

1. [Athletes](#)
2. [Samuel Thompson](#)
3. **GBDURO22 Stage Four.**

28  
10



[Samuel Thompson](#)

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## GBDURO22 Stage Four.

I am conscious that I barely touched upon the race situation in my other stage reviews. This is not due to a lack of interest in this aspect - a major draw to me for entering such events is to have the opportunity to pitch myself competitively against others and I am motivated by attaining successful results. However, my posts have been concentrated on my experiences on the bike and in that sense the influence of others generally only applies when there are in sight. My racing strategy is to get from A to B in the fastest time possible for me, which invariably involves riding at my sustainable pace and keeping stopped time to a minimum. The actions of others should not influence this and for that reason I do not check the tracker when racing. Incidentally, my phone generally stays on airplane mode in my pocket, unless required, to save power and minimise distractions. If I am aiming to push all my controllables to the limit, I should have no margin to react to others. When encountering fellow riders on the road, I enjoy having the opportunity to exchange pleasantries and possibly ride alongside for a while if we find we are naturally holding the same speed. However, if they then race up a hill (Pim!) I will not over-exert myself

just to maintain contact. The decisive time differences are often forged at night, or when the going gets tough.

It was a shame that three of the riders initially at the 'pointy end' of the race had to scratch early, as the gaps between the top 5 after the first stage were relatively close, promising an interesting tussle as the race developed. I thus found myself in a comfortable second place going in to the final stage, with the time gaps in either direction so significant that only a major mechanical (or astronomical bonk) could change the order. Bryn, lying in third place, had put in a storming ride on Stage 3 but remained 12 hours in arrears and Huw was a class apart, fully meriting his 6 hour lead. I suspect that the majority, if not all, of the lead Huw held over me was forged through his vastly superior off-road abilities. He was able to ride numerous sections far beyond my skillset and I was only vaguely in contact through sleeping (& possibly stopping in general) less and perhaps climbing slightly faster on the roads.

I had joked at CP3 that Stage 4 was essentially our equivalent to the roll-in to the Champs Elysees on the Tour de France. It certainly would have been welcome to cruise through a straightforward final stage and on paper it was the shortest stage with the least elevation gain. Nevertheless, I was fully aware that 386km remains a hell of a long way on a bicycle, especially with 50% being off-road and considering the state of the bodies and bicycles remaining. Everybody, (except for Huw seemingly!) was by this point complaining of some form of mechanical issue or physical gripe. I was pleasantly surprisingly holding up physically very well - the rest days had been used productively and all the contact points which usually show wear by this point were not causing me any overly disconcerting issues. I had even managed to clean and tinker enough with my drivetrain to make the shifting relatively reliable. Mostly importantly, particularly considering the profile of the first 30km of the stage, my easiest gear had returned to action.

This big cog (still not big enough in hindsight) would be needed from the off as we were immediately faced with tackling three significant off-road climbs. The first, straight out of the CP3 campsite, was hike-a-bike territory for everyone as we trudged our bikes vertically up the hillside for what must have been half an hour. If anything, this felt harder, and certainly more

trying, than riding for an equivalent effort. The second was a beauty up a nicely graded and smooth old military road. The descent revealed views across the valley to the snaking climb the other side. This was consistently steeper and comprised loose, coarse gravel in places, making retaining traction a challenge. I dug in and was pleased with how much I was able to ride, when others around had to push short sections. Maybe my off-road riding skills had improved after 1,600km of practice! Those of us in the leading 'group' were often in close proximity and the mechanical issues persisted. Huw had stopped to check a wobbly rear wheel and then George came to a halt on a descent with another puncture. Fortunately, both were back moving soon. I briefly entertained the thought of what would happen if Huw was not able to continue. As I have previously mentioned though, this would have been a hugely unsatisfactory way to overtake a fellow rider and I was genuinely pleased to see Huw on the move again soon after.

