



Walking the Worcestershire Way: a personal account and report by 44 year old Martyn Wells who was diagnosed with Polyarteritis Nodosa (PAN) in 2012.

On the 29 June 2013 a group of 14 walkers rose to the challenge of walking the Worcestershire Way, a 31-mile trek through the verdant, remote hills and valleys of west Worcestershire. In total the group raised over £5,000 to walk in the name of charity Vasculitis UK. This is my personal account of the day, both as a walker, and as a vasculitis patient.

The grey gloom of a cloudy pre-dawn sky showed no threat of rain as I awoke at 03:45. It didn't take long to get ready, although today it included putting tubi-grips on both legs to support my Achilles tendons and prevent inflammation of the lower legs, a bright green Vasculitis UK T-shirt and my trusty walking boots. Knowing that ascending the hills was going to hurt I took some slow release morphine to help get me through what lay ahead.

With rucksacks packed full of dry socks, sandwiches, water, sports drinks, dextrose tablets, and in my case pharmaceuticals, we headed off. With 6 people in my car, the atmosphere was nervous and exciting as we made our way through the empty roads and countryside to arrive in Bewdley at 05:30.

It wasn't long before the 6 became 14. Or should I say 15, as Dilys, a member of Vasculitis UK joined the gathering to wave us off and offer any help we could need; little did several members of our crew know how much they were going to need her later on. With all the paperwork done, maps given distributed and final checks made, we headed down to the start, the atmosphere buzzing with babbling conversations. Following a roll call of photos at the start and a few words of thanks and motivation from me, we were off.



From left to right: Martin, Nathan, Sarah Pittaway, Gary Dolphin, Chris Jewson, Alan Link, Kelly Fee, Martyn Wells, Hazel Chislett, Hayley Dolphin, Rob Bray, Steve Leith, Sara Moyden, Andy Mayhew



Starting Line: An already tired looking Martyn Wells does his best to give an uplifting and motivational speech.

Conditions were perfect for walking as we set off just before 06:00. The weather was dry with light breezes, the sky mainly overcast and the temperature a cool 14c as an exhilarated group set off down the quayside along the River Severn. Bewdley snoozed as the group cruised through empty streets, the early pace set fast by adrenalin and the anticipation of a day of fun, whilst good natured banter and boisterous conversation belied the peace of the early morning.



Bewdley, Severn Riverside: Early pacemakers Sarah and Chris lead the way over the old cobbles of the riverside path.

Quickly the group found the countryside as the Worcestershire Way passed through a church yard and offered up its first hill on the way up to Ribbesford Woods. The hill had the immediate effect of stretching the group out to a trail of walkers several hundred metres long as the Way made its way into flat open farmland with views over the hills that lay await near Abberley.

A small gap in the hedge presented a descent between two fairways at Little Lakes golf course, the waymarker difficult to spot amidst the greenery. The first group, which by now comprised of 9 walked across the still and silent golf course, devoid of any play as all the sensible golfers were still tucked up in bed. The lead group then crossed several open fields before entering the Heightington Road.

At around 7:20 the lead group took a series of calls from the other group, who had lost their way somewhere on the golf course. Now over a mile ahead, some instructions were given, but it was impossible to know where the other groups now were, so going back to find them would now have helped and so instructions were left on possible routes. Mobile signal strength was intermittent at best, and getting Internet connections to run Location Services impossible.

Back in the lead group, the Way took another dart into the hedgerows, which again was poorly signed. In an effort to help the second group, an arrow of branches was left on the lane to point the way, but they never got to see this marker.

The pace in the group was steady and conversations flowed freely as the kilometers clicked steadily away. We headed through ancient woodland, and crossed the gurgling Dick Brook at Joan's Hole, a strange and muddy place with a tarpaulin outdoor shower and some builders who were starting work on goodness knows what in the mud.

The path turned into some beautiful open fields of wheat, whilst Abberley Hill started to loom somewhat ominously ahead.



The beautiful wheat fields near Netherton House Farm as the group heads towards Abberley Hill.

We passed the 7 mile marker at 08:17, 2 hours and 25 minutes into the walk, returning a respectable 3 mph for our troubles. Our pathway dipped down into another valley, and at this stage, Alan was having some trouble with an old war wound in his knee. As we pressed on it was becoming clear that Alan was having some trouble. Like us, he was oblivious of the climb that was ahead.



