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MIND OVER MUSCLE

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GET THREE PEAKS-FIT

TRAIN FOR THE UK'S ULTIMATE WALKING CHALLENGE

Words **Hanna Lindon** Photographs **Matthew Roberts**



GE **ON ANY HILL NEAR YOU...**

Hanna steps up to the challenge, while Monty searches for Eau de Fox Poo.



FITNESS IS THE F-WORD OF HILL-WALKING.

It's the curse, the tormentor, the great polariser. Mention it in conversation and you'll find that people split into two camps – physical titans (legs of iron, lungs of steel, think nothing of ticking off ten Munros before breakfast) and everybody else.

If you're a titan then all this jaw aching about fitness probably tries your patience no end. Ben Nevis? Just a walk in the park. Isn't it? What's that you say – your legs hurt? Pahl Man up, you wuss.

But what if you're not one of the lucky ones?

What if there's a gaping crevasse between the stuff you want to do and the stuff you can physically achieve? What if – as the old saying goes – the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak? And what if your problems are compounded by living hundreds of miles from the nearest mountain?

The gritty reality of being a nine-to-five with a bulging diary and less than titanic fitness levels is that your hill-walking goals can seem the wrong side of achievable. If you're like me and a ramble up Helvellyn leaves you salt-stained and nursing jelly legs, then Ben Nevis may as well be Everest for all the chance you have of hauling yourself onto the summit. As for the Three Peaks, Britain's ultimate sweat-fest and the zenith of many hill-walkers' tick-lists – you've got to be having a laff, right?

Well, first the bad news: it's going to be hard.

Trust me, I know. I'm writing this after a day of on-the-hill training in the Brecon Beacons, and my thigh muscles feel like they've been welded to my knees. But there's some good news too. You can get Three Peaks-fit, and you can do it without pounding a treadmill in the gym. You won't even need to spend your savings driving to the Lake District every weekend. All you need is a training programme, some nearby hills to inject a healthy dose of ascent into your walks, and a good dash of motivation.

Let me introduce my motivation for the day. His name is Monty, and he balances overflowing reserves of enthusiasm with an unfortunate addiction to Eau de Fox Poo aftershave. And before you get the wrong idea, I should probably mention that Monty is a dog. He belongs to Will Legon, founder of Will4Adventure, who joined Matthew



#1 GO WILD!

Make yourself work harder by leaving the path. Tackling heather and long grass will work up a sweat far faster than walking a worn route, and it's a great way of simulating ascent. Wear stiff-soled boots with good ankle support to avoid injury.

#2 FUEL FACTOR

When it comes to hill nutrition, everybody is different. Use your training walks to figure out what works for you, so you know exactly what to eat and when on challenge day. As a general rule, Will advises



avoiding chocolate (fast-release energy that will ultimately send your blood sugar levels plummeting). Instead snack on nuts, dried fruit and cereal bars, and use a hydration system to keep you drinking.

#3 BAG A MATE

Mental motivation is just as important as physical fitness. Training with a mate will boost your enthusiasm levels and introduce a competitive element, encouraging you to walk faster and further. Be careful who you choose as your walking partner though – tempers can fray during challenge events, and you don't want to fall out.



#4 GET KIT-SAVVY

The right kit can transform your training walks from miserable to marvellous. Well-fitting, supportive boots, a rucksack with a good back system and layers that keep you warm while wicking sweat away from the body are all crucial. Get your Three Peaks kit list sorted before you start training, and walk with a sack that weighs the same as, or more than, the one you'll be carrying on the big day.

#5 POLE POSITION

Trekking poles take the weight off your legs, saving your joints and



your muscles. If you don't own a pair it's well worth investing in them for the challenge. Adjust your poles so that your forearm is parallel with the ground and the straps support your wrists. Use the opposite pole to the leading leg and plant it roughly level with your foot.

#6 NIGHT WALKS

If you're planning on completing the Three Peaks in 24 hours, then don't forget that a large proportion of your walking will be done at night. Factor at least one night walk into your training, and make sure you're comfortable with navigating in the dark.