Through the next valley we were back on the road for a 10 mile cruise gently downhill where I could stretch out contentedly in the aerobars. Flapjack number one (of many, naturally) was knocked back in anticipation of the next off-road section up and over a bumpy trail which stayed on the top of the moor for an extended period. A group of five were together for a while but I took things steady on the faster rolling sections and tried (with mixed results) not to get soaking feet at this stage traversing the various bogs and streams dissecting the trail. The strung-out descent eventually led to Contin and the famous Contin Stores – described on Komoot as 'an oasis for passing bikepackers, cyclists and hikers in a very remote area'. One of the major challenges of this stage was the lack of commercial resupply options. I believe that even on a self-supported event following a fixed route, it is crucial to research the route in advance and precisely know the location and operating hours of resupply points. I am therefore reluctant to discuss this element in detail with others before/during the event as the time and effort I put in researching can give me a competitive advantage. In this case, it was an open secret that Contin presented the final guaranteed opportunity to fill bags, pockets and, in Bryn's case, the inside of jerseys for the remaining 295km. I suspect that the store must have done a brisk trade that day! Since entering Scotland, macaroni pies had become the endurance food of choice for almost all riders and I'd be surprised if there were any left in Contin once the field had passed though. I filled a basket with these delicacies, plus a pizza slice, tatty scones, two doubleshot

espresso cans for the night and a replenishment of my already bulging flapjack/bar supply. Plus, the obligatory can of Irn Bru. I ensured not to rush this stop – I didn't want to find myself running out of food in the wild north of Scotland.

Continuing on from Contin presented more trails of various bumpiness for long stretches, now offering up the sensation that I was really entering the wilds. The landscape was expansive as I traversed glens and past crofts seemingly in the middle of nowhere with tracks of 10 miles leading to the next paved road. The group was now stringing out, but there was a kind of end-of-term feeling with everyone happy to take time for an extended chat when passing others. I was feeling relaxed and content as the afternoon passed, the terrain and benign weather conditions much less stressful than previous stages. Weather-wise it was the sort of day that required little change of clothing throughout - mild with light clouds so never too hot, cold and no likely prospect of rain.

At around the stage's halfway point the Achness Hotel bar at Rosehall represented the very last chance to fill up on tap-sourced water. I stepped inside (and seemingly back in time a few decades in this remote spot) and purchased an Irn Bru, primarily to justify my request for a bidon top-up. A few others rolled in with the same idea as I fettled with my bike outside. I could carry around 2.5 litres of water which would be enough for the remaining 210km, especially as it was now nearly 8pm and the cooler conditions of night approached. I was intent on continuing straight through without sleeping, as always, would listen to my body if I felt I needed a nap and that it would be dangerous to continue.

Up next came what would be the final steep climb on the road, followed by a magnificent swooping descent around a loch in the fading light. As I came to re-join the main road I could sense my feet becoming uncomfortably cold as a result of the various bog/river crossings earlier in the day. I took five very itchy and arm-flappy minutes to change socks whilst being assaulted by midges. There were a couple of stretches earlier alongside rivers where it felt like riding through a cloud of the mites and I even considered for a moment putting my head net on. I really can't understand how people can put up being outdoors in these locations when the midges are out. One man I passed out fishing in the calm evening resembled



someone in a hazmat suit with the amount of midge-shielding clothing he was wearing. Socks duly changed and I was joined by Simon (bonjour!) as we hit the penultimate gravel section. We discussed French and British food, Simon notably commenting on how us Brits always put things in pies! He had nonetheless immersed himself in the full Scottish experience by fuelling on more than one of the macaroni-filled delights. Simon paused as we exited the penultimate gravel section for his customary sleep at around midnight and my tyres reconnected with a paved surface as the route turned east for the final 150km. I recall remarking how dark the night appeared in this sparsely populated location. With almost no light pollution, and clouds shielding the sparkle of stars, the sky was a rather unnervingly pure black. It almost was dizzying looking around, with no landmarks visible to offer a sense of balance or perspective. A slight drizzle and minor drop in temperature led to me donning my jacket, but conditions remained tolerable throughout the night.

