty intimidating”, says Sabrina. “It took every bit of my ultra-running experience to reason with my terrified inner voice, and a huge amount of focus and

determination to pull through it. We had come here to show that together we could do hard things, and we were doing that for sure!”

“On day one, I managed to run much of the Mamores ridge and climbed four of the Munros with the rest of the team despite never having run on such technical terrain before”, adds Nethliee La Croix. “I achieved more than I ever thought possible on that day. I enjoyed encouraging the other runners and experiencing all the beauty these mountains have to give!”

Fellow BTR runner Leroy Valentine says: “I realised early on that I was capable of completing the Ramsay Round challenge and I was super-excited to be →

‘It took all of my ultra running experience to reason with my terrified inner voice’



YOUR PERSONAL COACH

Blaze your own trail

As the autumn comes along and the seasons start to change, motivations can follow suit as summer events are put behind us and the winter looms ahead. Whether you’ve finished your big summer of trail races, completed a block of autumn marathon training, or just need a boost, the question that often springs to mind is ‘what next?’ However, sometimes all you need is a new challenge to give you a refreshing perspective. This can be something as simple as joining in with a local running group or as daunting as your first multi-day ultra. Blazing your own trail can be exactly what you make of it. My tip: don’t worry about how big or small the challenge may seem to you or others; trying something new can teach you a lot! Liam Dee

The Carn Mor Dearg arete is a grade one scramble with steep drops on both sides. The team worked together to overcome their fears and make it across



Five of the team reach the top of Beinn na Lap, the final Munro of day two

'Nothing feels like this; it was almost an out-of-body experience'

there. But on the day it was important for me to rein in my ambition and help support the others. We were there for a bigger purpose. But I'm definitely coming back to do the whole thing. This is just the beginning for me – and hopefully for others, too."

Day one took a lot out of the runners, so the plan for day two was adjusted to enable everyone to achieve their own goals. The second day would be leg two, starting from Fersit. We began with a steady pace to ease in weary legs and tired minds. Nethliee had opted for the lower-level 'valley section' of leg two, while the rest of the team would try to complete the five Munros on the schedule – but time was tight. The terrain was rough and unrelenting, with little in the

way of trails. The sheer scale of the Ramsay Round was becoming apparent and a group decision was later made to retire early and save legs for the grand finale over Ben Nevis on the final day. Thankfully, the team were able to get off the hill in time to catch a train from Corroir, the UK's highest, most remote train station. So far the team had missed out only two of the summits on the round, so the tally was still looking good!

For the last leg it was important to all team members that they climbed Ben Nevis, the UK's highest summit, together – whatever the pace. They started at 4.30am and took their time, helping each other with layers, with food and with motivation as they gained height in the mist. Visibility was poor and there were

The finish of the Ramsay Round challenge was emotional for all involved

snow patches to cross near the plateau. Reaching the summit on such tired legs felt like an enormous achievement for everyone involved. It was also symbolic and very moving to witness.

"Nothing feels like this; it was almost an out-of-body experience", says Deo Kato. "Standing there with a group of people with the same beliefs and a shared goal that we had all trained on for months felt unreal. I was so happy that I achieved this with the Black Trail Runners family! Now, others like me can believe it's possible for them too!"

From this high point, four of the runners felt able to continue, and descended the tricky boulder field to the infamous Carn Mor Dearg arete (a grade one scramble overlooking the intimidating North Face of Ben Nevis). The weather improved as the team pressed on, adding the highest and most technical of the round's mountains to their list of achievements. But by mid-afternoon it was clear that the only

safe decision was to call an end to the journey. It had been long and emotional, and in many ways far more than anyone had expected.

"Finishing the challenge as a team was so important to us", says Sabrina. "Standing there, arms encircling each other and knowing that we had achieved what we set out to do was the virtual 'medal' we needed. A challenge 12 months in the making, involving so many moving parts, was always going to test me, test us, but we did it.

"There is nothing that we, as a Black community, can't do. But the important word is community. Never had I truly understood the importance of that word until this event. To look around and see yourself reflected in the faces and stories of others, other Black people who have experienced the same as you, is a gift. And to see that in a space where, to that point, you haven't been represented and have felt 'othered', is very special."

As the group hobbled down Glen Nevis

they were reunited with the rest of the team who had come up to meet them at Steall Falls. The finish was filled with heartfelt tears and hugs. Quiet words of understanding, thanks and friendship were shared over the rumbling sounds of the giant waterfall. It took a while for the Black Trail Runners to realise what they had achieved, the scale of their journey in the Highlands.

Simply by turning up and putting themselves out there, these individuals have helped break glass-ceilings for other Black runners, celebrated the achievement of Charlie Ramsay, the Scottish Black man who created this classic mountain round, and ultimately shown that Black runners belong on the trails and in the mountains of the UK.

"We felt it, people saw it, and now, more Black people want it!" says Sabrina. "The work has started, and for the community and future generations, we and our allies need to continue working to keep the wheels turning." **TR**

BTR GOALS

For the Future

Essential steps to making trail running a truly inclusive and diverse sport

Black Trail Runners was created by Sabrina Pace-Humphreys in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, along with fellow co-founders Sonny Peart, Rachel Dench, Marcus Brown, Phil Young (see p60) and Donna Richards. Their aim is to increase the inclusion and participation of Black people in trail running through representation, access and skills.

REPRESENTATION The more Black trail runners who show up on the trails and at races, and who communicate their passion for trail running by sharing images, videos and success stories, the more other Black trail runners will follow and feel welcome. BTR is a supportive community and a safe space for runners to connect and grow, and develop a sense of belonging within the trail running community.

ACCESS Improving the accessibility of trail running to Black people is about making sure that there are no further barriers standing in the way of their participation. BTR aims to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to get involved, regardless of their appearance, background, financial status or ability. Initiatives include BTR Trail Taster Days and other face-to-face community events.

SKILLS is about enabling progression within the sport. Sometimes it's hard to know where to turn for advice and support. BTR wants to equip newcomers with the knowledge and confidence they need to become a part of the trail running community, either with navigation skills, training advice or even race experience.

But what if you're not a Black trail runner? What if you're a white recreational runner, brand manager or race organiser? What can you do to improve diversity in our sport?

The answer is the same: representation matters. Through our actions and our voices we can be allies to this important change, and others will follow. We can listen with empathy to the lived experiences of Black people, and call out those who discredit the validity of their concerns. We can check our own subconscious bias and confront it when we hear it from others. We should look for inclusivity in the brands we use and the events we attend (and give constructive feedback should it be found lacking). We should engage with groups like BTR and be ready to put in the hard work to bring about real change in the sport we love.

If trail running is to become a truly diverse and inclusive sport, then we are all in this together.



The BTR team displayed power, pride and perseverance