

A Survivor's Guide to Hundreds and Other Long Walks

Ken Falconer - from December 2002 Strider, updated 2016 & 2025.

As a veteran of some 37 Hundreds, I am often asked for advice on preparation and approach to walking long events, so here are a few ideas. I would be the first to admit that my own approach is not particularly conventional, but then, walking a Hundred is a very personal thing – other walkers may have different suggestions!

Beforehand

Training

The only real training for walking is walking. If you do 20-30 mile walks regularly during the year along with the odd 50, then you probably don't need anything special to prepare for a Hundred. However, I do recommend half an hour or so brisk walking each day – this makes an enormous difference to your general level of fitness and readiness to tackle longer walks. Don't forget to include a few hills – you use different muscles for steep ascents and descents.

Route familiarity

When the route is released, spend time studying the map to get a 'feel' for the route. Where are the climbs? Where can you look forward to 'easy' sections where you can stride out? Where is route finding going to require particular care? Many Hundred entrants pre-walk the route or parts of it, particularly the night section. If you do so, don't forget that the route will look very different at night and paths that are obvious in the daytime, particularly across grass, can become almost invisible by torchlight. Identify landmarks that are easily recognisable at any time. Recceing the route over 5-7 days 2-3 weeks before the 100 not only builds up endurance (training), but also allows entrants to visit places of interest, read information boards and to learn the route inspiring confidence and knowing what to expect. And it makes a great holiday!

Clothing and Equipment

The equipment listed on the event rules is the minimum any sensible walker would take on an overnight cross-country walk, so don't be tempted to skimp, for safety's sake, as well as to avoid disqualification.

Clothing

What you wear should be comfortable. A final decision can be left to the day, depending on the conditions and weather forecast, but carry enough for all conditions that might occur: weather can change rapidly and a hot day can be followed by a freezing night. Layering is the key.

Footwear

Crucial, of course. Use footwear in which you have confidence – it should be a comfortable fit with room to move the toes. Anything that feels even slightly tight when put on is too small –

feet expand during a long walk.

Trainers or boots? I've used both. Boots keep the feet drier and thus reduce the chances of blisters or trench foot. With boots, a twisted ankle will be less likely, balance over rough ground is easier, you can stride across bog with confidence and the stony tracks after 80 miles may feel less painful! Trainers are lighter and will tire the legs less, and, if you intend jogging very much are the only option, though you'll get wet feet, at the very least from long grass at dawn and from the almost inevitable stretches of boggy ground. Whatever you choose should have been well-worn in on a long walk or two, but not so old that the soles are thin or heels worn down. A new pair of insoles adds a lot to comfort – Sorbothane or gel insoles can reduce the impact on the body at each step, but are expensive.

Choose your socks carefully – I generally wear two pairs. New wool socks have a pile that provides extra cushioning; outdoor shops sell seamless socks and socks with extra heel padding, reducing the chance of blisters and sore spots. Avoid nylon socks – they don't absorb sweat and make blisters more likely. Waterproof breathable socks have recently been introduced and are an (expensive!) option. A change into dry socks half-way round feels like heaven.

Poles

Walking poles reduce stress on joints, especially on the knees when going downhill, and help to maintain balance and stability, particularly on rough ground and stream crossings.

Disadvantages include that they add to the weight carried and make the use of hands rather more awkward, especially when looking at a route description or opening and closing gates or eating on the hoof. Quite a few walkers use poles on Hundreds, but a compromise is to send a pair to the breakfast checkpoint so they are available for the latter part of the walk when they may be of most benefit. Marching rhythmically with poles aids posture and pace.

Rucksack

A smallish (25-30 litre) rucksack should suit most walkers – make sure that everything (maps, spare clothing etc) is compartmentalised in sealed plastic bags or dry bags with a waterproof rucksack liner. Pack your rucksack carefully, with things most likely to be needed most accessible. It will save time (particularly in the dark) if you know where things are packed. Make sure soft items are against your back. Back chafing is common on 100s. Use Sudocrem, taping or an extra underlayer for prevention.

Route description

Make sure that your route description is in a form that you find easy to read – you will need to be able to read it with a torch and maybe in wind or rain. Electronic versions of the route description are now provided so you can format them with a font style and size that you find easy to read. Where possible, arrange page turns to occur at checkpoints, so they can be discarded along the way. I always carry a spare route description in my rucksack in case rain reduces the working one to papier mâché! I like a (waterproof!) map case, so I can keep my hands free, with the route description showing on one side and the map on the other. Or

waterproof the pages in sealed plastic pockets/bags. Some entrants laminate the pages. Alternatively, you can put the route description onto a phone or other device, but make sure that you have batteries that will last for the whole event.