A spring still in their step: The group head on after 7 miles.

After a brief stint on a minor road, Alan was trailing by several hundred metres. We phoned him, and he had made the decision to exit the walk once he reached our first rest point, which was earmarked for the other side of Abberley Hill. He was determined to finish this leg, but at his own pace, so our 9 had become 8.

We left the road and joined a path that ascended very rapidly along the side of Shavers End quarry, where limestone laid down in the Tethys Ocean 400m years ago was mined until 1993. The ascent was through some thick woodland, which had kept the path muddy from the rain the previous 2 days. The climb then became a complete scramble and we all needed to encourage each other to complete it. Dextrose tablets and lucozade were gulped as the group again spread out. The path broke left at the top of the main climb, and continued to rise and fall for what seemed like a good distance. We could see and hear circling buzzards soaring on the developing thermals as we trekked along the Abberley Hill ridgeline.

After 3 hours of walking, we finally got our first glimpse of the finishing target way off in the distance. Behind Abberley School rose the spectre of the Malvern Hills.



The view from Abberley Hill: Looking south towards Great Malvern

Buoyed on by our first sight of the end, and probably from the freshly consumed energy intake, the Way eventually started a rapid descent that wound down the hillside into Abberley. At this point we had been underway for 3.5 hours; the ascent had made its impact on our mile times, and also on another member of our team.



Poor old Sara had become the next victim to surrender to the Worcestershire Way. A combination of the pace and ascent over Abberley Hill had proven too much, and on the descent into the valley she made her mind up to also call it quits at the rest stop.

Further back behind us "Big Al" Link had manged it up to the top of the hill and was taking his time to cover the remaining distance to the rest stop.

Knowing our group was now down to 7 was a bit of a blow, but at the same time it was a relief to know that people were not going to punish themselves to complete the trek. We broke out of woods on to the lane at our determined rest point, just as John (Hazel's father) our marshal for the day arrived with supplies. Our timing had been perfect so far; the first third of the walk completed in just over 3.5 hours.



It was a relief to sit down for a moment, take on board some more food and restock our water supplies from John's horde. It was also a good opportunity to take our boots off, get some fresh air to our feet and put on a fresh and dry pair of socks. By now I was experiencing the familiar aching above the ankles in both my legs and despite the morphine knew it was time for a tad more breakthrough pain relief. I shared some Ibuprofen around with a few others who were also feeling the burn.

We never saw Alan get back to the rest stop, but said goodbye to Sara and headed off. We later learned that Dilys our helper on the day had arrived at the rest stop and kindly took both Sara and Alan home to Worcester to recover and rest.

We trudged on from the stop suitably refuelled and passed through the grounds of Abberley School, passing under the Clock Tower and emerging from the woods to cross the B4203. Rising from the meadow in front of us sprung Walsgrove Hill, the path cutting straight up the slope.

Negotiating both the sheep that filled the hillside and the angle of slope could have proved too much for Rob Bray, who nearly took a tumble which would have resulted in several hundred feet of rolling downhill. We all reached the top of the hill with thighs burning; only 11 miles in and the signs of cramp in the quadriceps was not a good sign. Despite being only 30 minutes into the second leg it wasn't too long more sandwiches and dextrose tablets were passed around.

The mood in the group was now more sombre; the bout of recent rapid climbs had drained energy levels as people took time to draw within themselves for reserves of strength and energy. This walk takes as much mental energy as physical endurance.



Rob Bray, above pictured without sheep or energy drink.

Moving into the 5th hour of the trek, both the temperature and humidity were starting to rise and the sun started to burn through the intermittent shield of stratocumulus above us. My memory of the next hour or so of walking is quite hazy; several short climbs in and out of woodlands. Briefly on and the off roads. A blur.

I concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other for a period of time; I could sense my energy level was dropping again, and I could still feel the pain that you become accustomed to with vasculitis still gnawing away at my legs and ankles. I was very glad that I had double thickness tubi-grips over both legs; normally they would have been swollen and puffy by now, but the bandages were serving their purpose admirably.

I could see a bit of discomfort in one or two others in our group, but a steely determination had settled over us. I knew at this stage that everyone left in the group, including me, was going to get to the finish line.

