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THE LONG GAME: HUW OLIVER ON THE 2022 GBDURO

✍ GUEST ([HTTPS://BIKEPACKING.COM/AUTHOR/GUEST](https://bikepacking.com/author/guest)) • NOV 7, 2022 • 9

Over the summer, Huw Oliver finished first in the 2022 edition of GBDURO, a 2,000-kilometer self-supported race across Great Britain between Land's End and John o' Groats. Along the way, he found a deeper connection to ultra-racing and his home country while barreling across its diverse landscapes. Find his story and a gorgeous selection of images here...

Words by Huw Oliver (<https://www.instagram.com/topofests/>), photos by Markus Stitz (<https://www.instagram.com/reizkultur/>), Anthony Pease (https://www.instagram.com/anthonypease_photography/), [forthebellofit.cc](https://www.instagram.com/anthonypease_photography/) (<https://www.instagram.com/forthebellofit.cc/>), and Rob Phillips

There was a lot running through my mind in the run-up to GBduro. I've made no secret of the fact that, as far as I'm concerned, the appeal of ultra-racing is all in the mind; I have little time for tactics and eyeing up the competition. Long, fast bike rides are a chance to take a microscope to the inner workings of my head under conditions that feel exhilaratingly, almost illicitly, far removed from the everyday. I felt like I might just have used up every last drop of focus and motivation that I possessed back in May, on a hallucinatory and redemptive ride of the Highland Trail 550. I quite happily lived and breathed every kilometre of that route for months beforehand, but I worried that this mixed-terrain journey between the southern and northern tips of the British mainland demanded energy that I no longer had to give. The route's aesthetic appeal is obvious, and in a way I had entered the race as an incentive to make time to ride it—the journey appealed to me more than the race itself.



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My goal for the ride, as we gathered under a sweltering sun at Land's End, was to stick to a few guiding principles to see me through the 2,000 kilometres and 11 days of racing that GBduro's stage format dictates. Firstly, fun is fast, so that should always be the priority. Secondly, such a pedally route didn't play to my strengths, so I figured I would sit back and let the fast folks go, relying on an ability to self-manage and accurately pace an effort to see how I could match up in the long run. Lastly, it was the idea of riding through an entire landscape that had brought me here in the first place, so I would try to always keep a part of me separate to be present and grateful for the places we were going to travel through.

Buckle up, it's a long ride.

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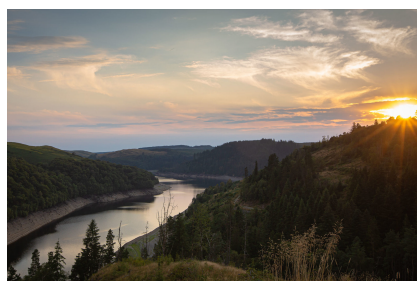
WINTER
WE'RE HERE FOR IT

SHOP STUDDED TIRES
45NORTH

The advertisement is a horizontal banner. On the left, there is an orange box containing white text: 'WINTER WE'RE HERE FOR IT', 'SHOP STUDDED TIRES', and '45NORTH'. To the right of the box, there are three images: a close-up of three black studded tires, two cyclists riding on a snowy path, and a small graphic of three blue figures on skis.

STAGE 1: LAND'S END TO YSBYTY CYNFYN

Heat is the big danger. Temperatures are forecast to hit 35 degrees Celsius (95°F), which is far above what any of us Brits are used to, but I've experienced similar heat before in the Arizona Trail race, and I remember how debilitating it was. The only solution is to reduce your effort and find ways to stay cool, so I entertain myself on the interminably hilly lanes of Cornwall by stopping to lie down in every river, stream, and pond that I can find along the way, noting the instant boost to my alertness that every dunk provides. I wish I'd packed more water capacity than my two bottles, and it becomes a day of scouting for taps, hoses, and cafés among the leafy lanes and old mines.



4/22



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Settling in over the first 200 kilometres, I find myself never far away from Molly Weaver, an ex-pro road racer who clearly knows what's what when it comes to riding sensibly. We resupply in the early evening just as the heat begins to ease, and I feel the familiar excitement to push on into the dark. The night brings a slew of place names I've heard of before but that I experience as the unwavering, cool light of an LED beam: Exmoor, the Quantocks, and the Mendips pass as interesting landmarks in a mostly lonely night. I stop for an hour, lying down fully clothed in the grass of the Mendips before pressing on to Bristol for breakfast and enjoy the novelty of sleeping out in Britain with no need for shelter, something I've never done before.

