

## Andrew DuBois 2006

Rannoch Moor. The vast expanse of Britain's largest uninhabited wilderness surrounds me. I am all alone save for the peaks of the magnificent Scottish Highlands that can be seen in every direction. Its 4pm Saturday 24th June, I have been going since 1am this morning and am now walking, my legs rebelling against the brain's command to run, my energy levels seem to have hit rock bottom despite forcing bananas, gels and sports drink down my throat. I stop and sit on a rock and contemplate the magnificent surroundings, at least I can enjoy that. It's more than 10km till the next checkpoint and after that another 45km to the finish. I recall the course map and remember that the biggest climbs are in the last 40km. It seems a long, long way away. Help is at least 2 hours walk away but while I can still walk I may as well do that so I get up wondering how I find myself in this state and start to put one foot in front of the other. I'm not sure I can make it to the finish. Should I give up? I remember Catherine asking when should she tell me to pull out "if I'm shivering uncontrollably don't let me go on unless I warm up". I have a fear of hypothermia. I am cold and have already stopped to put on all the clothes I have with me. Maybe by the time I reach the checkpoint I will be too cold to continue and then I won't be giving up. I reason that nobody will think any less of me if I give up, but deep down I know that's not true, there's one person that would be bitterly disappointed if I gave up - me. I decided to do this race to challenge myself both physically and mentally and giving up would seem like a failure. I decide to worry about that later and just keep moving, keep moving, keep moving...

At 1am, the gun goes off and I am away. It's the start of a 95mile challenge to run from Milngavie on the outskirts of Glasgow to Fort William along the West Highland Way. A route that passes through some of the most magnificent scenery in Scotland. The pace feels comfortable as I settle in with the lead pack. I have no idea where I am going so I decide to stick with the pack until daylight (barely 2 hours away this far north). As we run people are already dropping off the pace and eventually I find myself alone with only two runners just out of sight ahead of me. I slow down and wait for some other runners. Lost in the dark this early on would not be the best of starts. It is quite surreal running through the forest in the dark with only a small headlamp to see. The only sound is the footsteps of the runners and the sloshing of water in water bottles. There is little conversation happening as we all try and find a comfortable pace and contemplate the long day ahead. After a couple of hours we start climbing the first hill and see pink clouds on the horizon indicating the sun won't be too far away. That will depend if this misty rain clears though.

The descent from Conic hill is challenging, steep, rocky, and slippery not like the smooth gravel slopes of Hampstead Heath that I had trained on. Still I don't lose too much ground on the runner in front of me and it is light enough to see by now without the headlamp so I am happy running by myself. Not long after the descent lies the first checkpoint. I check my watch and am surprised to find I am 15mins ahead of schedule - it didn't feel that fast. My approach startles my support crew into action and they frantically fill up bottles, relieve me of my torch and batteries, change socks (I put one foot in a foot of mud earlier) and tend to any other needs I have. I set off again after probably only 2 minutes on the next leg. It wasn't the slickest of stops and seemed a bit chaotic but I had what I needed and was on my way again.

My support crew without whom I would have no chance of finishing this race consisted of Catherine, Jan, Susie, Ken and Eckhardt. They had all generously volunteered to help me out and I was extremely grateful. Any early morning chaos in the first checkpoint was made up for in buckets with what they did for me later on.

The next section of the race was along the banks of Loch Lomond - the largest Loch in Scotland. It starts off well, myself and another runner passing time by chatting away as we run along some easy terrain and nice views of the Loch. This all changes very quickly. The path we are following becomes narrower and narrower until we both conceded there is no path anymore. We are lost. We traipse through knee to waist deep foliage in the hope of regaining the path but to no avail. I keep thinking we will find the path soon and losing 10-15minutes in a race this long is no big drama. Besides I'm not really aiming for a certain time, merely to finish knowing I'd given it 110% would be enough whatever the time. Eventually we realise we aren't going to stumble onto the path without checking a map and compass. Once done we hack our way back to the path in around 5 minutes or so. I think we spent maybe 40 minutes stumbling around, not great but no real disaster.