Elsewhere, there was no further news from the other group, and several attempts to reach them by mobile phone failed as we dipped in and out of pockets of signal in the rural outback of west Worcestershire

More woods and hedgerows followed before another short climb took us over Rodge Hill. Sarah and Chris continued to set the pace, visible at the front of the group in their striking green Vasculitis UK T- shirts and walking poles, whilst Andy, Kelly, Rob, Steve and I bumbled along behind.



Signpost: Kelly looks excited to know that there is "only" 17.5 miles to go

For several miles we passed through a fertile valley as farmland rolled across the horizon, and we walked through fields of onions and cabbages. In the distance Ankerdine Hill showed itself, and there was some hesitancy about another climb, up another bloody hill.

The farmland provided our group with some relief from the slopes and a couple of miles over level ground saw the pace pick up slightly much to all our relief.

We heard that the other group had just checked in at the first rest stop, having taken a 6-mile detour around the county to arrive at the Abberley rendezvous. It was a relief to know they were back on track, but we all feared the additional mileage would take its toll as the day got warmer and longer. At least they had managed to avoid Shavers End quarry and arrived at the Abberley check in 2 hours after us.

We were on pace to complete the walk around 18:00, so we expected the other group back in Malvern around 20:00.



Signpost: Rob and Martyn share relief at passing the halfway point.

Amidst the rolling countryside loomed another sign post, which showed we had passed the halfway point. Spirits rose in the group at this milestone; the pace was still steady as morning turned into afternoon.

Eventually we crossed another whispering field of wheat, swaying gently under the warming sun. The temperature nudged 20c and the humidity continued to rise. Common blue damselflies flitted gracefully across the crop; we had reached the River Teme.

The path joined the banks of the river as it flowed south and we trudged on, pushing each other onwards. Chris and Sarah had a lunch drop off pick up arranged several miles ahead, and so they pressed on at the front, striding out for lunch.

At this point, the heat and humidity, as well as the huge rucksack had now caught up with Andy, who needed some time to cool off. Stopping at a convenient bench, he whipped off his rucksack and boots, heading down the river bank for a paddle and some cool relief. We agreed to meet Andy again at the next rest point over Ankerdine Hill, so our number dropped again to 6.

We passed Berrow Hill to our right, the site of an ancient Iron Age fort, before hitting the tarmac and walking into the village of Berrow Green. In the bright warm sunshine, the inviting beer garden of the Admiral Rodney Inn greeted us.

We pulled in as Chris and Sarah took their lunch, refuelling with more water. At this stage the growl in my legs had become a howl; so I took a large dose of Tramadol, knowing this would provide at least several hours of proper relief. We all looked knackered. Ahead was Ankerdine Hill.

We set off agreeing to meet Chris and Sarah at the next rest stop too, and all of a sudden the group was reduced to 4. At this stage we handed map reading and pace making duties over to Kelly who seemed to have more energy at this point than the rest of us put together.

We left the road again just past the Admiral Rodney, and ploughed back through bumpy farmland where Kelly made friends with a farmer in his red tractor mowing the hay. From the field we passed into the curiously named Nipple Coppice.