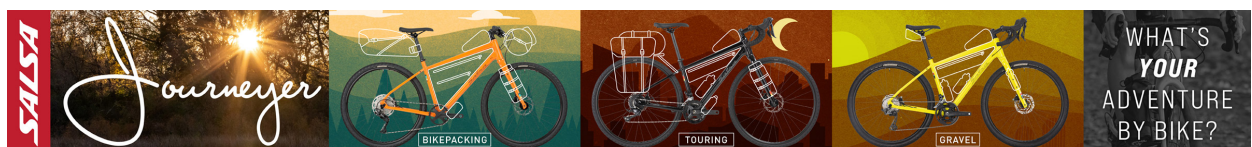
Everyone who I speak to agrees that the relentless small climbs, with few major landmarks to mentally tick off, made this stage one of mental attrition. Through the second day, I see Molly again, as well as Sam T. and Christophe the Belgian for brief snaps of conversation, all happily munching their way through the all-you-can-eat buffet of sharp climbs and leafy lane, with palate cleansers of rough trail through the Brecon Beacons. I hear other riders talking about how horrific "The Gap" is, but the rough mountain pass is one of my favourite sections of stage one, since a mind that is focused is unlikely to be caught drifting off to sleep.



(<https://bikepacking.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2022-gbduro-11.jpg>)

Night comes round again, and the 36 hours of riding start to take their toll. It's amazing how, once the mind decides that I'm going to keep riding unless sleep stops me, the body falls into line, going two and three times beyond what would be an "epic" ride on a normal day. After a gratuitously hilly final 30 kilometres, I barrel down a grassy descent toward Daf's Farm, where I find the impossibly idyllic setting of checkpoint 1 among a grove of trees beside a stream, all warm lighting and enticing smells of real food. Some of that feeling might be from the fatigue, but Daf's warm welcome is all his own work, offering up a cup of tea and a big plate of chili within seconds — he's a man after my own heart. I expect to see about four riders here ahead of me, but instead there's only Alex from Innsbruck, who has been at the front of the pack all the way and looks for all the world like he's pedalled here from just down the road.

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STAGE 2: YSBYTY CYNFYN TO GARRIGILL

The downtime passes far too quickly. Seventy-two hours after we set off from Cornwall, the remaining riders start all over again, at least those who are finished packing. Predictably given its difficulty, there have been a few scratches on stage 1, mostly due to the heat. The weather is cooler, and an early stretch of “gravel” (the bouncy UK type, not the smooth American type) splits us up early. I ride with Christophe and Alex through the morning, enjoying the longer climbs and quieter hills. A little while after Machynlleth, Alex’s derailleur cage spontaneously combusts, and we leave him with a plan to return to Atherton Bikes HQ in town to try and source a new one. Our trio becomes a duo, and a few hours later, Christophe stops for a quick resupply outside of LLangollen. I don’t realise it at the time, but I’ll be on my own for the next 430 kilometres.

Luckily, my head has found that space in which time and distance don’t matter much. The unfamiliar hills of north Wales give way to the border, then to the red brick mansions of Chester and the canal that will lead me all the way to the centre of Manchester. The sense of riding through our entire country is very tangible in the low evening sun. Manchester is bewildering: the route does a fantastic job of plonking me in the city centre, feeling like a fish out of water among the pub-goers at closing time. To make it stranger, a pair of guys see me, stop and shout in German accents, “Fuck yeah, GBDURO!”



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The North welcomes me with wind and rain as I leave Manchester, picking up the Pennine Bridleway and its maze of grassy singletrack, gates, and bewildered sheep in the darkness. A wind turbine looms out of the fog at one point, but at night everything seems like more of an adventure. At one point, I see a pair of lights perhaps five kilometres behind me across the moors, and know that I'm not alone. Towards dawn, I'm low on food, morale, and alertness. I had wondered if I could ride this stage straight through, but the sun doesn't bring its usual mental boost, so rather than fight it, I lie down under a hedge for half an hour.

After failing to find anything open in Horton, the 40 kilometres to Kirkby Stephen are an uninviting prospect on an empty stomach. Self-pity doesn't get things done though, and this section of high moors and sunlit singletrack makes up for the growing fatigue behind my eyes and in my legs. At Kirkby, I decide that time is not of the essence and sit down for a milkshake, a coffee, and a hot meal at a café in the square. Caffeine and melted cheese push me on my way up the alpine climb of Great Dun Fell before peeling off into upper Teesdale, where the vague trail disappears into the expanse of moorland. It's another hated section according to other riders, but this sort of thing is the bread and butter of riding in the Highlands, so I enjoy trying my best to find a rideable line across bogs and along sheep ruts.