Maps and GPX files

Rules require walkers to carry mapping covering at least a mile either side of the entire route at a scale of 1:25,000. Many walkers use standard OS maps, often cutting off the irrelevant parts to reduce weight. Some even cut out a strip around the route which they paste alongside the route description. It is worth marking the route onto the map to help route familiarity and for ease of use. Maps are now readily available for download and printing from the internet. This is also possible with the route (GPX file) marked on, but checkpoints need to be added. Caution is required with inkjet printers – the slightest damp and the ink will run so the map becomes unreadable. Printed maps therefore need to be waterproofed like route descriptions. For most 100 routes, it is possible to buy a bespoke OS Custom map at 1:50,000 with the whole route marked on – useful for recce planning or for supporters.

Nowadays GPX (GPS eXchange Format) files, essentially an accurate list of grid references or latitudes and longitudes of points on the route, are routinely provided for Hundreds. As well as their use for plotting the route onto electronic mapping, increasingly many walkers use them with a GPS (Global Positioning System) device which is carried and shows the route, indicating the current position and direction. Spare batteries or a power bank will certainly be needed on a long event. And there have been several instances of walkers following GPS trails so assiduously that they have walked straight past checkpoints. This can be avoided by adding checkpoint locations as waymarks on the GPX file, so the participant is aware they are there. An alternative is to have a paper map, but also have the GPX route downloaded onto a phone or GPS device so that a quick check can be made if uncertain about the route at some point.

Trackers

In recent years trackers have been provided for Hundred walkers. These small devices are attached to a rucksack strap and use the satellite GPS system to pinpoint a walker's location and record this in real time on a dedicated event website. This is primarily for safety, so that event organisers can detect walkers who go off route or who are stationary for a long period. But the system has other benefits such as informing checkpoint teams when walkers are approaching and enabling supporters or friends to follow walkers' progress on a mobile phone or computer.

Torch

Most walkers now use LED torches. An enormous range is available, but think about the range, power, width of beam and battery life that you need. A powerful torch can cast a beam a couple of hundred yards, useful when searching for a stile the other side of a field, but the batteries may not last more than two or three hours. Also, too powerful a light can be dazzling when trying to read the route description, particularly if it is in a plastic bag or map case. A less powerful beam is suitable for lighting up the ground ahead of you. Variable power torches, though expensive, can provide the best of all worlds. A hand-held torch has the advantage that it

casts longer shadows, making stones etc more visible, though many prefer a head-light which leaves the hands free. Chest torches are now also available. These help to reduce glare. You should certainly try out your torch beforehand on an after-dark stroll to ensure that it suits your needs. With the possibility of two nights of walking, spare batteries are essential, but with LED torches spare bulbs are no longer needed as they were 20 years ago. I always carry an additional 'mini'-torch, in case my main one fails or is dropped and damaged or if batteries have to be changed mid-checkpoint.

First aid kit

The rules require walkers to carry a first aid kit, including plasters, adhesive dressing, antiseptic wipes, fixation tape, safety pins and bandage and low adherent dressing. Make sure that you also include any lotions or tablets that you might possibly need, for example Sudocrem for chafing and painkillers, such as paracetamol or codeine. Research has shown that ibuprofen should not be taken due to stomach erosion and kidney failure. Prescription medication may also be required since the event takes place over 48 hours. Whilst checkpoints generally hold first aid kits, it is contrary to standard medical practice to issue tablets or creams.

You may also need 'first-aid' for your kit: some large safety pins and string may be useful for repairs to clothes, rucksack straps, etc.

The event itself

Eve of the event

Try to have a relaxing evening with a leisurely meal (not too much beer!) and a good night's sleep (not always easy to achieve!). Make sure that your toe nails are cut fairly short. Sort your bags into what you will carry, what you will send to the half-way point, and what you will leave at the finish. Endeavour to be unflustered and at peace with yourself and with the world.

Start times

There is generally a choice of several start times, with later times intended for runners or joggers and perhaps fast walkers. Study the checkpoint opening times alongside the section distances and ascents. Most walkers choose the earliest start, but if you walk fast or jog early on, you have to accept that you may have a short time to wait if you arrive at early checkpoints before they open.

At the start

Arrive in good time to check in and make your final preparations, but not so early that you end up standing around for too long and tire your legs. Take great care putting on your socks and boots/trainers, and walk a few steps to check that they are comfortable, with no bumps and with the laces adjusted to the right tension. Note any last-minute route changes and make any final decisions on clothing, depending on the weather and the forecast. There will be queues for the toilets - empty your bowels well before the start!