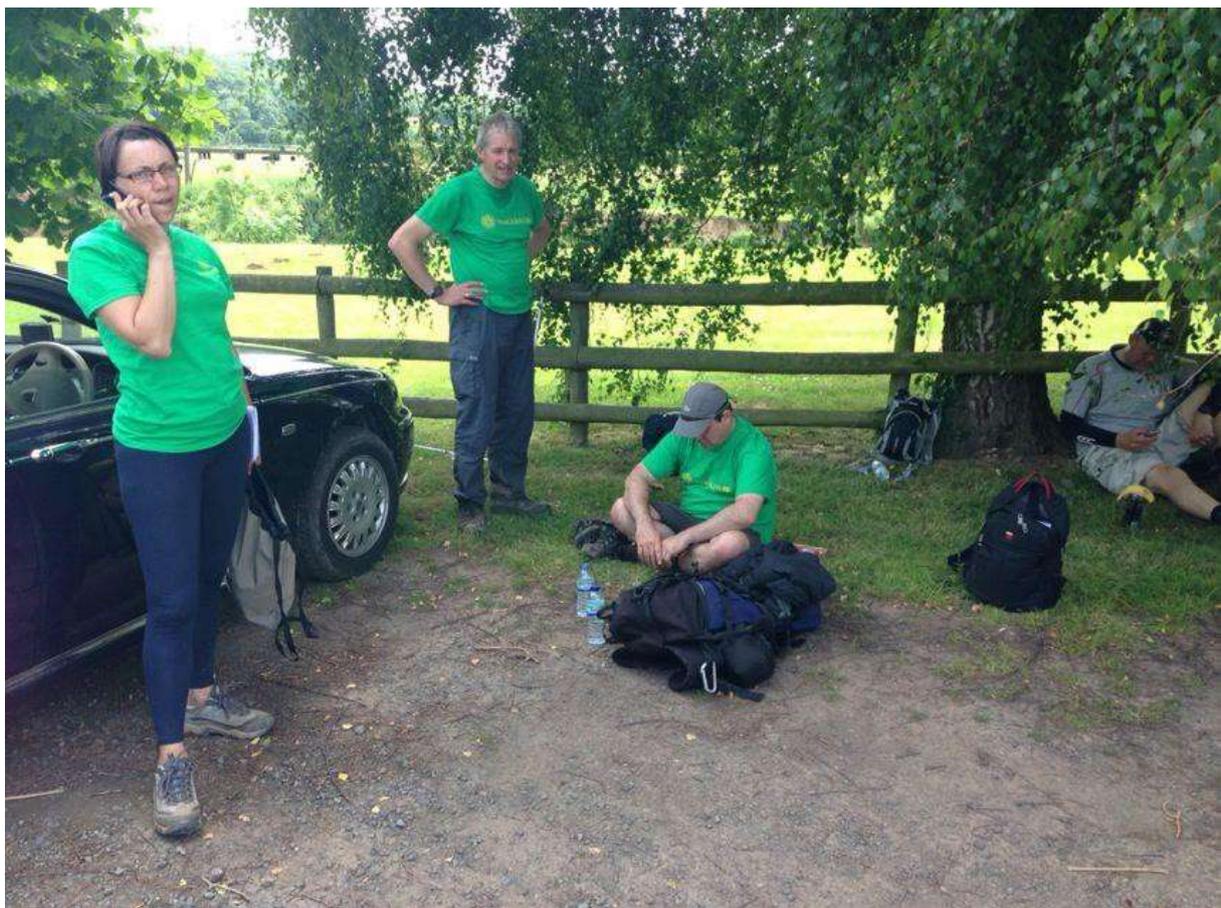
At this point the spirit of the group rose, with us laughing and joking; perhaps in the adversity of the relative size of the group now. After dropping through some woodland and over another stream, we took a shaded path through trees that rose steadily. We exited the treeline to the last 150 metres or so of climb; straight up Ankerdine Hill.

I was glad for the relief being provided by the Tramadol; the final slope was a real struggle and Rob, Steve and Kelly all cheered and cajoled me up to the top, a sweating grimacing mess of a walker by this stage. More water, a melted snickers bar, my remaining jelly babies and more dextrose tablets were consumed rapidly.

We crossed the common with views across many of the valleys we had walked down; but by now we all a little bit too tired to think about getting cameras out to take pictures. I willed myself over the common and into the trees on the south side of the hill before we picked a sharp incline down through the cool shade of some old oak trees. I knew this would exit on to the steep road down to Knightwick and our final rest point. I had got through "the wall".

We followed the road down to the car park at the Talbot Inn, arriving within 5 minutes of our scheduled time, which wasn't bad given we were 20 miles into the walk now.

We met again with our marshal John; we were glad to get our hands on a fresh supply of water, and sat in the shadow of some trees, boots off. Around us, the beer garden was full of people enjoying a pleasant Saturday lunch in the 22c warmth. We sat sweating and cursing in the shade. At this point, Rob and I took some diarolyte; normally used to provide relief from diarrhoea, this powder balance the salts in your body and is useful in combatting cramp, which is something the big man and I had experienced on Ankerdine Hill.



