

Andy Brock

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Here I am standing at the start at Milngavie (pronounced Mul-Guy) railway station at 00:40 very nervous wondering just why I had said yes to Simon when he came up with this challenge in January. Dario, the main organiser, is doing his final briefings and saying about how the finishers form a tight knit community with only 212 having completed the event since 1991, although many of them have done it more than once. We have a minute's silence for someone who had completed more than once but who had unfortunately died earlier this year. I look around at the other faces in the crowd and wonder if I look as nervous as I feel. Why am I here, do I really want to do this?!?

Simon and I look at each other without saying much and slowly head over to the start. We cheerily say our good licks to each other and everyone around us but its false jollity. A friend of Simon's called Keith has joined us although he is looking to do a sub 24 hour time having previously struggled to finish in 33:13:50 in 2002.

Later we find out that there was 89 starters although 90 actually registered at Milngavie with one possibly getting too scared at the last minute and going home before the start (not a bad idea!).

Milngavie to Balmaha (20 miles).

Suddenly its 1am, the hooter sounds and we're off, the legs feel OK and we jog through the town past the official start of the West Highland Way and onto some dodgy path through an industrial estate. Some rather drunk lasses chase us and there's lots of talk about spending the next hours doing other things. We hit our first hill and break into an instant walk. Everyone at the back of the field knows that there is little point on a 95 mile race expending energy on running up hill. Soon we are separated from the leading groups in front and we are left to form a group of 8 with a further 4 some way behind, or at least that's the number of bobbing head torches that can be seen. We jog on taking it easy and talking with Keith and someone who is running with us from the Navy called Lee. (We find out that he did most of his training on a ship, 7 times around the deck was 1 mile!) After about 2 miles we turn onto the road and run for about a mile before someone notes that this can't be right as there is no road section this close to the start. Maps are brought out and it dawns on us that we have gone in the wrong direction for about a mile and have to back-track. Although the route is fairly well signposted it's easy to miss the posts in the dark unless the head torch actually shines on them. We jog back and Simon and I make a note to keep the map out from here on so as not to make any more silly mistakes. It's a valuable lesson although one we did not want to have to learn.

A bit further along Simon trips over in the dark but luckily seems uninjured if a little embarrassed.

The first miles pass fairly easily up to a point at about 9 miles where Simon had got a friend to leave out some Coffee and Water under a bridge. I have to use the local bush facilities and wish Simon would since he manages to pass wind every few hundred yards or so. This feat of Hydrocarbon generation was managed all the way to the finish and people say I'm bad. The four of us are running nicely together but we soon hit a road section of about 2.5 miles and Keith seems to want to push the pace. I am concerned as my heart rate rises above the 140 I had set as my limit and soon fall off the pace of the group. Simon drops back to join me and we decide to let Keith and Lee go on especially as 24 hours was not our target.

Up through the woods at 12 miles and I am starting to feel really bad. Is it all going wrong already or am I still nervous about what's in front of me? I trip on a stone and go down fairly heavily ripping my leggings. Now it's my turn to feel embarrassed but what's worse is that I get real doubts about my ability to finish. The route to the 20 mile check point now undulates and includes the dramatic Conic Hill, which we both feel the route should have skirted rather than gone over. It's a long pull to the top but the early morning sun comes out to greet us and our first view of Loch Lomond is stunning. The run downhill is hard on the legs and rather wet and slippery. I fall over twice with one complete touch down getting wet and muddy.

We run into the checkpoint and are very pleased to see our support crew Sarah. Unfortunately she is one of very few cars now at the car park with everyone else having moved on. We find out that we are 81st and 82nd.

Balmaha to Rowardennan (27 miles).

After the stop it's hard to get going again, I feel all out of sorts and I am not running at all like I want to. I make a decision to try and settle myself down and just concentrate on the next check point rather than the overall event. We keep checking each other to ensure that we are both taking in food and drink. Something that continued all through the event was making sure that we were both peeing clear as a check on our fluid intake and during the event this became quite an issue for both of us. The run along the loch is undulating with a couple of short hard climbs but we manage to settle into a

run/walk pace that was to pay dividends later in the day. There is a cool headwind from the North but otherwise the weather is perfect and the temperature just right.

