

Horseplay 10K: 27th March

I travelled over to Henley on Thames on Saturday afternoon to take part in the inaugural Horseplay 10km run organised by the same people who run the Rat Race events. It was advertised as having a country theme, and was made even more unusual as the race start time was 6pm, and there was a piece of mandatory kit....A head torch.

300 people assembled in a field just before 6pm, on the Hambledon estate (where they filmed the Legend of Sleepy Hollow), and waited for the off. Many had turned up in horse/country wear based fancy dress. Just to really confuse things there were also a group of Beefeaters and some semi naked, kilt wearing smurfs. The organiser did his best to make himself heard above the noise being created by the runners, plenty of horse noises, hunt bugles and banging of coconuts (all very monty python). He was trying to tell us where the route went and wet our appetites for the obstacles we were going to encounter. And with that, a gun went off and the race started.

Within 30 seconds we encountered the first of the obstacles, a rather large tree trunk, laying on its side, with a drop into an expanse of water. Then the penny dropped.... This is a horse trials course! This was going to be interesting!!! After about 10 minutes of running through woods and over an array of wooden obstacles, some with pits before, some with them after, we left the trials course behind and hit the hills.

Over the next 7km, we snaked up and down the side of the Thames river valley, with lengths and steepness of climb being more like the Terminator or Kamikaze rather than races like the hellrunner. They obviously threw in the natural obstacles present by the woods covering most of the hillsides. Very few footpaths were ever used and we spent lots of time climbing over and under tree branches.

I was beginning to think that Ray Mears and a machete would have been more use than the head torch!!!

That was of course until 50 minutes into the race when the sun went down!!! The terrain and the course stayed the same, but the fact that you really couldn't see anything presented a whole new level of complexity. Thankfully I fell into place with a couple of other guys, and we took it in turns to take the lead and weave in and out of the trees, trying to spot the course marking tape tied to the branches. My shins were taking a real battering by now as you couldn't always see the branches on the floor. Ouch!!!

With about 2 km to go, or so a help marshal yelled out of the dark, we hit yet another hill. At the top was a lovely, knee deep, rancid pond of water and mud.

Once crossed, and I had climbed up the bank on the other side, I asked the marshal which way now as it wasn't obvious. He then shone his torch over the side, and said 'slide down there, on your back and keep your head down, there are low branches'. And he was right. I must have slid for a good 40 feet down this bank, ending up in a heap at the bottom against a tree trunk.

The last couple of kilometres proved to be as fun as the first, with loads more obstacles to negotiate, including more water, more wooden fences and a good few ditches to jump across. I finally crossed the line, completely filthy and exhausted in 1.27, which put me a 122 out of 300. Fantastic race, really well organised, will get bigger when the word gets out. Definitely do it next year, but take a tent, as they have free camping and an 'event pub' onsite that's open till midnight :-)