20 miles down: Grateful for the shade, the group contemplates progress and life in general

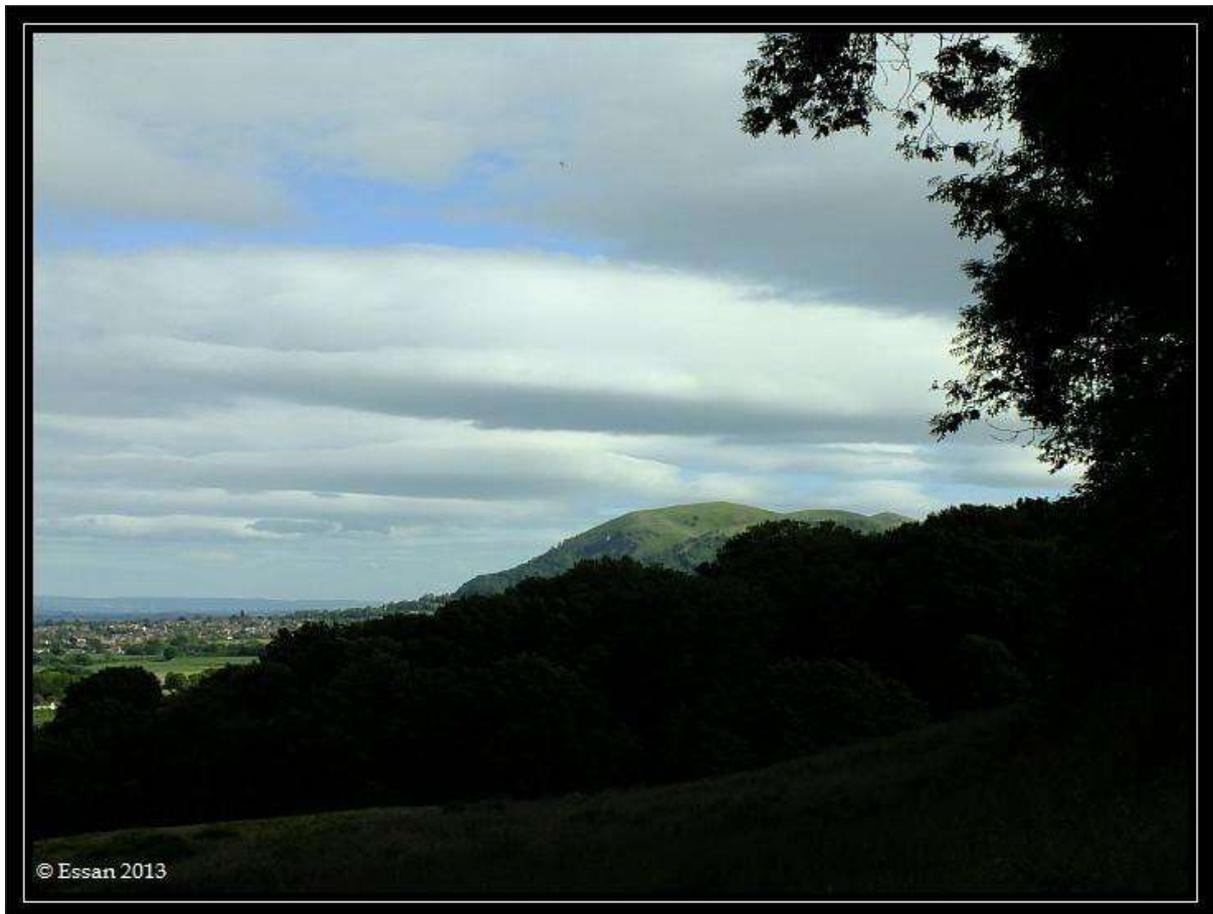
Shortly after arriving, Chris and Sarah also turned up, having made a good effort to catch us up on the journey from the Admiral Rodney. They had bumped into and passed Andy on Ankerdine Hill.

We supped up, but fearful of getting too comfortable we took as much water as we could carry for the last leg and packed up to head off. Andy wanted 10 minutes more and said he would catch us up on the last leg; but this was the last we saw of Andy until much later.

Galvanised from the stop, and enjoying the full benefit of pain relief, I decided to take the lead and set the pace. We left the lovely Talbot Inn behind and crossed the River Teme where a fisherman on the bank was surrounded by a herd of curious cows. Crossing the A44, we headed up the longest stretch of tarmac before heading to the ridge line of the limestone Suckley Hills. Here a damp, cool and long path cut through the trees like a green tunnel, the Way squelchy with ankle high mud in many places.