We run into the checkpoint at 27 miles and I'm probably feeling my worst of the whole event. I have grave concerns if I can get to the checkpoint where Nancy and the kids will be at 44 miles but vouch to go on. Sarah is there with the valued coffee and all too soon we are off to Inversnaid now in 82nd and 83rd position.

Rowardennan to Inversnaid (35 miles).

We jog along nice and steady with the path undulating but not too bad and manage a pleasant mixture of walking and jogging. The sun also gets a bit higher and for the first time I start to feel more comfortable and positive. We are working well together and apart from the checkpoints we have seen no-one else on either of the last two stages. The conversation now flows easily and with the terrain I feel more comfortable with my pace and not that I am simply holding Simon up. I have to stop again for the bush facilities but Simon continues to only discharge gaseous waste. We both put it down to the energy drinks and gels.

I run out of water in my back pack and receive a knowing telling-off from Simon for not checking my water at the last stop.

The views of the loch are beautiful and we both agree that it would be nice to walk this path over 5 or 6 days. We arrive at the Inversnaid marshalled checkpoint where the support crews are asked not to come. The plan was to give the marshals a bag at the start for this checkpoint but on arrival at the start we realised that the bag was still on the kitchen table. We still lie in 82nd and 83rd but we are happy. We have made fairly good time but check the map to find that we had the distance wrong and our next leg will now be a mile longer. We leave the checkpoint fairly promptly and note that we have passed 3 runners sitting on a wall. This could mean that we are in the 70's and we get a lift to our spirits.

Inversnaid to Derrydaroch Farm (44 miles).

We're now looking forward to the next stop, as this is where we will see the families and last night seems along time ago now. The path now takes a tortuous route along the side of the loch with running bursts cut to 20 yards whilst you have to stop to climb over roots or around boulders etc. The pace slows significantly but it's enjoyable and we are both now feeling good. The route eventually leaves the loch and by this time you are only too pleased to get shot of it even if it does have nice views. We then climb up and over a number of hills and find that we are catching and passing people. This is a great morale boost for us and I'm starting to feel really good.

Eventually we turn and head up the valley towards Derrydaroch farm. The map says that there are waterfalls which are lovely to look at, but we soon realise that waterfalls mean hills and we are left with quite a climb to the farm. However we pass another 3 runners and keep going. I think Simon is having his low point and then he runs out of water so I now get to give him the knowing nod. Although we are running well the miles are now starting to pass much slower and it is taking a lot more concentration.

Eventually we run into the farm and are met by great family support from all but my daughter who is upset that she is not being allowed to eat the goodies in our food box. Its now 1 o'clock in the afternoon and Lucy is hungry! Simon suggests to Mary (his wife & Nancy's sister) & Nancy that they take the children to see the waterfalls, but the children aren't going to enjoy anything until they've eaten. Mary has to tell Simon that she's been done for speeding on the way here, so the event has cost them an extra £60! We ask the marshals and find out that we are 71st and 72nd, which is a real boost.

Derrydaroch Farm to Tyndrum (53 miles).

We probably spent too long at Derrydaroch but it was great to see the families. We leave and it takes me about half a mile to get the legs going again. Soon enough we get back into our run/walk pattern and overtake a couple of people in front of us again receiving a moral lift. We are moving well and easily and our pee stays light straw coloured. (Our biological conditions were important to us at the time)! The route is lovely the sun shines every now and again and we are feeling good about things.

At about 48 miles we pass Lee who had run with Keith to Derrydaroch Farm but was now walking. He seems very positive but it's a long way to the finish if you're only walking. We wish him the best and move on hoping to see him again at the finish to have the beer that we had talked about at the start. Unfortunately Lee did not make the finish and was never seen by any of us again. I have since found out that he retired at Bridge of Orchy.

Our arrival at Tyndrum is met with cheers from our support crew and everyone else's. The support that all the crews give is terrific. I overhear a comment by Simon's wife Mary that he's now looking better than me whereas I was looking better at Derrydaroch Farm. We have a joke about it but it doesn't really matter, as we are now at 53 miles and over halfway. During the last leg I have started to get real rubbing on my bottom cheeks and this is causing me some considerable distress. As a result I go to the front of the car to apply liberal quantities of Vaseline but get photographed by Nancy. The

grease doesn't seem to help as much as I had hoped it would and all I can do is pray that it won't cause me too many problems before the end.

Tyndrum to Bridge Of Orchy (60 miles).