MIND OVER MUSCLE

There's people-fit and then there's Monty-fit... The pooch makes light work of the grassy summit of Fan Hir, with Llyn y Fan Fach shimmering below.

the photographer and me in the Brecon Beacons in the role of outdoor personal trainer, route-planner and general challenge expert.

"Everybody who walks regularly has at least 12 miles in them," Will said firmly, as we nursed half pints in the Abercraf Inn the evening before our walk. Outside it was drizzling mournfully – that penetrating, mountain-patented moisture that Wales does so well. "Fitness is as much psychological as it is physical – you just need to keep your motivation levels up."

The key to a good training walk, he explained, is to introduce an element of interest. For us, this was going to be a historical treasure hunt. Woven into our route were the crash sites of two airplanes – they would give structure to the walk, breaking it down into achievable goals and presenting tricky navigational challenges to boot. That all sounded good to me. It was the next bit that had me worried.

"You don't need to head to Scotland to get fit for Ben Nevis," said Will. "Smaller hills like the Brecons



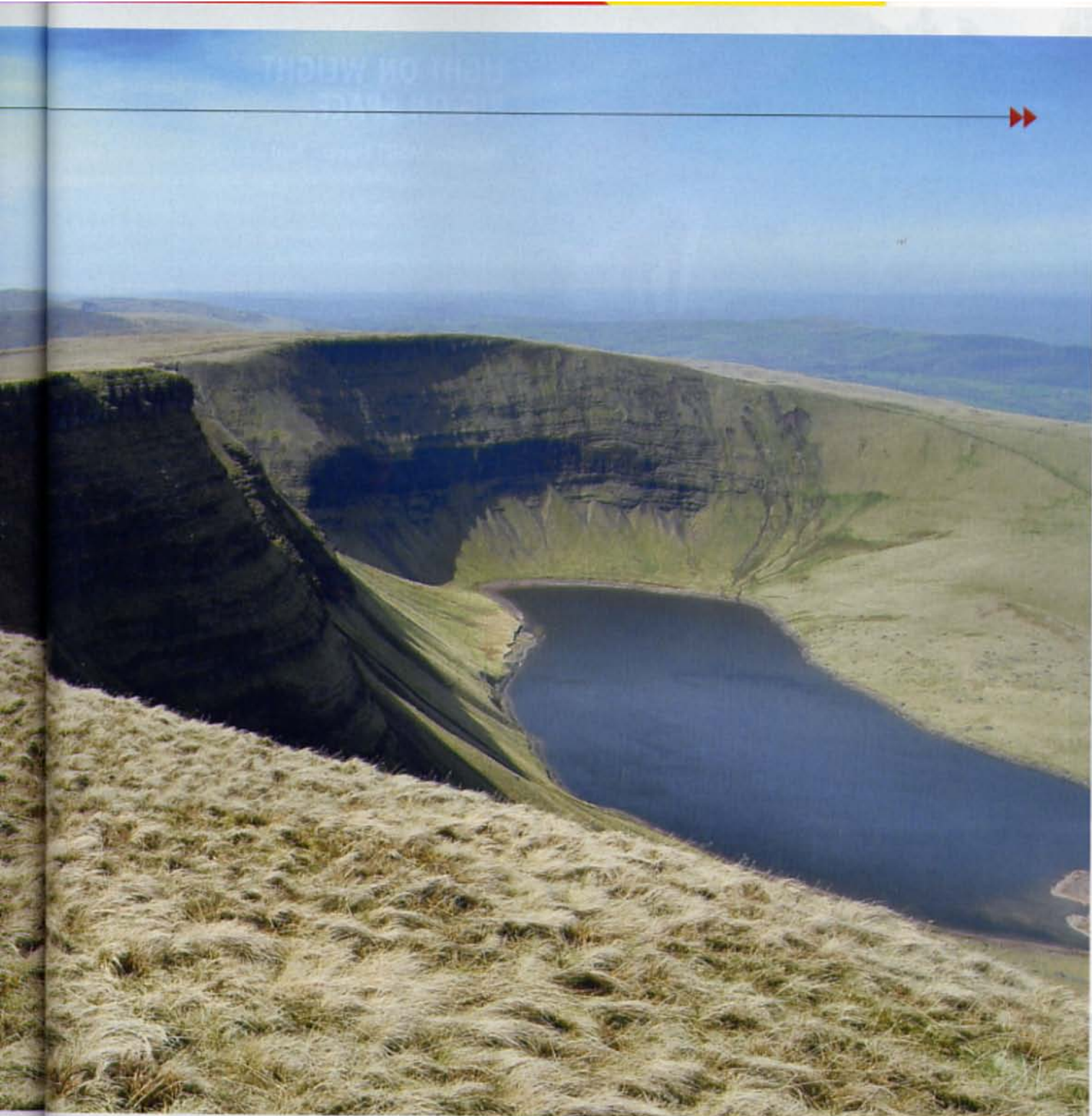
'HILLS LIKE THE BRECONS ARE PERFECT TRAINING TERRITORY. YOU JUST NEED

A medium-sized leap for Hanna's hill challenge.



Training expert Will Legon points out the views.





ST NEED TO BALANCE OUT THE LOSS OF ASCENT WITH GREATER DISTANCE'





are perfect training territory. You just need to balance out the loss of ascent with greater distance. I reckon we'll be covering around 22km tomorrow, all in all."

I'm not going to embarrass myself by telling you how that figure struck the fear of God into my soul. I'm not going to go into the hours spent lying awake in a sleeping bag that whiffed slightly of dog (my fault - don't offer a spaniel any encouragement if you don't want it to invade your tent and make merry on your roll mat), pondering the inevitable aches, pains and embarrassments of the next day. I'm just going to roll briskly on to 7am the following morning, when a weakling sun spilled over the hills and caught us weaving up the sheep fields of Glyntawe towards the outcrop of Carreg Goch.