As the path rose and fell and my pain and cramp dissipated, I stepped up the pace, enjoying the freedom of unwinding my legs for a full pace stretch. Occasionally I would glance behind to check I was not leaving anybody behind. At the back of the group, Rob and Steve guzzled water and looked perplexed as I ploughed on with new found energy. I was in my own place now, and had found what they call "the zone".

The Malvern Hills were now visible to our left through the trees, tantalisingly close, yet still over 8 miles away.



North Hill: But we didn't know at this stage what was still to come

For several miles I pushed my body hard, knowing the pain relief was there but also knowing that when the pain relief wore off I was going to be in trouble; therefore distance and ground covered now was really important and would prevent further punishment

From the Suckley Hills we powered into Crew Hill, but the inclines now were gentle. We exited the woodland at Longley Green and the landscape changed again woodland made way for orchards.

My time as pacemaker had been and gone, and the pain in my legs started breaking down the resistance that I had put in its way. Chris and Sarah took off at this point, with Kelly closely behind.

Steve was really feeling it now too, so Rob and I passed a few miles with Kelly 100 yards in front and Steve and 100 yards behind. It felt like we were all falling to pieces.

Eventually Kelly held up for us as Chris and Sarah disappeared from view, Steve caught up, and the 4 of us flopped down in the shade of an orchard for an unscheduled rest. The distance and pace was upon us, and as we sat or lay in the grass, North Hill smiled at us in the warm sunshine. We shared what little Ibuprofen and paracetamol that was left amongst us.



A lovely day for a walk: Lenticular clouds rise over the distant Chilterns buoyed by the warm rising air

It was time for the last push. Roads, fields and orchards started to become a blur until we passed through Cowleigh Park Farm and approached the outskirts of Great Malvern, rising through slopes, to meet the first urban landscape since Bewdley 11 hours before.

We took the road into Great Malvern up to the Beauchamp Fountain, where we found the path up between a row of houses. The path consisted of a series of uneven steep steps; the 4 of us limped, hobbled and spectacularly swore our way up. Fatigue was now heavy in all of us.

At the top of the stairs a 5-minute debate ensued. Do we turn left or right? The debate was not helped by the mischievous owner of one of the houses, who was determined to send us the wrong way. We chose the right way in the end and headed right, where we found The Lamb pub. We then spent 2 minutes debating which of 2 routes would take us up on to the hills.

Shortening tempers and exasperation were coming to the fore. Eventually we found our way out on to the Malvern Hills, only to have to follow another path for half a mile in the opposite direction that rose steeply. Our group developed a theory along the walk, when deciding which path to choose, always pick the one that goes up the bloody steepest hill. Again this was true.

As we ascended North Hill our group of 4 split for the last time into 2 groups of 2, as myself and Kelly kept pace and Steve and Rob trailed. Up we climbed until we hit the path that circles the peak of

North Hill. The 3 counties were spread out in beautiful late afternoon sunshine as we picked our way around the path. We were too hot, too tired and too bothered now to care.



The end is nigh: Great Malvern, from the east slope of North Hill

Familiar landmarks in Malvern came into sight to our east, and we could retrace our entire route to the north back over the hills and valleys. With great relief the escape path down off the hills finally loomed into vision and I lumbered painfully down the descent, which steepened as it reached St Anne's Well near the terminus of the slope with Great Malvern.

The final steps of descent were agony, taken inch by inch as every sinew and muscle strained and groaned. We hit the road and the level ground, for the final 200 metres walked in silence, taking the chance to absorb what had played out over the day.

Metres from the finish line, we waved to John, who as ever was at the right place at the right time. We waited several minutes for Steve and Rob to descend from the hill, and then walked together to the finish line.

Some tired pictures taken, it was time to sit down and rest awhile and see what had happened to the others. It was now over and we had done it. The relief was incredible.



31 miles in the bag: 4 very tired and happy walkers

Post-script: Andy Mayhew made it to Foley Arms around an hour later, equally sore, tired and relieved. The other group arrived at the second rest stop in Knightwick at 17:30, 4 hours after the first group had passed through. The group then walked the third leg as The New Inn is Storridge. In light of the additional mileage walked during the morning trying to get to Abberley, they also completed their own version of the 31-mile Worcestershire Way.

Do I have any regrets? If I did it again I would want to spend more time sharing the experience with my partner Hazel. Bit would I do it again? Ha!