

# Alan Kay

## THE WAY RACE 2004

The start 1a.m.

I may look cool but I'm a bag of nerves

I'm sitting here looking at a blank page, where do I start. It's hard to put into words how I feel about the West Highland Way Race, at the prize giving, it was said that it becomes a bit of your heart, I would agree with that. It is a race that is just about you, and you alone, to finish is what it is all about and the pride to stand up and receive your glass at the end. Mind you, some just can't stand, others can only shuffle, and a few look like they haven't run the race. Pride, is what it's all about

I'm 62 years old, I've run the race for the last 9 nine years and I'm going for my tenth in a row, it's late Friday night I haven't slept all day and I'm standing in the car park at Milngavie station waiting to start at one o'clock on Saturday morning, I must be aff my heid.

Dario, the race organizer, and West Highland Way fanatic gives the usual briefing (wish it was brief), and then it's into the tunnel for the start.

Everyone is laughing, talking and smiling, they'll soon get the smile wiped off their faces, and by the end there won't be too many talking either.

Head torches on and the word GO is all it takes to send eighty odd, and I mean odd people in to a frantic frenzy of running. Out of the tunnel and up the steps, the race has begun.

Mugdock wood in the dark packed with runners on a narrow track is a real fun way to start off, trying not to bump into each other or trip up is the best you can hope for. It's not easy to pass people so you just have to go with the flow. The path does a sharp right turn up a hill (that's where we all went wrong two years ago, and guess what! Some of them did it again, it adds an extra mile on, and no, I didn't go wrong). I have a few Jelly babies as I will throughout the race A few miles on and as the runners are thinning out the track goes sharp left down a short road then sharp right and I suddenly came face to face with runners coming towards me, they had gone straight on and ended up in the sewage works, what fun. It's still dark and now and I'm more or less on my own, I can see people ahead but I'm not gaining on them. I'm out of the woods now and the ground opens up more and is rougher under foot, I caught up with a German, whose dream was to run this race. You could tell by his voice how much it meant to him. That was the first time I fell, I went down heavily on my left side and my elbow dug into my ribs, my shoulder and ribs hurt like hell, but all you can do is pick yourself up dust yourself down and carry on. Drymen at 12 miles is the first place I meet my backup crew, Anne, Jill, Simon and my driver Iain, they make sure I'm fed and watered and send me on my way. It's getting light by now so I don't need my torch any more. Up into Garadhban forest and at about 18 miles on open but rocky ground, I fell again, on my right side this time my right knee slammed into a rock so I don't know which side hurts more I'm not very good at staying upright. Conic hill is the first real test it's about 1200 feet and very steep, I have to walk up most of it, going down is worse, as it is steeper and very difficult to keep my feet as I head for the first checkpoint at Balmaha car park at the side of Loch Lomond. 20 miles in 3 hours 43 minutes doing O.K. My crew make sure I'm all right, and I'm on my way down to the loch side, legs are a bit sore but hopefully they will ease off, and after a few hundred yards the first of many climbs they're not long but quite steep, most of the track wide enough for only one person and as I pass some walkers they all move aside and clap as I go past looking at me as if I was mad, but it's being mad the stops me going insane. The rest of this section is part on road and part in woods it twists and turns in all directions. My legs are beginning to feel a bit heavy and I'm getting a little tired it's quite cold and the wind is right in my face as I come onto the road again for the last time on this section.

Rowardennen. My crew are waiting for me with a cup of tea and a sausage sandwich, which I'm going to have to share with a few thousand midges, as soon as I stopped they came at me with a vengeance and within minutes my legs had so many spots, if my crew had found a pen they were going to play join the dots. Five minutes and I was off again leaving the midges behind. The track is wide here but there are some very long climbs past Ben Lomond and at about 32 miles it's down to a single person track, over very rough terrain all rocks and roots, then out of the trees I see the hotel, a very steep climb over a bridge and down a long flight of steps that make my legs really ache. What fool put a long flight of steps there!

Inversnaid

34 miles, 6 hours 51 minutes. Stopped long enough for a wee chat, some water and a banana and I'm off again. The tracks not to bad at this stage but it soon narrows to single track and very rough again and at Rob Roy's cave there are steps going almost vertically down, I have to go very carefully, I don't fancy falling down on those rocks. Then the smell hit me, a very strong stench as if something was dead, it was a goat, not dead, just smelly, and standing at the side of the path looking at me. Only another goat could like that aroma. It took one look at me and stood its ground. I didn't fancy getting butted so I made my way round some trees and back onto the track. Coward or what? By now I've run out of water and have to find a decent stream to get more, they tell you not to do that, but, needs must. I'm out of the woods and passing our old checkpoint at Beinglas farm, then on to a wide track for the three miles to the next stop.