The route started with a sharp climb up a bridlepath, but quickly dog-legged off into trackless wild land. Soon we were stumbling over peaty tussocks, their heads trailing long blonde grass like a battlefield of beheaded Rapunzels. The channels below the tussocks were laced with oozing bog and it was hard going on the legs - all part of Will's plan.

"Walking off-path is much trickier," he said gleefully. "It takes more energy and burns more calories, which means that you're training harder."

Funny, I'd almost forgotten that this was supposed to be a training exercise. It felt like nothing less than a quality mountain adventure, in a far-flung area of the UK that seemed blessedly to have escaped the national hill-walking consciousness. A few kilometres in, we were taking bets on how many grid squares around us were deserted (Five? Ten? Twenty?) and admiring an untrammelled panorama that owed nothing to the hand of man or the teeth of sheep.

Our first marker was the wreck of Wellington bomber XMF 509, and we found it easily enough. From there the route looped around boulderfields and low contours back to the line of the path at Banwen Gwyn. The track was so little-worn that we almost missed it - a mark, Will said, of truly wild land.

We trudged onwards up the barely-there path. The sun rose, the clouds retreated and the blue sky blazed. I'm not going to lie - ten kilometres in I was starting to feel the first twinges of muscle pain. The deceptively knackered undulations in the terrain, the peaty bogs underfoot and the burden



Trekking poles ease strain on the knees.



Having interesting landmarks to visit - such as this wrecked Wellington bomber - takes your mind off aching muscles. Theoretically.

THE CRASH SITES

WELLINGTON XMF 509

The story behind this plane is most poignant: shortly after it crashed in World War Two, a photo was found in the wreckage by a local man. He took it home and put it in the family photo album, where it stayed for over 50 years. In 2005 his grandchildren identified the face in the photo as that of Canadian airman Bill Allison. His sister Phyllis was still alive, and she flew over in 2006 to see the site of her brother's 'final flight on earth'. A plaque at the site commemorates her visit.