Around this moment I noted that my shifting, which was until then behaving so well, had gone somewhat awry. I couldn't access my 3 to 4 hardest gears or, again, my easiest. I had a couple of attempts at tweaking the barrel adjuster but this didn't yield any improvements. Then, as I followed the lochside road just past Altnahara at 12:50am, I felt the shifter release tension as I went to change gears and sensed immediately what had happened. Twang! The gear cable had snapped, flopping my chain into the smallest cog (hardest gear). I let out some form of expletive and flicked on my head torch to assess the situation. Replacing or fixing a gear cable is beyond my current mechanic abilities, let alone with internal routing and no spare cable to hand. This wasn't the first time this has happened to me, but the first in these circumstances. I was still 130km from John o' Groats but there wasn't much debating in my mind - even if it took hours longer, I was going to keep pedalling this bicycle until I got there. The idea of getting this far and not finishing was but a fleeting, albeit gut-wrenching, thought in my mind. The only way to make life easier for myself was to adjust the H screw on the derailleur, thereby pushing the chain to engage with an easier gear. I checked my phone to make sure I was turning the correct bolt and was somewhat surprised to note that here, in the back of beyond, the 4G service was at full strength. My resulting roadside hack gave me a gear ratio of 40-21. I was mostly concerned about being able to overcome any hills ahead so went for the easiest ratio possible, but this meant spinning out at

around 22kph when maintaining a natural cadence. It took 100rpm plus to reach 25kph which was not comfortable or sustainable at this point in the ride.

I must have only been paused for less than 5 minutes, determined to keep forward progress however possible. As I proceeded on my solitary gear the terrain remained appreciatively gently rolling for what seemed a long period of time. Cruising at around 20-22kph, I came to appreciate that I wasn't moving all that much slower than I would have been with the luxury of a full range of gears. Pushing on the pedals up the inclines meant I may even have ascended faster than if I had the option of spinning an easier gear. I optimistically deemed that the situation wasn't all that bad - checking my route profile there were only two climbs of note remaining which I was prepared to walk if absolutely necessary. The adrenaline imparted from this conundrum also banished any lingering sleepiness as I was having to concentrate on adjusting my pedal stroke for every change in gradient. In a way, I was relishing the challenge.

The first of the climbs, on road, came about relatively soon. Around 4km at an average gradient of 4%, which was thankfully gentler than my profile suggested. This required a bit of high torque heaving at a low cadence, with regular rises out of the saddle to lean in to the pedal strokes, but the climb was soon surmounted with relative ease. I also had in mind the people I know who willingly choose to ride fixed gear bikes, remembering (or trying to convince myself) that the sort of ratio I was on is similar to that they use to cover even greater distances. Someone even recently completed the Transcontinental Race on a fixed gear bicycle so why should I complain about hacking out a mere 130km?!

The next obstacle was the final gravel section, and chiefly the opening climb which revealed itself to be a similar gradient and distance to the previous on the road. I gave myself a pep talk, determined not to walk unless my legs ground to a halt. Thankfully, the surface was largely smooth with good traction so I was able to summit this climb with only one short section of really grinding to keep moving. I let out a bit of a whoop to celebrate but was not getting carried away as shortly after I came to a standstill on a short, sharp pitch and was forced to walk a brief 20 metres until the gradient eased and I could remount.

