

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!

British Army veteran and ultra-extreme athlete, Darren Hardy



Every so often, something unexpected enters your life and leaves you inspired – and humbled. For me, it was Darren Hardy, and the encounter put Dunsfold at the heart of a successful attempt to solo-pull a Land Rover 100km in 100 hours. This is the inside story...

WELL, it was a resounding success: British army veteran Darren 'Daz' Hardy pulled a 1.5-tonne Land Rover for a distance of 100.38km (62 miles) in 98.5 hours. I wrote about Darren in last month's LRM, but in case you missed it, here is a brief summary...
Born in Belfast, Darren grew up during the final years of The Troubles. In 2003 he enlisted in the Royal Engineers and after training was posted to Germany, where he took part in multiple overseas

exercises that tested his physical endurance, technical competence and mental resilience.
Deployed to Iraq in 2006 during one of the most volatile periods of the conflict, during this tour he was involved in the recovery of the bodies of five members of the RAF, the Royal Navy, the Army Air Corps and the Royal Marines who were killed when their Lynx helicopter was shot down.
In 2012, he commissioned as an officer through the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, one of the most demanding leadership institutions in the world. Following Sandhurst, Darren undertook challenging training exercises in Canada, including deployment to BATUS, one of the



During his first visit to Dunsfold, Darren tested the Stage 1 with a few 100m pulls



Sponsors decals affixed, HOJ waits for the team to arrive at Blackbushe Airport

largest live-fire training areas globally. It was during this period that Darren experienced another life-altering event. While on exercise, he helped save the life of a soldier who had fallen into a fire. Although Darren continued to serve, this incident became a catalyst for the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). During his military career, he also suffered a serious injury to his shoulder.

In 2017, after years of service and cumulative physical and psychological strain, Captain Darren Hardy was medically discharged from the Army. Undeterred by the abrupt end to his career, he chose to embark on a personal journey to strengthen his mental resilience in a bid to heal from the mental consequences of the things he had seen and experienced first-hand during his military career.



Media attention helps spread the message



Darren with team member Trust, left, Dunsfold's Philip Bashall and Gary Pusey

Darren was selected to represent team UK at the 2018 Warrior Games, where he won two gold medals in the 100m and 200m sprint events, setting records in each. Darren's ultra endurance accomplishments are remarkable, and he is also the founder of StayStrong, which supports execs and organisations to perform at their best under pressure, providing personalised AI coaching for decision-making, wellbeing and strategy, built on real-world leadership experience.

The 100km Land Rover Pull is the latest in a series of ultra-extreme events that Darren has accomplished, although by his own admission this was one of the toughest, and once again he was raising money to help develop a life-changing treatment for 17-year-old Aggie Candy-Waters and others like her who live with a rare, deadly, and currently incurable brain disease, H-ABC. Everything Darren raises from the 100km Land Rover Pull will go to the H-ABC Foundation and SynaptixBio, which is developing a drug to tackle the illness, and the money raised will pay for the development of a new, much safer and easier method of delivering that drug to patients.

In January this year, Darren contacted Dunsfold out of the blue, asking if he could borrow a Land Rover. Once it was clear what he wanted it for, the Collection was more than happy to help. In fact, he wanted two Land Rovers, and they had to be similar vehicles weighing around 1.5 tonnes. They also had to look attractive and tidy because they would be appearing on TV and in the media. The obvious answer was The Twins, the two surviving prototype short-wheelbase Stage 1 V8s of the four made by Land Rover in 1981.

Darren visited Dunsfold to meet the vehicles and the team, and expressed his satisfaction with the choice. Just to make sure, he promptly



Darren being helped into his special harness just before the start

"HE ADMITTED THAT THE DRAG WOULD BE HIS GREATEST CHALLENGE YET"

harnessed himself up and took one for a trial pull. Snapper Craig secured some photographs for Darren's press release, and then it was time to start planning and preparing.

It was decided that the Masai Red Stage 1, HOJ 573W, would be the one that Darren would pull, while its Pageant Blue sister would be available over the five days of the Big Land Rover Pull for members of the public to have a go, just to get a feel for what Darren would be doing over 100km and 100 hours. All this would be happening at Blackbushe airport in Hampshire.

Darren had already begun speaking with potential sponsors and explained that he would be grateful for assistance with preparing and applying the sponsors' stickers to the vehicles, which Dunsfold agreed to handle.