ANSON L9149

Little remains of this 1939 wreck apart from a few scraps of metal. The plane apparently became disorientated and crashed while carrying two military personnel and two civilians. Though the pilot and the air crewman died, both civilians survived. A memorial in Glyntawe churchyard remembers the victims.



Now, it's downhill all the way.
(The dog's already in the pub.)

THREE PEAKS TRAINING TOOL

Use Will's handy mind map to plan your training walks...

Interest Keep your motivation high by factoring at least one point of interest into your walk. This could be anything from a plane wreck to a stunning ridge.

Height gain Use your route-planning skills to factor in the maximum ascent that your area can offer. Surrounded by flat countryside? In that case, you'll need to up the time or distance of your training walk.

Safety Don't go overboard. Planning a route that is beyond your ability is demotivating at best – and, at worst, extremely dangerous.

Challenge You won't improve if you don't push yourself. Plan a training walk that includes a real challenge – whether that's distance, ascent or time spent on the hill.

Distance

Compensate for lack of ascent by increasing the distance of your walk. As a general rule, add one mile for each 500ft of ascent.

Time: According to Will, the single most important factor in your training is time spent on the hill. Lucky we love it then, isn't it?

of an over-packed sack were eating into poorly-stocked energy reserves. Monty circled back every ten minutes or so to hustle on the back-marker, twitching his nose impatiently at such gross physical incompetence.

There was a last burst of ascent up the flank of Brest Twrch (cue much burning of thighs and *sotto voce* curses). Then the hills either side opened up like the pages of a book and the sky above expanded to fill the horizon. We were at the top of the Fan Hir escarpment, with the green ridge panning out before us in chunky, wedding cake tiers. Below us the slashed edge dropped down to Llyn y Fan Fach, the dark lake, its water brushed by the wind into elegant peacock tails. It was... well, all those mountain clichés that you don't expect to squeeze from the Brecon Beacons. Stunning.

Majestic. Spectacular. Awe-inspiring.

That was a good moment. The weather was laying down the ground-work for summer with broad-stroke white clouds across a perfect blue canvas. The view was more than I had the right to expect from a 'local' training walk. And, apart from a small deft in the ridge, it was downhill from here all the way home. Good God, I found myself thinking. Maybe I could do the Three Peaks after all.

"We've climbed more than 960 metres today," said Will, as the final leg of ascent dropped away beneath us. "That's a proud effort – not quite Ben Nevis, but a good start."

Sometimes it's the small things that give you the greatest thrill of achievement. I'd had every expectation of being in a wheelchair by the end of this walk. Instead, I was *compos mentis* enough to

search with relative enthusiasm for the remains of our second plane wreck. I could even *aww* over the wee lambs that were wobbling on newborn legs across the fields above our campsite. I'm not trying to pretend that I wasn't in considerable amounts of pain, but it turns out that the best things in life are worth suffering for.

And so you know what? I reckon the titans have got a point. Perhaps it isn't calves of iron and abs of steel that distinguish them from the rest of us, but simply a different attitude towards the F word. If the Three Peaks is your target then do the training, put the time in and build your strength up – but bear in mind that overcoming the psychological hurdle is half the struggle. **W**

>> www.will4adventure.com

FOUR WEEKS TO THREE PEAKS FITNESS!

	WEEK 1	WEEK 2	WEEK 3	WEEK 4
MON	Rest	Rest	Rest	Rest
TUES	Run for 2 miles	Run for 3 miles	Run for 5 miles	Rest
WED	Rest	Rest	Rest	Rest
THURS	Run for 3 miles	Run for 4 miles	Run for 6 miles	Rest – load up on carbs, particularly brown pasta
FRI	Rest	Rest	Rest	Rest
SAT	Training walk – 12 miles	Training walk – 18 miles, including night navigation	Simulated challenge event (such as the Yorkshire Three Peaks) – 25 miles	Rest – carb load
SUN	Warm-down run – 1 mile	Warm-down run – 2 miles	Warm-down run – 1 mile	Three Peaks Challenge!

*This plan assumes that you already have a reasonable basic level of fitness