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Garrigill is a welcome sight when I arrive at around 3 p.m. The checkpoint, run by volunteers in the village hall, is an ultra-racer's idea of Valhalla but with more tea and tray-bakes. Chris and Jilly come out to meet me in the square before gently guiding me towards a seat, a hot meal, and a chance to stop moving. As accomplished riders themselves, they know exactly what mind and body want, and over the next day and a half, they and the other volunteers go above and beyond for every single bedraggled rider that arrives, staying up late to make sure no one arrives without a welcome.

Special mention goes to Steve Wikeley, who got locked in a toilet overnight and generally acted as a lightning rod for assorted calamities, taking it all in his stride with a smile and a livestream. Our group was becoming tighter-knit even as it diminished,

with the tough terrain of the Pennines having claimed more riders to the scratch list. Christophe rolls in not long after me, at almost the same time as Sam T., who is proving to be well-prepared, focused, and brutally consistent with his riding. Molly Weaver is an unfortunate scratch due to Covid, of all things, while Alex's struggles to find a replacement derailleur saw him arrive the next afternoon, delayed but not deflated.

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STAGE 3: GARRIGILL TO FORT AUGUSTUS

This is where it gets interesting, I think, as we pass within 10 miles or so of where I grew up and riders are swallowed by the silent, spruce-covered hills of Kielder Forest. Everyone knows the riding gets better the further north you go (don't they?), and this stage will take us from the Pennines, to the Borders, through the Lowlands of Scotland, and into the Highlands as far north as the Great Glen, all in one ride. There's something magical about all that ground covered by legs, willpower, and egg sandwiches alone. I'd assumed that by this point I would be feeling rotten: a bag of worn-out muscles and aching tendons protesting northwards, but I feel fantastic considering we've already ridden 1,100 kilometres and covered around 20,000 metres of climbing in six days. Everyone else I see that morning seems to be feeling the same.

The day is lonely but not unpleasant, punctuated by occasional showers and empty spaces. Forestry plantations are interspersed with tiny lanes in places I've never been before, despite thinking I know the Borders quite well. From the Bloody Bush Road, which gives the first view across the border to Scotland (home), to the wind farm track that provides a first glimpse of the Forth Bridges and the distant Highlands beyond, there's a tangible sense of covering ground. "Ground" isn't the right word, though:

we're covering landscapes. It's less than a week since we started, and already I'm staring down the rampart of the Highlands that looms behind the flatland of the M8 corridor. I give my bike a wee pat. Well done.



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At Biggar, a downpour dampens the mood a little, and immediately after the temperature plummets. I shiver my way through a full refuel outside Sainsbury's in Larbert at 11 p.m., while snippets of everyday conversation I overhear are comforting in a way. My friend Ian makes a surprise appearance near Stirling for a couple of miles, and his chalk messages on the climb towards Callander make the warm glow last a little longer on a cold night.

Nightfall coincides with entering the Highlands. I meet Bryn near Killin, who stealthily slid past me while I was buying food, and we dodge deer and badgers on the hydro road to Glen Lyon. I'm impressed: Bryn is only 20, but he's dived headlong into his first ultra, and after a rough first stage due to the heat, he's riding with a far cannier head than his age would suggest. His background is in road racing for the Welsh junior squad, but he's clearly enjoying the whole immersive experience. It's getting late, or

early, depending on how you look at it. When we spot a deep drift of beech leaves beside a low stone wall, the decision to stop for 30 minutes is easy. It surprises me every time, the way that an hour or less of sleep can see you through another day.



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Unfortunately, that day dawned wet and wild. I lose Bryn early in fog on the Thieves Pass towards Rannoch. The final 100 kilometres is very familiar – I ride it regularly from my front door – but today it's throwing wind and rain in heavy curtains that chase me up and over the Corrieyairack Pass, the route's highest point. The undulating

descent contains a lot of climbing, with a few more climbs after Fort Augustus to trick the weary who think it's all downhill. I'm beyond tired when I arrive at the checkpoint, and Bryn arrives around an hour and a half later.



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After the 20 or so remaining riders had arrived, it turned out that the drama wasn't quite finished for this stage. The event rules state that any items dropped will incur a "hefty time penalty," but so far this hadn't featured. On the final evening at the checkpoint, riders were summoned to sit around the campfire, and things took a turn for the surreal. First came a terse reminder of the Leave No Trace principles, and a verdict that collectively we weren't doing well enough in this respect. We were then invited to confess to any items we'd dropped between Land's End and Fort Augustus.