Final adjustment requires a knowledgeable assistant



Philip Bashall made sure that everyone on the team knew how to operate the Stage 1, especially the transfer box lever

HOJ 573W would also need a permanently live 12v electrical feed independent of the ignition system to power the tracker and it would be vital that no one could accidentally turn it off. Dunsfold's Philip Bashall and assistant curator Josh Richardson also dismantled, cleaned and adjusted the brakes, and greased everything underneath that might possibly make Darren's drag an even bigger task than it was already going to be.

Once Darren told me that sponsor discussions had been completed, I called my trusted local expert, Alpha Graphics of Liss, which has been incredibly helpful over the years creating designs, stickers and badges for me. I didn't give them much time to tweak and produce the artwork, but with just hours to go, Peter Howells and Paul Compton at AG delivered.

It took a surprisingly long time to attach 15 stickers to each side of both vehicles, and as well as the sponsors that Darren had found, Dunsfold was able to add a few from the Land Rover community - Britpart, a long-standing supporter of the Dunsfold Collection, and Blockley, whose tyres are worn by both the Stage 1 88s. Prominent as well, are LRM's banners, because editor Martin Domoney had also agreed to support this extraordinary fund-raising effort.

Darren had also been focused on preparation, though in his case it was a bit more... shall we say, physical. And mental. When I asked him how he planned to train for the event, he admitted that the drag would be his greatest challenge yet. Considering all he has already accomplished in previous ultra-extreme challenges, that's really saying something.

"My training programme for the Land Rover pull will be focusing on posterior chain strength."

DARREN'S ULTRA-EXTREME CHALLENGES

JAN 2020: 480km Montane Yukon Arctic Ultra

MAY 2020: 121km Charity Treadmill Run carrying 35lb Extreme Isolation (world-first) on VE Day

JUL 2020: 203km Run-Swim-Run around Isle of Wight (84km run to Leps Beach carrying 50lb, 6km swim across the Solent with kit and bergen, 113km run around the Isle of Wight)

AUG 2020: 933km Adventure Triathlon in Scotland via the Caledonian Canal (112km paddle board, 779km cycle, 42km run)

OCT 2020: 10 ultra-distance triathlons in ten days in ten different locations

DEC 2020: 190km World's Highest Duathlon at 12,000ft (10km run, 150km bike, 30km run)

APR 2021: Five marathons in 50 hours

NOV 2021: Pulled a 1.5-tonne car for 53km in 47 hours

APR 2022: 320km run from Manchester to London in 90 hours

he told me. "The priorities will be shoulder durability and leg drive for sustained towing mechanics. I'll build up my distances and load carrying, with the final weeks in the run-up to the event involving weekly distances of 85km, then 100km, and finally 120km per week, all with 15kg increasing to 22kg loaded on my back to strengthen my Achilles and heels.

"These will be up to 3.5-hour continuous efforts, building time-on-feet and connective tissue resilience. It will also be very important to focus on hydration discipline, making sure I drink around seven litres of water per day during peak training blocks. My training programme is Artificial Intelligence-led, with everything structured and monitored through my AI persona, ROAR AI, and built around resilience, load tolerance and mental regulation.

"This challenge is not about speed or handling, but is all about resilience and brute strength. It really is the biggest and toughest challenge I have ever attempted. I'll have to battle sleep deprivation, weather, keeping on top of eating and drinking - let alone the pure physicality of the challenge. Over the 100 hours I'll be pulling, I'm expecting to wear through two or three pairs of shoes, consume about 45,000 calories and drink around 50 litres of water and electrolytes."

Everything that Dunsfold could do had been done, and all that remained for Philip, Josh and I to do was deliver the vehicles safely to Blackbushe and make sure that Darren's support

team knew how to put the transfer box into neutral, before Darren strapped himself into his harness at 12 noon to begin the long drag. We set off early on 20 March from Dunsfold, me driving the red Stage 1 while Philip towed the blue one behind his Range Rover Sport. Snapper Craig would ensure the day was recorded for posterity.

Darren and his support team, many of whom are either serving or ex-military, were already there, as were many family members, friends and supporters. Dunsfold volunteer John Mill was also there and would return from time to time over the five days of the event to ensure that someone from Dunsfold would always be on hand. Philip and I would also be there on most days.