There was quite a climb from Tyndrum but soon enough you gain the height and then the path follows gently down hill or bumbles along the level. The going is fairly easy now and if I was able to keep running then it would be possible. Unfortunately it's hard to run for much more than a mile at a time and we keep having to stop for a walk just to ease the running muscles. Along this stretch we meet the first of the 1800 Caledonian Challenge walker/runners who started off from Fort William at 9am this morning and go to the top of Loch Lomond some 54 miles away walking through the Saturday night. The support services laid on by the Army for this event are significant and come as an intrusion to us after so long of running on our own only really seeing anyone at the check points.

Along this section we generally follow the route of the road and our support team keeps stopping to cheer us on our way. It's a great boost but does mean that we try to keep running so as to look good. I don't think it worked though.

We arrive at Bridge Of Orchy and meet our families plus John and Anne who will take over the support duties for the evening sections. Nancy tells me about some of the supportive text messages that people have been sending her and although I'm really pleased that people are supporting from afar I find it difficult to listen at the moment as the tiredness is making me very emotional! Only 35 miles to go and I am now feeling really tired. I change clothes to cheer myself up and go into the woods to try to deal with my bottom cheeks and apply liberal amounts of Vaseline. The Marshall insist that from now on we carry an orange plastic survival sack and full waterproof clothing as the forecast is for low temperatures and snow on the hills. The stop is again quite long and when we do get going it's hard to move the legs.

Bridge Of Orchy to Kingshouse (72 miles).

The route goes up over a hill and down to Victoria Bridge some 3 miles later. We are now passing many walkers going in the other direction and have to dodge out of the way many times to get through. This will now be the pattern for the next 10 miles and by the end these walkers have really got on our nerves. I have lost count of the number of times that I have said hello and wished them all the best and we try very hard to remain positive and optimistic.

From Victoria Bridge the path goes up hill at a steady rate for about 3 miles onto Rannoch Moor. Somewhere near to the top my legs start to seize up with the constant effort, speed and angle forcing me to sit down. I manage to get going again after 5 minutes although it's not easy. Eventually we reach the top and decide to start run/walking again which relieves the pressure on the legs and things start to ease up. One more up at the end of the moor and we start our decent into Glencoe and manage to run most of the downhill. A section on the flat proves tiresome before eventually arriving at Kingshouse and Anne and John with their two boys. We are now lying 53rd and 54th and feeling good about our steady progress through the field. Only 23 miles to go, we must be able to do it now but there are still 2 major climbs causing us concern.

Anne and John ply us with coffee and then make the mistake of showing us their picnic for the journey home later. These rolls look nice and unfortunately for them we decide to tuck in. Thankfully, being good friends of Simon & Mary, they are very understanding of us, and our need to eat their food! It's now about 9pm and starting to get cold. We pack a bag for the last check point and hand it over to Jim who will get it to the last checkpoint. This will allow Anne and John to go home as it's now getting later than planned since we are running behind our plan by about 1 hour.

Kingshouse to Kinlochleven (80 miles).

We both put on another layer but realise when we get going it's colder than we thought. For the first mile I'm finding it difficult to walk and we are both shivering with the cold, however eventually we get running and start to warm up. Luckily we asked John and Anne to meet us again along the road in 3 miles just before the start of the Devil's Staircase where we have another one of their rolls and put another layer in our bags just in case it gets really cold on top. We pass a runner who is having difficulty walking and is moving really slowly. His backup team meet him and he rests in the car. We wonder if he is going to manage to get out of the car but I don't know whether he finished, as the finishers that I saw as all looked so different with their clothes on.

The path is long and up and we can soon only manage a steady plod but we keep it going all the way. The light is starting to fail and we decide to try to get to the top before we lose it (the light that is) altogether. It's 11:00 at the top and there is still good light so we break into a jog across the top few miles and halfway down into Kinlochleven. This has surprised us both and we feel good about how well we are maintaining ourselves and keeping it together. We are both tired but have few other problems. We do both have sore feet and Simon has a few blisters but luckily I have not yet got one. My bottom continuously causes aggravation but not sufficient to stop me.

Halfway down the hill we lose light and have to put on our head torches. We decide that it would be easy to twist an ankle on this terrain, especially with our tired legs so agree to walk through the night until we can see by natural light again. The field of vision we get using torches is just not good enough to run with.

Eventually we arrive at Kinlochleven and check in, we are now 51st and 52nd.