The gravel persisted for more than 30km and I got used to the rhythm of churning out the uphill and cruising as much as possible when the downhill took me beyond my pedalling capacity. I could also note the sky beginning to take on a blue-ish hue, signalling the imminent arrival of the final morning of this ride. That first note of daylight often signals a shift in my attitude and alertness. Perhaps it's linked to circadian rhythm, or just the optimism a new day and new light brings. As the illumination reached a point where my headlamp was no longer required, I re-joined tarmac for the final 50km and was once again made fully aware of my surroundings. Since leaving the beautiful backdrop of glens, lochs and mountains at sunset I had blindingly transitioned to a rather more prosaic landscape - bleak, flat and dull. A real end-of-the-world feeling with little in the way of interest to the eye, not helped by a grim, grey atmosphere. Nevertheless, I sensed I didn't have far to go and settled in to my then familiar rhythm of churning up the gradients and spinning wildly on the downhill, adopting a tuck position at anything above 30kph whilst waiting for my speed to relent to a point where it was worth the effort to pedal. I still had plenty of food and water left, treating myself to a Kit-Kat Chunky Peanut Butter for breakfast. As one does in such circumstances.

It didn't take long for the North Sea to come in to view and on joining the main north coast road I checked the distance remaining for the first time. John o' Groats was 3km away. The realisation of the end flooded me, but I never know what to expect, or how to feel, when finishing these events. I hadn't seen any other rider since parting from Simon hours earlier so didn't know if anyone else had arrived yet but suspected that Huw, Bryn and Charles were still ahead unless they had taken a lengthy nap. It would have been nice to have arrived first for the concluding stage but in the event, just finishing felt enough of an achievement. I cruised down the ramp to the famed pole at John o' Groats at around 7:15am and was greeted by...nothing or nobody. Uploading my photo to Instagram confirmed that the aforementioned trio had arrived around 90 minutes previously. A couple of minutes later, after milling around like a lemon at this rather underwhelming spot, I was approached by a chap who introduced himself as Mike, Emily's husband. While I tried to work out where the others were and if I could get to the hotel to sleep and shower, Mike made me a top-notch coffee from his van and one of the organisers, Ed, rocked up. He

informed me that the other three were taking a nap at the hotel and I too could check in there and then. I initially regretted drinking that coffee but I soon learned that it would have required industrial quantities of caffeine to prevent me from sleeping at that moment when offered a bed after ten days of sleeping in a tent (or not sleeping at all)! During this time, as I was recounting to Mike my 'heroic' tale of the broken gear cable he offered to help me replace it. When I insisted on paying him for his time and effort he was having none of it. The generosity of the people I meet doing these events never ceases to amaze. This is one of the main things I will take from the event - beyond any racing or competitive aspect, the comradeship and mutual support is heart-warming. I felt positively subsumed within the race bubble, removed from everyday worries and inconveniences. There is something so wonderfully simple about only having to concern yourself with riding a bicycle as continuously as possible and using any time not pedalling to best facilitate this. Extracting myself to the real world took a good few days.

My next post will contain my considered reflections of the event but essentially, I am delighted with how it went from both a sporting and enjoyment side. It was tough, ridiculously so in places when trudging through some godforsaken sodden field at three in the morning in the Yorkshire Dales, wondering how long it was going to take me to get to the next gate up that impossibly steep hill, let alone reach the northernmost tip of the country. I've learnt a lot about my strengths and weaknesses in such a challenge and will take great confidence to my next endeavours.

The Numbers:

Distance: 384.38km / 238.84mi

Speed\*: 11.4mph / 18.3kph

Elevation: 4,629m / 15,187ft

Power\*: 128w (172w WAP)

Avg Heart Rate: 98bpm (142bpm max)

Elapsed Time: 23:19:10

Moving Time\*: 20:53:07

Calories: 10,729

TSS: 613

Sleep Time: nah

Leftover Macaroni Pies: 0

\*note speed, power and moving time all distorted by auto-pause and hike-a-bike sections.

Links:

<https://www.strava.com/activities/7684677523>

<https://dotwatcher.cc/race/gbduro-2022>

<https://www.theracingcollective.com/gbduro.html>





Felicitations Simon!(Photo @topofests)





Who needs gears?





Nice walk to start the stage (Photo @topofests)





And the walking continued... (Photo @topofests)





(Photo @topofests)







(Photo @gutsibikes)



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