Checkpoint number two and another sock change (I put the same foot through another foot of mud, if I keep this up I'll run out of socks very soon). The support team had everything ready this time and I am in and out in a flash. The path continues along Loch Lomond but calling it a path is very generous indeed. It twists and turns, over rocks, boulders, trees, with very few sections that you can actually run. Despite this it is very scenic with views along the loch the whole way. It is impossible to get into a rhythm so I run when I can and climb over obstacles as fast as I can when I can't. Finally the "path" leaves the loch and resumes what you would recognise as a trail. It feels great to break out into a run for more than 50metres without having to stop and scramble over rocks. I notice my knees are a little sore as are my quads. They aren't used to this kind of terrain. I remember reading somewhere that the legs get to a point where they can't hurt anymore than they already are so you just deal with it and keep moving. I'm not that bad yet but there is still a long way to go. As I approach the next checkpoint I see Catherine waiting for me and we run the last few hundred metres together. It is a real boost whenever I reach a checkpoint and running in with her really gave me a lift. She asks how I am and I reply my legs are pretty sore but I don't feel too bad. Since we were not even half way this sets Catherine thinking "if they are sore now how are you going to manage another 80km". Fortunately she doesn't tell me this. By now the support team have become highly organised, each person having a different role, one mixing my sports drink,

another emptying my backpack of used gels and stocking up with new ones, someone else offering me extra food and clothing, stocking up on salt tablets, filling up my water supply, offering towels to wipe my face down etc etc. I feel like a formula 1 driver at a grand prix pitstop.

Off I set again. Next checkpoint is over halfway I tell myself and I am feeling ok despite my sore legs. I start climbing, it is impossible to run almost any of the climbs, so I try and keep the pace up striding out uphill as fast as I can. Finally the path starts to descend, although running downhill is now also very challenging. My quads are pretty sore and don't like steep downhills, yet I manage to shuffle down the steep parts and run along the gentler slopes. Half way down I stumble over a rock and fall to the ground. I lie there contemplating the damage, my knee hurts but I'm pretty sure that's just a bruised patella - it will hurt but shouldn't affect my running, my ankle also hurts but I'm not sure what that is. I stand up to inspect the damage and test out the leg. No blood and nothing drastic pain wise so I continue on. Finally the path flattens out and I can get into a rhythm running. By now my body is telling me that running maybe isn't such a good idea and maybe walking would be better. I try to ignore this for as long as possible but sometimes the brain's ability to override the body weakens and I start to walk. I remember reading that the key to ultramarathons is "run when you can and walk when you can't" so I walk for maybe 10 seconds then commence running again for a few minutes. I see another couple of runners ahead that had recently passed me doing the same thing so I figured this must be pretty normal at this stage. Finally the town of Tyndrum comes into sight and I know that I am over halfway. Catherine and Eckhardt meet me once again and lead me into the checkpoint. "That was a real tough section" I tell Catherine. Not what a partner wants to hear at the half way mark of a race this long! I am sat down by the team and restocked with supplies and in what seems like 5 minutes I am off again. . She gives me a good luck kiss as we part and it comes as a great act of love and support. I'm sure I must smell by now! This thoughtful gesture keeps me positive for the next few hours.

