

Beaten to the top of our highest peak ... by a three-legged dog and an infant

DICK LUMSDEN dons hiking gear to celebrate a diamond anniversary

A long, long time ago, in a lifetime far, far away, as a young man I was privileged to meet HRH The Duke of Edinburgh.

The wisecracking Prince Philip was on good form as he presented me with a coveted Duke of Edinburgh gold award in Holyrood Palace.

As a fit young 18-year-old, I remember being struck by two things about him. First, he was actually very funny and his banter with us was really genuine – and second, he seemed really old and craggy (at the time he would have been 53!).

Last week, I was struck by two more thoughts, not entirely unrelated. First... Prince Philip celebrated his 95th birthday and – remarkably – in my memory doesn't seem that much older or craggier.

And second, there I was back in Scotland, standing on top of Ben Nevis, once again participating in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. Only this time, 42 years after collecting that Gold Award, I was no longer as fit as I had been then, and I certainly didn't feel there was the same huge age difference between me and HRH.

With a week of recovery now behind me, I can glibly say that climbing Ben Nevis was a fantastic



■ Mrs Lumsden and I looking more cheerful than we felt on the summit of Ben Nevis and, below, on the way up.

Photos: CONTRIBUTED

new experience. But at the time, as Mrs Lumsden and I wheezed our way to the top in a six-hour marathon, it was just Hell.

To explain. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme is 60 years old this year – as am I. Over

the course of those 60 years, a little over 253,000 people have achieved a gold award as it has grown into a global challenge – but back in 1974 gold awards were still relatively rare.

To celebrate its diamond anniversary this year, the DofE invited people to tackle a challenge and, if successful (and if you reached your fundraising target) you would receive a special diamond award. So I decided it was time to do my hiking gear and get cracking. Supported by Mrs Lumsden, my son and his fiancée, we planned our Ben Nevis ascent. I say ascent, as I was not stupid enough to actually "climb" the monster, we would be taking the hiking path 1,349 metres (or 4,406 feet if you prefer) to the summit. How bad could it be? Just a stroll

in the hills right? Wrong... it was, quite simply, the hardest physical thing I have ever done in my life. To put it into perspective, there are 1,576 stairs to the top of the Empire State Building in New York... climbing Ben Nevis was like doing that five times... and then coming down again five times.

It was just a relentless cycle of climb and stop, climb and stop – although all around us there were a great many people who clearly had youth on their side but didn't seem to need to stop every 50 yards like Mrs Lumsden and I.

We were passed by a man with a three-legged dog recovering from bone cancer (the dog, not the man), we were passed by a young woman carrying an baby in a sling, and we later saw her changing the baby's nappy on the summit... now there's

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something you don't see every day! But as we climbed higher and the slopes got steeper, the views were extraordinary – when I could lift my head up enough to take them in.

At 4,000 feet, a mountain guide encouraged us on saying not much higher now, and for a second our spirits lifted – until we turned the corner and saw that the next few hundred feet up was through knee deep snow. Oh joy!

But we eventually reached the top... and no, there is no café, no souvenir shop and no nice grassy areas to have your picnic.

The top is just an area the size of a large garden, completely covered in sharp boulders, blasted by the wind, almost permanently in cloud, and with vertical cliffs on three sides cunningly disguised by overhanging snow and ice.

Pausing only to savour the moment, force down a sandwich for energy and take the obligatory photographs, we turned for home.

I thought going up was bad, but coming down was even worse. Exhausted legs, difficult paths alongside treacherous cliffs – oh and a torrential downpour to rub it in.

Six hours up and over four hours down, we didn't break any speed records for sure, but for a couple of 60-year-olds, we were rightly proud of our achievement.

And for good measure I raised a few hundred pounds for the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme to help some other young person enjoy what I have enjoyed down the years.

My fundraising page is still open if you feel you'd like to help a good cause... simply go to www.justgiving.com type in Dick Lumsden and you can make a donation which goes directly to the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme.

Just don't ask me to ever do anything like that again!

■ Dick Lumsden is managing director of Owl Marketing Solutions, one of the few companies specialising in marketing and advertising to the 50+ group. dlumsden@owlms.com



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