(<https://bikepacking.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2022-gbduro-20.jpg>)

Riders pointed out that some of the items dropped — lights, bottles, essential snacks and bolts from a broken rack — were clearly unintentional and potentially costly anyway. A three-hour time penalty per item dropped was introduced. A debate about the usefulness of punishing riders in this way went back and forth for a while, until increasing numbers of us felt the need to say that we felt very uncomfortable. The organiser's ad-libbed proposal to award a three-hour bonus per item of litter picked up was vetoed on the grounds of being bonkers.

I don't enjoy criticising the race organisers, since the event as a whole is a fantastically unique format that genuinely enriches the ultra-racing community, but the evening was far beyond anything I've ever experienced at an organised event, and to gloss over it would be dishonest. This isn't an opinion on the rules themselves, since they're at the organiser's discretion, but the ad hoc way that they were applied and the tone that went with them felt out of kilter. GBDURO makes no secret of having a strong sense of environmental responsibility, but the way in which it was presented at that moment benefitted no one.

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STAGE 4: FORT AUGUSTUS TO JOHN O' GROATS

Stage four gets off to a more subdued start than the previous three. The night before certainly raised questions about ethics and responsibilities, but the timing and the tone seem to have shattered the mood. For the first time, people talk about looking forward to getting finished and getting home, and I begin to feel the same way. There's noticeably relaxed pace on the way to Contin, whether due to tired legs or heavy spirits I'm not sure. I stop to take some photos, and later stop again to re-tension a slightly saggy rear wheel. My erratic pace gives me the chance to flit about through the front group and chat to riders that I've only seen at checkpoints before now. The morning feels sociable, and I begin to look forward to this final 400 kilometres and its remote glens.

The party atmosphere is still going at Contin, where we all take the time to properly fuel up before the mostly barren final 300 kilometres. All except Charles, who smiles and waves as he breezes by. I figure he must either have a solid supply of food, or he's in for a bad time.



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By Croick Church, I've caught up with Bryn and Charles again, who are at the head of the race. It feels odd to talk about it as a race at this point. Everyone seems so settled in themselves, and so immersed in the journey, that I forget we're meant to be racing each other. I decide I don't want this stage to be as lonely as the last two, and our trio makes its way up and over to Oykel Bridge before going into the far north under cover of night.

Somewhere along the way, the unspoken agreement is that we're here for the night shift, and sleep can wait until John o' Groats. The earlier off-road sections were engaging enough to keep sleep at bay, but the final 160 kilometres are almost entirely on the narrow, barely-a-road-at-all lanes that twist across the faintly undulating country up here, and they're sending us all to sleep! For the rest of the night, we enter a tortured state of watching kilometres drip by, unsure of how we can keep this up until daylight. You'd think that some nice flat roads would be an easy way to finish, but it's an excruciating agony all of our own making. We could just stop and grab a nap, but something about riding through the night pulls us on.



(<https://bikepacking.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2022-gbduro-29.jpg>)

(<https://bikepacking.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2022-gbduro-30.jpg>)

Dawn breaks before we do, with just a few kilometres to go. A thick mist from the Pentland Firth stops us from escaping the muzzy purgatory we've been in since midnight. The sign — the cousin of a similar one at Land's End that gives distances to spots around the globe — lurches out of the fog and we... stop. At last. It's six in the morning, and the only people here who know enough about what we're doing to care are about to fall over for want of sleep. So, in fine British tradition, we say something about how it wasn't too bad at all, and go looking for a cup of tea and a bed at the hotel.

Every race is the same from this point on: the first, dreamless sleep, followed by alternating rounds of food, naps, and story-gathering as other riders arrive. With a café just 20 metres away, it was easy to make sure that everyone had someone to welcome them in. Every race is different, though, and I think the beauty of GBDURO's stage format is the opportunities for spending time with people you might not see otherwise. We regrouped three times during the race, and each time was a chance to make friends and see the same route from someone else's perspective. I enjoyed that aspect just as much as the privilege of riding the entire length of our country (and climbing every hill along the way it felt like) by bike. More so than any event I've done before, GBDURO was about the people just as much as the places, and that includes the incredible checkpoint volunteers, as well as the fiendish level of organisation that must go into the whole thing. The ultra-racing world is a small one, but it's a bloody lovely one to be part of.



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