Mercifully this section is relatively flat and I start running trying to get the legs moving again. They stiffen up after each stop and take 10 minutes or so to get going. Thirty minutes later they are still stiff but I'm running so I try to ignore it and concentrate on moving forward. I stop every minute or two and walk for 10 seconds or so then continue. The 10 seconds is getting longer though but at least I can still run. Another runner passes me with a support runner beside him. I find my running pace is faster than them but I can't keep it up for very long and I can't run as slow as him so I run and walk and keep up with them eventually passing them again as I find some momentum. This is starting to get hard. My knees are sore and a sore tendon on top of my foot is making each step uncomfortable but I still feel ok within myself so I push these pains to one side and continue. Its over 60km to go but I know I've already done 90 so maybe 60km is do-able. The next checkpoint at Bridge of Orchy comes into view and I briefly contemplate not sitting down to avoid stiffening up but then temptation is too great and I gratefully accept the seat. Jan tells me there is only three checkpoints to go which almost brings me to tears - I can do three checkpoints which means I can finish this thing. I have a sneaking suspicion it is four and he confirms that unfortunately he has it wrong and it is four. Even so four is a small number which my brain can process - four more stages then I've done it. I fight back tears and completely ignore the number of kilometres involved in those four stages. By now my support team are a well oiled machine - I don't have to ask for anything and I am even told what to expect terrain wise for the next leg.

I set off with Catherine up the hill out of Bridge of Orchy, it is great to chat with her. Eventually I kiss her goodbye thankful for her support and encouragement and continue alone, striding up the hill, running whenever the path flattens out. The views are becoming more and more grand as I continue further into the Scottish Highlands and this helps take my mind off the pain in my legs. My thoughts range from focussing on what I'm drinking and eating, to contemplating the magnificent scenery, wondering how I am ever going to finish this, to knowing I can finish this and hoping I can finish in time so all the support crew can get some sleep tonight, singing the Pearl Jam song that was on the cd player when we left home so long ago and glad that I didn't hear some crap song that would stay in my head for hours and be impossible to dislodge. While my thoughts ranged like this I knew I was ok. I am enjoying the ever changing scenery and enjoying the challenge. If it was easy it wouldn't be worth doing, the rewards for doing something like this only come by overcoming adversity so I didn't mind it being hard and in some ways actually welcomed each mountain and the pains in my legs as just challenges to be overcome. The greater the challenge the greater the reward.

I finally reached the top of the climb and started descending. As I try to run some of the gentler slopes my legs rebelled and just seized up, not so much like a cramp but they felt like blocks of concrete and no ability to contract and relax. They hadn't felt like this before and I was a little worried. Just keep going I say to myself maybe they will loosen up when I get to the bottom. With this sliver of hope I reach the bottom and try to resume running unfortunately with the same result, they don't work. Keep walking then if that's all you can do I say to myself. I start to do some maths in my head and calculate that even if I walk I will still finish well before the cut off of 35 hours so I plod along. Some people pass me and their support runners ask if I am ok - "fine thank you, just can't run anymore". The path continues slowly but steadily uphill and continues on into the distance across Rannoch Moor. My thoughts are turning more and more negative and I find my energy levels getting low. The sun has disappeared and clouds and wind have picked up. Another hour passes and I look around and discover I am all alone, no-one in sight and I barely have the energy to keep walking. This is the lowest I have been ever in a race. I feel like a shell of my former self and have no idea if I can make it or not. I am approaching a ridge and I cling to the hope that on the other side of that ridge I will be able to see the next checkpoint at Kingshouse. Finally I come to the crest and my hopes are dashed when all I can see is another path continuing slowly uphill long into the distance to another ridge. I sit down for a minute trying to eat some food. I know something is not right when I can't force a whole banana down but I stand up and tell myself to just keep moving, keep moving, keep moving...

Finally I reach the next ridge and look down to see Kingshouse in the distance. The last hour has been a bit of a blur - I don't really know what I have been thinking, my mind is shutting out any thought that is not - keep moving. I start the painful plod downhill hoping that the support team will send someone up to an intermediate checkpoint. They haven't so far as I told them not to and I'm not really sure what they can do for me but just seeing a familiar face would help. I'm still very unsure if I can finish this or not but still can't find a reason to pull out that would be satisfactory to me. Maybe I look that bad that someone will tell me I'm not fit to continue. It wouldn't be my decision then so that would be ok. I keep walking wondering what to do, I really don't want to suffer like this for the next 45km over the massive hills coming up. Ahead I see a familiar orange T-shirt of Jan then also pick up Catherine and Eckhardt walking towards me obviously concerned that I'm an hour behind schedule. I can barely look at Catherine, I know I look awful and I don't want her to worry. She knows straight away that something's wrong and is very concerned. I walk down to the checkpoint with Jan who is nothing but positive whilst Eckhardt tries to convince Catherine I will be ok. Catherine knows how stubborn I am and is scared I will push myself too far.

