

Surviving Weekend Meets

Fred Reynolds

Part 1

The weekend meet is the mainstay activity of any climbing club, and the Pinnacle is no exception. The annual meets list is a full one, so anyone wanting to maximise on public displays of both climbing and social skills is well placed to do so. In particular, members keen to promote an air of distinction completely disproportionate to the level of their actual climbing ability can reap great rewards, but only if they take care. Ill-thought out participation in the weekend meet can lead to personal humiliation from which the ego is unlikely to recover.

This guide is primarily for the image conscious, for they have the most to gain by getting it right and, of course, the most to lose by getting it wrong. But even the most self-effacing individual may find some useful advice, if only to avoid the worst of the pitfalls. Read it under the covers and no-one will ever know.

Getting there

This is less problematic than it used to be as car parking is now within spitting distance of the hut but prior to the new arrangements this meant tackling the Cwm Dyli A-to-B Challenge several times a year. However, I include the information about the longer approach for posterity and because on occasion the state of the track may be so poor that you opt to leave the car further away. If you cannot even contemplate the short approach then you need to remove Cwm Dyli from your meets diary entirely but bear in mind that this will reduce your presence in the club to virtually nil. If no-one knows who you are, then no-one can admire you.

'A' is your car, and it's parked in at the top of the track, some 500 yards from 'B' which is the hut. The track between the two wends a tedious but innocent way downhill until just before the first of two gates. There, heavy rain has often fashioned the surface into a highly mobile little scree shoot - somewhat taxing on the ankles. The last 100 yards are even more tricky, involving squeezing through the second

gate (the start of the short approach), teetering over a narrow stone bridge, and tracking through some seriously boggy ground. Those shod in Merrell trainers can expect to go down several times. And don't forget, on more occasions than not, it's going to be dark.

In your quest to identify the ideal transport system for this journey, you will try many sizes and combinations of rucksacks, carrier bags, boxes and bins. None of them will ever be completely successful and, every time, you will lurch through the hut door like a harassed and overwhelmed bag lady, cursing your latest bad idea. The beam of light emanating from the centre of your forehead will only add to the general air of absurdity.

Short of a helicopter drop, the best option is to pile everything in an expedition-sized sac. By all means try other techniques first (they will all fail) if you're not convinced (you soon will be), but you should really establish the single sac method as your standard *modus operandus* by at least your third visit. If not, the word will spread that you are an organisational incompetent; you are scarcely through the door of the Pinnacle Club and your image is already into negative equity.

Incidentally, research shows that your exit, some 36 hours later, can be no less a debacle. Indeed, it is often worse. Missing the advantage of Friday's forward planning, you are under pressure from the knowledge that everyone else has got it together when you patently have not. You can almost hear the fingers tapping as you criss-cross the floor of the hut at speed, anxiously scooping your far-flung belongings back into whichever receptacles have not measured up to the task this time. Inevitably, you will forget or fail to find something, thus ensuring you will have to make return visits to Cwm Dyli for the rest of your life.

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Part II

Accommodation

There are only a few camping meets each year, and they are always timetabled to coincide with a cyclonic depression sitting over the whole country. It makes no difference where you go; it will be a wash-out. The annual 'high camp' is so-called because high winds accompany the incessant rain.

With a bit of luck then, you'll never have to set out at all, and you and your camping gear will make the wet-weather alternative in pristine condition. However, bad timing on the part of the weather pattern may force you onto the hill, knowing full well there will be a shambolic retreat later on. If you don't fancy this, you can always try The Missed Rendezvous Strategy, whereby, from the cosy little B&B you stayed in overnight, you telephone a damp and bedraggled meet leader at the wet-weather doss and ask witheringly why no-one turned up. All you need do then is to stand with your gear in the rain for twenty minutes, before joining the others and impressing with tales of wild winds, atrocious visibility, and the challenge of being alone in such conditions.

Most frequently, you will stay in hut accommodation, where alpine style bunks are the norm. Those who place a premium on personal space are going to struggle unless they plan ahead or only come on very small meets. You can often acquire an extra body-width of space either side of your slot, by the careful siting of your belongings or a spare sleeping bag. You should not do this, however, if it results in obvious overcrowding for others, as your actions could be seen as selfish and uncharitable. Getting your sleep is important, but not at the expense of your image.