On the walk

Psychology plays an important part – a Hundred is walked in your head as much as on your feet! Your immediate thought should be the next checkpoint – when you start to tire be spurred on by the thought that it is 5 miles to the next checkpoint, not depressed by the thought there are 80 miles to go! After 75 miles you can start thinking that it is just a day's walk to the end! Enjoy the scenery and company to take your mind off tiredness or aches and pains.

Companions

Most Hundred walkers walk in company, enjoying the mutual encouragement and shared route finding (though make sure you know who is doing what). Some walkers do the entire walk with a particular friend or relative, whilst many combine with different walkers for different stages to fit in with their pace. Your low points will probably occur at different times from those of your companions and mutual encouragement will give an important boost.

Checkpoints

Crucial for recharging body and spirit – make the most of them! As well as eating and drinking what is on offer, take the opportunity to tend any aches and pains, to adjust your kit, to refill your water-bottle and to rest awhile. I find that taking weight off my feet even for five minutes reduces the aching of the limbs over the next few miles. Don't forget to thank the checkpoint marshals when you leave – they are probably as tired as you and need encouragement just as much as you do.

Breakfast checkpoint

Hundreds have a 'breakfast checkpoint' between 50 and 65 miles along the route, where a hot meal is served. There's an arrangement to have a 'breakfast bag' transported to this checkpoint and this might contain a change of clothes or other items such as spare food, with the bag returned to the finish. Most walkers have a longer rest here and relax over their meal, as well as tending their feet; sometimes there's even the possibility of a shower.

Potential problems

Blisters

An obvious problem that most walkers are familiar with and for which they have their own treatment. Don't ignore early signs of soreness as early treatment (plasters or moleskin) to reduce friction can avoid more major problems later. If a blister has formed then, contrary to standard first aid advice, there is a strong case for popping the blister with a sterile needle – otherwise continued walking will enlarge the blister which will then burst and be much more painful. Feet used to regular walking are less susceptible to blisters. Modern advice is to keep the feet soft. Daily massaging with body lotion works well.

Trench foot

Feet can become very sore with a waxy white and deeply creviced skin, as a result of socks and footwear being waterlogged for many hours. A change of socks can provide relief, but the problem might be avoided by waterproof boots or socks or treating the feet beforehand with Vaseline or Sudocrem.

Rubbing

Ensure that nothing that you wear or carry rubs against your body. On a short walk you may hardly notice, but continuous rubbing on a Hundred can lead to major sores. In particular, pack and adjust your rucksack so that pressure on your back is not concentrated at a single point, and use a waist strap. Don't keep anything in your trouser pockets – I carried a small wallet in my pocket on my first Hundred, and the 'dead' area on my thigh resulting from the rubbing remained many years later. Too tight clothes, especially underwear, can also give problems.

Energy depletion

Walking 100 miles uses a colossal number of calories. Estimates vary, but for a person of average weight, brisk walking on easy terrain uses perhaps 300kcal per hour, with over double that for hill climbing or on rough ground. A chocolate bar might contain about 150kcal. Your intake has to provide for the basic functioning and warmth of the body, as well as energy directly used for walking, so the message is that you have to eat an enormous amount to replenish the energy that you are expending on the walk. Eat and drink plenty and often, particularly energy-rich foods such as cake, bananas, dried fruit, sandwiches, and isotonic drinks. Eat the food provided at checkpoints, even if your appetite seems poor, and don't be tempted to rush through checkpoints without eating just to save a few minutes. There are several websites that provide useful hints on nutrition, for example <https://goqii.com/blog/preparing-for-the-100-km-trailwalk-what-you-need-to-remember-and-do/>

Digestive problems

One of the most common causes of retirement on Hundreds is being unable to digest food, perhaps even vomiting. Alongside a nauseous feeling, this makes it impossible to take in the energy needed. Some walkers find this a regular problem and have tried many ways of relieving the difficulties. For example, there are energy-rich foods, such as fruit, rice or custard, that can 'slip down'. On the one occasion when I had problems eating, a checkpointeer gave me a drink of Bovril, which was enough to keep me going, and soon I was eating normally again.

Dehydration

Even in average temperatures, but particularly in hot weather, you will lose gallons of water through sweat. If this is not replaced continuously, you may feel unexpectedly devoid of energy. You should drink regularly even if you do not feel thirsty, both at checkpoints and by keeping your water bottle topped up so that you can drink between checkpoints. The body loses salt at the same time as water, increasing the chance of cramp. This can be pre-empted by eating salty foods at checkpoints, but if cramp strikes a salt tablet or a little salt dissolved in water can give almost instant relief. There is a vast range of proprietary drinks primarily aimed at runners

that provide energy and/or maintain electrolyte balance or use electrolyte tablets, such as ORS hydration tablets, which can be dissolved in water.