Kingshouse takes ages to arrive at even with the company of the crew. Finally we arrive and I sit in the car to warm myself up and put on as many clothes as I have, force some more food down and drink as much coke as I can handle. Slowly the coke or the rice pudding or the nurofen starts to work and I feel a little more human. After 5 or ten minutes I decide that I may as well continue and gingerly step out of the car wearing a t-shirt, 2 long sleeve running tops, two thermals, goretex jacket, beanie and gloves and set off with Jan who is accompanying me to the next checkpoint at Kinlochleven. I tell him I can't run but will try and walk as best as I can. My legs are very sore as we get going but after 10 minutes I somehow think to myself that I might be able to run. I try a 50m run along a flat section and to my surprise my legs are working again. It's not pretty but it's still a lot faster than walking. I walk a bit more then try running for a bit further, slowly the legs are responding. I continue on like this until we reach the Devil's Staircase, which as you can guess from the name is not conducive to running. I stride uphill with purpose and determination, feeling energy flow back into my body. I am actually starting to gain on a runner who passed me earlier. This fills me with even more confidence and I push harder catching and passing her before we reach the top. On the way down I am still unable to run the steep downhills, my legs just lock up but slight downhills, flats and gentle uphills are ok. I now look forward to sections where I can run again and am running for longer and longer stretches. Jan gives me encouraging words at all the right times and helps me push on. His support is invaluable and helps me to build on the positive energy I now feel.

I'm back! The feeling is wonderful. To conquer all those negative thoughts and push them aside when I was feeling so bad gives me an enormous sense of pride - I CAN do this - it will not beat me. I can't keep a smile off my face. I'm clenching my fists yelling "c'mon" Lleyton Hewitt style, in my mind. I don't know how I turned it around but I think it's primarily that I don't know how to give up. It's not in my nature to give up at anything and I think deep down I knew that I wasn't going to give up during this no matter how hard it got and boy did it get hard. The support crew at Kingshouse got me out of my negative thinking and their belief that I could finish gave me back my belief, I don't know what I would have done without them.

I'm now running on adrenaline, it's almost 9pm I have been going for almost 20 hours and I feel unbelievable. Everything hurts, my foot is killing me, my calves are tight beyond belief and quads feel like concrete but none of that matters because I know I will finish. The last few kilometres into Kinlochleven takes forever, the village came into sight ages ago but the road has twisted and turned away from it at every chance possible. I want to keep running right into the village and show everyone that I'm back. Finally the checkpoint looms and as I run to the car they leap out surprised as I am an hour ahead of schedule and only 10 minutes down on the schedule for 24 hours. I have a grin ear to ear. Catherine can see in my eyes that I really am back and I think she is very relieved. I'm sure it has been a very hard day for her. There is now only one more checkpoint and 22km to go. This sounds easy but both stages involve either large uphill or large downhill or both so I knew it wasn't going to be easy. I was refuelled then headed off with Ken as my support runner. We run out of town then slowed to walk up another long steady climb. It was now 10pm at night and as we reached the top of the climb and headed along a long, long ridge the sun illuminating the adjoining mountains with a beautiful yellow colour. It is a stunning sight. Every time I start getting negative I stop for a second and look around and decide I wouldn't want to be anywhere else than right here, right now!