By the way, earplugs are well-nigh essential because those people who declare that they never snore are lying through their teeth.

Opting for a top bunk gives at least some sense of space, albeit over your head, but you should be aware that this may be setting the seeds of your own downfall later in the night. At two a.m. your level of

intellectual functioning is likely to be pretty well zilch, so middle-of-the-night trips to the toilet can become quite complex activities. For high level devotees at Cwm Dyli and similarly designed huts, this translates to especial danger. (Those who habituate on low level bunks can probably skip the remaining paragraphs in this section unless they wish to congratulate themselves on the rewards of their good judgement.)

You must have the confidence to use your headlamp. If you try the whole thing without it, under the impression that you will disturb fewer people, it will end in disaster. For starters, whilst groping for the edge of the bunk, you will wake up the two people sleeping on either side. In hissing your apologies, you are bound to disturb any light sleepers. (Insomniacs, of course, will have been listening from the moment your sleeping bag zip first gave the game away.) Maybe this small group of not disinterested listeners will be wishing you well as you approach the crux - crossing the gap from bunk to ladder and then descending - but none of them will muster enough generosity of spirit to warn you that your fate is sealed from the moment you tentatively float out a limb feeling for the said ladder.

Unable to locate the crucial first rung, you experience a little pang of anxiety. Maintaining your unconsolidated bridging position is tiring but mostly you're irritated; it's only a step for goodness sake. And so, cursing *not-so-sotto voce* you reach further. Suddenly you lose control. Everyone holds their breath as desperate scrabbling noises pervade the darkness, evidence of your futile efforts to regain lost ground.

Try to maintain a stoic silence as you plummet earthwards; at this stage there's no sense in inviting total ridicule by screaming. The utterance of such phrases as "And so...I die" and "That it should come to this..." is also to be discouraged as such statements smack of melodrama. The only impact that should concern you is the one you are about to make with the floor. If you come down feet first, apart from the suspicion that your body has compressed itself by at least three inches, there's a good chance you should be able to limp off under your own steam. Landing on alternative parts of your anatomy will, almost certainly, render you immobile and you'll have to wait for assistance. Either way, the resolute thud of your heavy landing will finally arouse the few who have, thus far, failed to acknowledge your

personal crisis. The main light is switched on; your fall from grace is evident to all, but at least you'll have a choice of driver if you need to take a trip to A & E.

So, have conviction and light your way. Okay, by the time you have extricated yourself from your sleeping bag and gymnastically descended the ladder, your headlamp will have carried out several sweep searches of even the most unvisited corners of the hut. But keep faith, because the only people who will have noticed the ever-changing illuminations will be the insomniacs, and they will be only too glad of the diversion. Everyone else will have remained steadfastly asleep, because you have remained steadfastly quiet.

The breakfast brouhaha

It's Saturday morning and a real hive of activity in the hut. It's all clatter and chatter, and it's not yet 8.30. If your organisational skills are up to it, you can really score personality points by joining this mêlée. Consuming your muesli and banana with one hand, you can prepare your packed lunch with the other, and periodically make intelligent and witty contributions to the repartee. Within the wink of an eye, your sac is packed with essential items only; you know where you're going, who with and it's still before nine. In the face of such a bravura display, there's every chance that an inept arrival the previous evening will be written off as a mere aberration.

If you genuinely cannot handle this early morning dynamism, you would do best to procure a cup of tea and discreetly return upstairs until it's all over. Making a laid-back entrance when the numbers have thinned can be very effective, provided you don't leave it too late. It is difficult to make an impact in an empty hut.

The worst thing you can do is to immerse yourself in this interactive maelstrom at it's height, thinking that you'll spark up a bit given five minutes or so. You'll simply end up in a corner, appalled at the assault on your senses and with your participatory skills lurking on zero. The convivial majority will interpret this as further evidence that you are a pathetic wimp unable to get to grips with anything. You might as well go home.

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Part III

The climbing

Considering its potential for terminal inconvenience, the actual climbing on the meet is less stressful than you might suppose. You should not get too indignant, however, when it is. It's as well to know that there will be occasions when you will be terrified out of your socks, make a total prat of yourself, or otherwise become the subject of amusing anecdotes recounted by your peers. If the latter becomes the only way in which you feature in conversations, you should seriously consider resigning.