Kinlochleven to Fort William (95 miles).

The midges in Kinlochleven are bad and if this is what the run is normally like then we are grateful for the headwind which has probably been keeping them at bay. A last fill up and grab a few more energy gels etc and we're off. It is now very difficult to get going and my legs are having real problems, not helped by my bottom giving me a further of concerns. The Vaseline isn't working as well as I had hoped.

There is a steep ascent out of the town and we are soon forced back into our plod mode. However we manage to pass a group of 3 and a group of 4 that gives us the desire to keep the walking pace as quick as we can.

Once at the top of the hill the map shows us skirting some mountains heading east for about 4 miles and then turning and heading North to Fort William for the next 11 miles. I decide that this turn to the North is the big issue and make a determined point in my head to keep going hard until we reach this turn and start heading North again. The path is rocky, undulating and wet, in addition it starts to drizzle and we are forced to put on our waterproof tops. I notice that Simon has started to walk straight through the streams rather than search with the head torch for the stepping stones and remind him that we still have a way to go and we should try and keep our feet dry. In return Simon keeps on to me about eating which I do forget to do especially for the last 20-30 miles as it makes me feel somewhat sick. I decide to keep going on energy gels despite what it might be doing to my insides and by the finish I find that I have consumed 30 of them during the event (it's a good job Nancy gave me a box of 36 for my birthday). We keep checking behind us at the groups we have passed searching for head torches and realise that they are slowly falling behind. We know that this is race with yourself rather than the others and we would welcome anyone being with us but it is a boost to pass people and a form of motivation to stay in front.

Eventually we turn the corner and head for home feeling for the first time that we are now going to do it. This is probably the worst thing for me since I lose some of my concentration and start to struggle just wishing it was all over and that we were at the finish. It is still dark and how we wish we could do some running just to relieve the boredom of walking.

Eventually with about 9 miles to go at 2:30am the light starts to come through and we are able to turn off the torches. We just about get running again initially only managing a period of about 100 yards. This slowly gets longer but the undulating nature of the track keeps the distances fairly short. We are also struck by the size of the stiles, which have steps of about 18 inches and seem to take an inordinate amount of effort to get over. The track is now very undulating with a number of boggy bits run mostly in thick woods such that you have no idea of where you are. Eventually we come out of the woods to be greeted by the sight of Ben Nevis and have only 3.5 miles to the finish with 2 miles mostly downhill. These turn out to be the longest miles I have ever run and the downhill causes a bad pain in my right knee. At the bottom the last 1.5 miles is on road and morally destroying.

Then we are there, the roundabout in Fort William which is the official finish of the West Highland Way and only a few hundred yards to the leisure centre which is our finish. At 05:19am we enter the centre and stop, finishing in joint 41st position. We look at each somewhat disbelieving that we had actually completed the task, shake hands and hug (in a manly way). Our time 28 hours 19 mins and 18 secs.

One of the marshals gives us a lift to the pre-booked hotel room and we manage 4 hours sleep before returning for the prize giving. Just before 12:00 we crawl very delicately into the Nevis Bank Hotel for the award ceremony. Simon can walk better than me although his blisters are giving him problems whilst my muscles are completely seized and have to be started very slowly each time I move. The prize giving is a lovely friendly event with everyone individually going up to receive their goblet from Dario to great support and cheers from the other runners and support crews. The winner's time is 17:40:35 and the last finisher is 34:45:49, the closest ever to the cut off time of 35 hours. Two of this year's runners receive special additional prizes for completing their 10th event.

After it is all finished I can now say that it was the hardest thing that I have ever tackled. I could not have done it without Simon and we could not have done it without our excellent support and backup crews. If it hadn't of been for Nancy's understanding I don't think I would have even made the start line. It was a great day out and the memories of the experience and what I went through have gone very deep. I would recommend it to anyone although I realise just how big a part the good weather played in our success, if it had been raining the whole way I wonder if we could have achieved it. Based on this (and Nancy's continued support) I would be prepared to have a go at another off road long distance event but I don't think I will ever do this one again. I have fantastic memories of everything to do with the event and I think its best left that way.

A huge thank you to everyone who sponsored me for the event, knowing that I was raising over £18 for each mile I completed really did help me when the going got tough. Now if you all pay up I should hopefully manage to raise around £1,700 for CLIC. I will let you know the final figure when all the money is in.

Andy Brock