I try and start running again but find I can run for less and less distance. My foot is really sore and is bothering me at every step, particularly anytime I am on unstable ground. This is not good since the path is strewn with rocks almost the whole way. I am reduced to a pathetic shuffle which eventually becomes slower than walking so walking it is. I know I can walk 15km no matter how bad I am and I don't care about the time. All I want is to finish. The path continues for what seems like forever around the contours of the mountains until eventually I see a forest in the distance. I know that the next checkpoint is in a forest so reason that it can't be too much further. We now descend in through the forest and am really struggling with my foot, it is hard to lift my toes and I start tripping over rocks causing me to stumble and force my poor legs to stop me falling which they complain very loudly about. I don't think I am much company for Ken, continually complaining about these @#%\$^ downhills strewn with rocks. After what seems like forever I hear a familiar call of "Andy" in a thick South African accent. Eckhardt has wandered up in the dark by himself to find us and I know the checkpoint can't be far. I am very grateful to him for walking up to meet us. It was just another example of how great my support crew are, he waited who knows how long by himself to help me in the last few hundred metres.

The final checkpoint. It is now 11.30pm and after more coke, rice pudding and nurofen I set off again with Catherine for the last leg. It is a wonderful feeling setting off for the final 11km knowing nothing will stop me now and having Catherine

by my side. We begin with a climb then gradually descend into the darkness of the forest. Catherine is fantastic, pointing out where all the rocks are on the path and even kicking others aside so I won't trip. When we get to a stile she pulls me up and over as I can barely manage it by myself. We cross many of these and every time she helps me up and over. I'm not much conversation but having her there beside me is an enormous help. She tells me that Eckhardt started telling Blair Witch Project stories before she left with me. Not the ideal thoughts to put into someone's head as they begin a 11km walk through a forest in the dark. The only scary occasion came as I hear her scream at me as I am just about to step on a frog. How she sees it in the dark I have no idea. After a long uphill we reach a proper path that isn't covered with rocks and begin what is hopefully the descent into Fort William. Walking along through the woods hand in hand with Catherine it feels like we are all alone in the world and that it doesn't matter. I have everything I need in just her. I feel extremely content and happy and in some ways don't want to reach the end of the forest because I know this feeling will be over.

However my foot and legs soon start overriding these thoughts and I'm sure Catherine is sick of me saying - "we must be there soon". I'm now limping noticeably and starting to wish it was all over. The descent down to the road to Fort William takes forever and finally we reach it and head towards town. Before too long I hear "Andy" once again in a thick South African accent, Eckhardt has once again walked along to find us and walk into town with us. He has our camera and takes some photos as we walk along. We reach the sign telling this is the official end of the West Highland Way. "Which bastard decided that the end of this race is past the official end of the way" I say to myself, or did I say that out loud. It's hard to tell now.

Around a corner and there it is- the Lochaber Lesuire Centre - the end. We walk through the carpark, then stop just before the finish, a big hug and a kiss from Catherine, Eckhardt taking photos, Susie is also there and gives me a hug, I walk past Ken and Jan asleep in the car, their job is done, and walk up the steps through the door to the final checkpoint. I hear the applause of others waiting for their runners, congratulating me on my effort. My race number is cut off my wrist and I am finished. 25 hours 45 minutes and in 37th position I am told. I have done it.

As I have written this I have been overcome with tears on several occasions. It was an amazing day that will stay with me forever. The hardest thing I have ever done, by a long way and the most rewarding. I am eternally grateful to my support crew who don't realise how much they did for me, Jan, Ken, Eckhardt and Susie you were fantastic and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Catherine, what can I say, sorry to put you through so much, you were there for me in more ways than you will ever know and your tears and concern only helped me realise how much you love me. That gave me more strength than anything else could ever do.

Thank you to everyone who donated money and offered me encouragement. Your words were fondly remembered and called upon during the race. Apologies also for my family, both the DuBois and the Mansons for putting you through a sleepless day and night worrying. Your love and support was also very much appreciated.

What's next you might ask? At the moment I can barely walk, have feet and calves twice their normal size and will lose most of the scraps of toenails I had before, so running is certainly not on the agenda for a while. Will I do it again. In a word - no. Was I glad I did it - absolutely