Fatigue

Everyone feels tired at some point on a Hundred, particularly during the night, but walkers commonly remark on getting a second wind after a period of tiredness, suddenly feeling much better and able to go on. A rest or even a short sleep at a checkpoint can be very refreshing. Extreme tiredness can lead to hallucinations, particularly for those going into a second night. (Hundred walkers have reported seeing rows of white nuns or roman soldiers by the wayside!). If you start to hallucinate then make sure that you keep with other walkers.

Cold

Physical exhaustion and hunger combined with wet and windy weather are just the conditions that can lead to hypothermia, and anyone walking a Hundred should be aware of the potential danger. There have been several Hundreds where the days have been warm, but the temperature has fallen to near freezing at night. Carrying adequate and appropriate clothing is crucial; in particular windproof protection for the whole body, and clothing that retains its insulating properties when wet, such as wool or thermal fabrics. If you feel shivery or even slightly cold, particularly later on in the walk, put on extra warm clothing to reduce heat loss. When you stop at later checkpoints it is a good idea to put an extra layer on until you are walking again, otherwise you may start to shiver.

The lean

On every Hundred a few walkers end up with their upper body, from the waist upwards, leaning at an angle of 15 degrees or more from the vertical, and in considerable discomfort. The 'lean' or 'Pisa syndrome' can affect walkers of all levels of fitness on a one-off basis for no apparent reason, though it is more prevalent in older walkers. There seems to be no current medical explanation for its onset in endurance events, though the LDWA is currently funding research to understand the lean and how to avoid it or at least ease its effects. Sufferers repeatedly try to jerk the upper body to the vertical but are unable to keep it there. Typically, the lean strikes after about 70 miles. Initially, a slant becomes obvious to an observer but the walker remains oblivious of any problem until eventually the back and hips start to become extremely painful. If someone informs you that you are leaning, try to keep bending your upper body away from the lean direction to delay the onset. The problem usually disappears quite quickly after stopping walking.

Pacing yourself

Walk at a pace that comes naturally. If you go either above or below your natural pace you'll tire far more rapidly, both physically and mentally. Whilst it's nice to journey with other walkers, you should ensure that their pace is close to yours. It's easy to set off too quickly or jog a lot to begin with and suffer for it later. On the other hand, there is a strong mental desire to 'keep up with the pack' and making good progress early on gives a psychological boost.

Getting lost

Having to retrace steps for even a short distance when tired can be a major psychological blow, and can sometimes be ‘the last straw’. If you are uncertain, it is worth taking a little extra time to check the route description or map, taking particular care at night. Frequent causes of going astray include the eye skipping a line of route description, missing a narrow path off a wide track, coming off a hilltop in the wrong direction, misinterpreting the first instruction on leaving a checkpoint, or following someone who claims to know the way. Route finding by committee is a recipe for disaster, though one person reading the instructions and another carrying them out can be effective.

Retiring

If you reach a checkpoint feeling you want to retire, pause a while before handing in your tally. Often a relaxed rest, some food and a chat with the checkpointers can help you over a low point of the walk. Whilst helping at checkpoints, I have seen many walkers arrive saying ‘I’m finished’, but who have revitalised their energy and spirit and gone on to complete the walk. If after a rest you feel that you really can’t go on then it’s no disgrace to pull out – there’s always next year.

Conclusion

The organisers and helpers

Putting on a Hundred is an enormous task requiring 3-4 years planning for the organisers and local group with over 200 marshals on the day. Many walkers may be almost unaware of the numerous tasks that need to be done such as health and safety requirements, negotiation with landowners, finding suitable checkpoint venues, logistics of ensuring that over two tons of food is distributed correctly, etc etc..

The organisers and helpers are volunteers, and walkers should do what they can to make them feel that their efforts are worthwhile. It goes without saying that walkers should be respectful and courteous even when exhausted or frustrated, and should also avoid causing unnecessary problems by keeping to the rules and following marshals’ instructions. A ‘thank you’ is never out of place, and after the event many walkers send the organisers a message to express their appreciation.

Finally ...

Remember that completing the walk is much more important than a fast time. Many problems can be avoided by taking just a little longer, for example by eating adequately, tending minor injuries, and double-checking the route.

Above all, enjoy the walk. The LDWA Hundreds are a marvellous experience. Without exception, they have followed fine routes in attractive surroundings. You meet like-minded walkers on the way. The atmosphere is quite unique, and on finishing you will feel great, even if you cannot manage another step. Good luck!