Do not be misled into participating in The Mass Ascent. Under the definition of Jolly Good Fun, it will involve A Frightful Experience, grovelling in the bowels of some vertical fissure named after the first person to die in it. Accompanied by several others, you will be expected to demonstrate Traditional Techniques e.g. standing in slings or on people's heads, and often under small, malevolent waterfalls. With witnesses in such close proximity and in profusion, the implications of making a spectacle of yourself are obvious. In the hands of the dedicated anecdotist, your antics will be the major source of fireside mirth for years to come.

The only purpose for which The Mass Ascent should be considered appropriate is one of clearing routes, or indeed whole crags, of undesirable elements. When faced with this strategy, brave men have blanched and moved on. It was in just such a situation that the collective term 'a pandemonium of Pinnacles' was first coined.

Decision-making

This can be a real problem area at any time, but is considered to be endemic on meets when poor weather encourages large and jolly groups (as opposed to small and serious pairs) to sport themselves gregariously about the hills. The problem revolves around making a

corporate decision about the day's activities, one which is acceptable to all and yet caters for individual taste. There's a veritable *potpourri* of possibilities on the table. Can you make a decision? Can the group make a decision? For some unaccountable reason, everyone immediately becomes afflicted with a type of cerebral malfunction that specifically excludes such an event occurring. No-one is capable of making choices, only of making more suggestions to agonise over. Everyone is awash with potential adventures that can only kaleidoscope around their minds in wasteful confusion.

This can all go on without resolution for some considerable time. If two people could manage to think the same thing at the same moment and say so, their assertions would probably carry the day because the rest of the group would clutch at anything approaching consensus in the hope of action before the light goes.

The following illustration, as well as highlighting a further problem with accommodation, is an interesting variation of this worrying group dynamic:

Four people are the first to arrive at a hut in the Lakes. They have been told that the hut will accommodate 16 people. The first discussion centres around how these 16 people can divide equally onto the three sleeping levels. Not surprisingly, that little poser remains unresolved despite some inspired lateral thinking. They pass on. Which way to sleep? ...head up, head down ...sideways or lengthways. Which level? ...on the outside, on the inside. Four people make as many decisions each, every one carefully argued before it's finally discarded.

A spanner arrives in the works. Another room is discovered, which makes sense of the accommodation ratios but adds further alternatives to the existing brew of possibilities. It's a small room with an en-suite washbasin...that would give more privacy...but, it could be claustrophobic...no problems with getting your head stomped on by a late arrival though....but everyone will want to use the basin, look in the mirror...

And so it goes on. The increasingly frantic four, desperate to capitalise on their first-foot advantage, have soon talked themselves in and out of so many final decisions, their reeling brains cells are

simply rehashing old conclusions as new. When three more people arrive on the scene, they are forced into a decision. They have to put their eggs all in one basket, or in this case, their sleeping bags all in one room. Aghast at the irrevocability of their commitment, their weekend is blighted by a sense of lost opportunity.

The best way out of this ambivalent quagmire is to sacrifice any idea of shared responsibility, self-assertion or democratic consultation. Opt out of the conversation to begin with, and then physically retreat to the periphery of the group, perhaps making a drink or reading a magazine; the idea is to create an air of detached nonchalance. Before long, you will be joined by one or two other dropouts from the debate, and your little offshoot group will start to look like an island of peace and tranquillity to the souls grappling with self-determination. Sacrificing assertion skills hand over fist, rats will swim for your shore until only two are left in the debate. Feeling very self-conscious, each will race the other to capitulate without undue loss of face and then, with a perfect sense of timing you can announce what it is you would like to do. That is, provided you know.

The meet cake

This is a rather quaint custom that requires you to consume large quantities of wholesome carbohydrate just before your evening meal (coincidentally also of wholesome carbohydrate). Don't believe the meet leader who declares this is no big deal and that she has bought her cake from her local branch of Marks and Spencer. Like everyone else, she's spent the whole of the previous week in a state of angst, first scouring the pages of borrowed recipe books and then taking a day off work so that she can produce a satisfactory example in time for the weekend.

If you have a severe problem with being the main character in amusing anecdotes but cannot bring yourself to tender your resignation, cultivating a reputation as cake-maker *par excellence* will allow you to play down the role of club clown. It is also worth considering buying-in the culinary expertise. Paying someone else to run up a high-fibre carrot and ginger on your behalf marks you out as someone with class.