The weather was magnificent - not only for the start but for the duration of the event, and at one point Darren even told me that he'd have liked it to be a little cooler with more of a breeze. Reuters and 5 News sent camera crews and journalists, and by the end of the first day the story of Darren's Big Land Rover Pull was widely available on the internet. Both the Reuters footage and the 5 News interviews are available to watch on YouTube.

At just after noon, Darren strapped on his harness and connected himself to the kinetic rope that clipped onto the two D-Rings that Land Rover had so thoughtfully bolted to the bumper back in 1981, as if preparing for this very moment. And then Darren was off, gathering momentum and traction, with his partner Ellie walking

"AS DARREN BEGAN THE PULL BACK, IT WAS OBVIOUS THERE WAS A PROBLEM"



Darren's seven-year-old daughter, Jessica, shows dad how it's done...



With the TV cameras running and Georgia and Jessica for company, Darren begins the Big Land Rover Pull

Nine-year-old Georgia gives it a go!



Nine-year-old Rory wasn't going to miss out either



Maximum effort as Darren gets underway at the start



alongside, while Ellie's son George was at the wheel, and Darren's young daughters, Georgia and Jessica, were holding their dad's hands, giving him mental and emotional support. Georgia and Jessica call him Superman.

The first pull went all the way to the end of the disused runway, but as Darren tugged the Land Rover around and began the pull back, it was obvious to everyone watching that there was a problem. Even with someone behind the wheel, turning the vehicle was creating huge and unsustainable stresses on Darrens' hips. It was also noticeable that the final few hundred yards of the runway had dipped downwards, which was barely noticeable until you turned round and started to walk back up the slope, pulling 1.5-tonnes of Stage 1 V8 88!

Darren continued, but eventually the plan was modified to remove the bone-breaking turns and the uphill slope. Instead, Darren would pull the 88 on a straight and relatively level section of the

runway for a distance of around 300m, at which point the vehicle would be driven back to the beginning of the section, and Darren would walk back using the break as valuable recovery and rehydration time, before starting all over again with another 300-metre pull.

By noon on the Saturday, Darren had covered around 27km, which was less than the target he had set himself. The tracker on the vehicle had been set to record only his pulls and not the return trips the 88 made with a driver behind the wheel. By midday on Sunday, Darren was back on schedule and close to the psychologically important 50km halfway point, which would be breached not long afterwards. Philip and I were there to join in the delight at the achievement of this major milestone, before we set off home to allow Darren to continue the pull into the sunset and challenging hours of darkness.

Philip and I were back at Blackbushe Airport on Tuesday, when Darren's 100 hours were due



“DARREN PUSHED A DELIGHTED AGGIE FOR THE LAST FEW METRES TO BREAK THE FINISHING TAPE TOGETHER”

Darren crosses the finishing line pushing Aggie Candy-Waters, with Darren's partner Ellie alongside

to end at 4.00pm. In fact, he was considerably ahead of schedule, as he told me later. "I did 99.5km then waited, because it was really important to me that Aggie should be there for the finish. If I hadn't paused, I would have completed the 100km in under 80 hours or so." But despite the wait, Darren still managed to complete the record Land Rover Pull at 2.30pm, and the total distance recorded on his watch was 100.38km (62.39 miles).

And what a finish it turned out to be, as everyone gathered round to watch Darren pull the Masai Red Stage 1 prototype for the final few hundred metres and the last of his 231,000 steps, pushing a delighted Aggie in her wheelchair for the last few metres so that they could break the finishing tape together.

And as for the Dunsfold Collection, which played a modest part in this astonishing feat of willpower, strength, resilience and endurance, those of us who were involved with it are very proud to have contributed to it, and remain in awe of Darren's commitment, dedication and sense of purpose. Perhaps The Twins will keep their sticks on for a while longer yet...

Please consider showing your support for Darren and the H-ABC Foundation, a charity supporting children and families affected by one of the world's rarest and most devastating genetic brain diseases, by visiting Darren's 100km Land Rover Pull at justgiving.com. Every donation, no matter the size, helps.



Reuters and 5 News interviewed and filmed Darren at the start



Victory smiles - Darren with Aggie and Frankie, and Frankie's brother Rory on the right



Darren delivered the goods for the H-ABC Foundation