Derrydaroch , 44 miles, 9 hours 22 minutes feeling fine, sore, tired, but fine

Now! My crew are not going to like this, but for the very first time ever they got it wrong I was supposed to get a jammy piece, but all I got was a truffle. Talk about let down! I was looking forward to my piece, and what did I get ?? a truffle. Enough said

About a mile further on, the track crosses the main road and my jammy piece was waiting for me, so I'll let them off with a slapped hand and a ticking off. The track goes up a long hill round the back of Crianlarich then a few sharp hills before a long descent to the main road at Mountgreen,

I get more water from my crew and head across the road and into farmland. The running is easier here mainly flat on a

wide farm road past the ruin of St Fillans priory, past a farm then back across the main road and along a track to the next stop

Tyndrum 52 miles 11 hours 37 minutes Food stop

I leave Tyndrum up a long hill my legs are screaming in pain to start with, but they ease off as I get to the top and I can start to run again this part of the run is mainly down hill and is on good track. It's still cold and the wind is quite strong now and straight into my face as it will be for the rest of the race. It's only seven miles to the next stop and this section goes past without incident.

Bridge of Orchy, 13 hours 11 minutes. 59 miles.

The bad news is it's raining now, the good news is it's got rid of the midgies. Short break then its onward and upwards, and it is upwards. A long climb over the top of Mam Carraigh and a long decant to Inverornon Hotel, could do with a pint but I'd better give it a miss. My crew are waiting for me at Victoria Bridge at the start of Rannoch Moor, it's raining steadily now but just a heavy drizzle. Refill my water bottle the I'm on my way

Over the stile and it's a long slow climb up Rannoch Moor the scenery is fantastic looking across to the Black Mount and Beinn Chaorach and by the time I'm about half way up the moor I'm passing first of the Highland Challenge walkers coming the other way, most nod, some smile, and some clap and say "well done". At least one of the words was right, and it wasn't well. As I come round a bend and over a rise I can see Kingshouse, but it's three miles away and it's a very long three miles. Down past Blackrock cottage and over the main road again then down the track and into Kingshouse 16 hours 16 minutes for 72 miles, doing well.

Leaving Kingshouse my legs don't work I have to walk for a bit until they ease off. I go up the road till I come to a stile then it's on to rough ground heading along the base of Beinn a Chrulaiste and back onto the main road at Altnafeadh. Now the race begins. The Devils staircase is in front of me and it looks higher than I remember, I'm breathing heavy, ache all over, every joint is sore, heart pounding, my muscles are screaming at me and I'm tired as I slog upwards, but apart from that I'm fine. Over the top, feeling good now as I head downhill zigzagging towards the pump station then steeply downhill to Kinlochleven.

19 hours 58 minutes. 81 miles

That's not a smile it's a grimace

Because of the weather conditions and the threat of snow, Yes, I said snow; (it's summer in Scotland what else would you expect!) my backup runner was asked by the checkpoint to run the last stage with me, so Simon the fool was volunteered by the ladies, and believing it was only ten miles said he'd run with me. There's one born every minute! So it's straight up the 800 feet onto Mamore moor. Simon keeps talking to me as we make our way towards the ruined cottage at Lairigmor, it's nice to have company. We can see a car ahead of us, it's not the usual thing to see up here, and away up on the mountain to our right is a man making his way along a ridge. It's getting late and starting to get dark as we pass a Landrover and behind it a man walking a dog, it turns out the man up the hill lost his dog in the morning up on the high ridge and the other man, a walker, found a dog. Alls well that ends well, as they say. I'm very tired by now and I'm being passed by some of the other runners, I just have to keep going. The lights of Fort William are a welcoming sight as we make our way down the forest track to the Brave Heart car park then on to the main road, and into the Lochaber leisure center to check in my number.

Finished

22 hours 57 ½ minutes 95 miles I'm knackered

All I want now is a cup of tea and a wee sleep

Sunday Breakfast

I can't believe that I have run this race for 10 consecutive years, that's 950 miles. When I did it the first time, I thought I would only do it once, no one is stupid enough to do it twice, are they? How wrong I was.

Prize giving

I was in 19th place. Quite happy with that

And I'm one of only three to have completed ten races

One word sums up this race

PRIDE

My thanks as usual go to my backup crew, who have been with me for most of the ten years I have been running this race, they are simply the best.

Anne Christie

Jill Foggie

Simon Hunter

Iain Murray

Thank you all again, for without your help and support I could not run this race. It is a team effort, and I am a very proud part of that team.

Alan Kay