

3 Days in June 2003.

A midsummer Adventure, The West Highland Way Race.

FRIDAY 20th June.

I had nervously passed the week collecting together my race "wardrobe" equipped for all the four season eventualities and deciding on the weekend gourmet calorie intake. My thoughts periodically drifted back to the distance, 95 miles and 11,624 feet of ascent on rough terrain. Break it down, I said to myself. Just a day on the hills then some more hills. Different sections, different terrain, section by section, one bit then another bit, checkpoint to checkpoint. However I thought about it, 95 miles was a long way non-stop, on foot. Now the waiting was almost over. Tonight I would embark upon this extraordinary challenge.

I took the day off work to put all my clothes changes, food and assorted bits and pieces into 2 large cardboard boxes and a cool box, then have a rest before the activity ahead. Just ate my usual quantity of cereal, sandwiches and fruit today with an early evening Pasta and chicken meal at about 4:30pm. I made sure I took on plenty fluid all day. Water, spring water, Pepsi Max and decaffeinated coffee. I tried to get some sleep but unsurprisingly with no success. At least I managed a few hours of rest trying not to think of what might lie ahead in the hours to come. I ate a small rice pudding and looked at the clock, about 9:30pm. Shortly afterwards, my friend, Lomond hill runner Derek Jablonski arrived at 10:45pm. Did I have everything I could possibly ever need? I hoped so or else we would need a truck. I bundled my boxes into Derek's car and we headed off for the start at Milngavie. Our adventure had begun.

Nearly there but we were unsure exactly where Milngavie was so out with the road map to check the last few miles. It was dark after all!

SATURDAY 21st June.

Milngavie station, the new Harry Potter book is released midnight tonight and there's 3 teenagers reading excerpts to each other on the platform at 1:00 am. "What's on tonight?" We were asked, A race. "Where to?" Fort William, "really", Yes. A bemused expression then back into their book. Not unusual behaviour compared to running up the West Highland Way at night.

I registered with the race organisers, then chatted to some friends who were also running. Looking around, there were many very organised people here. I began to feel I might have entered a "run too far". I now ate a jam sandwich, which is also known in Scotland as "the jammy piece" and drank more water. The jammy piece was to play a heroic role as the race developed. I was now getting anxious and feeling cold which accounted for my shaking appearance. Derek at this point thought I might suggest we just go back home!

For the technically interested:

I started the race wearing Nike dri-fit leggings, long sleeve Helly Hansen top, Fife Athletic Club vest, tammy, goretex paclite jacket and thin gloves. I wore a head torch, a watch and Asics trainers. I carried my Salomon rucksack containing 2 fluid bladders, one had 500ml water, the other 500ml SIS P22 orange energy drink. It also contained spare protective toe pads, other blister stuff, micropore tape, vaseline, sunglasses, sun hat, a map for first 20 unfamiliar miles to Balmaha, spare helly hansen gloves, a sports bar, a jam piece, 2 gels, toilet paper, my phone, whistle, compass and a checkpoint times chart. I had all of these items with me throughout the entire race and carried my own rucksack from start to finish.

MILNGAVIE (THE START) 2:00am

Dario the race director had given the pre-race brief. Then there was a general shaking of hands and good luck wishes all round. The front runners began to move through the tunnel and the race had started. I moved off into the darkness near the back of the 69 starters with my fellow runners Dave Muir and Jeremy Tomlinson who had kindly invited me to tag along with them. Keep a slow pace and walk all the uphill bits. Fear not of moving forward but that of standing still. I reminded myself this advice I had been given.

DRYMEN - 12 miles 4:22am

By the time I arrived here I had went over on my ankle twice and also tumbled full length after colliding with a gatepost. I put all this down to a lack of "night vision" training and hoped for less acrobatics now that it was daylight. As Dave and Jez were both physiotherapists I was reliably informed that sprained ankles were not fixable!

Met for the first time by Derek and ditched my head torch. The jacket had already been packed in my rucksack but the gloves and tammy were to remain on all day. I began the routine of pouring 500ml into each of my bladders and ate a jam piece. The midges were already awake for what was to be a world class performance from them today.

BALMAHA - 20 miles 6:02am Position 50th

A single shaft of sunlight illuminated the small boats in Balmaha harbour. What a superb view over Loch lomond from Conic Hill as I descend steeply to the checkpoint.

Filled the drink bladders, ate a rice pudding and a tuna sandwich. Sat down on the car park tarmac and changed my socks. Reluctantly munched some more midges! I felt fairly comfortable and importantly, my asthma was not bothering me.

ROWARDENNAN - 27 miles 7:59am

The large parking area in the trees was crowded with race supporters and hill walkers making an early start up Ben Lomond. Derek met and guided me to his car. I filled my drink bladders, ate a jam piece and took a sports bar to eat on the way. Went for a visit to the gentlemen's rest room and now felt better. I headed out of the Rowardennan support point informing the marshals I was on my way.

INVERSNAID - 34 miles 9:42am Position 44th

Dario and I introduced ourselves here as he checked the runners through. Picked up my labelled Lucozade sport drink and another jam piece. Ate a supplied banana. Water was provided here by the T.S.A.R T. I drank some then poured 500ml into my water bladder. Off I went for more ducking, diving and hurdling over, around and under the branches, boulders and tree roots. This was the highly entertaining Loch Lomond side obstacle course. Some manoeuvres more planned than others and an easy place to suffer a terminal injury. I was now carrying my Lucozade drink and then responsibly gave the empty pouch to someone at Inverarnan as I passed by. Thanks. I was glad to make it through this section unscathed. Serious midge problem continuously now which contributes to the general wearing down process. Every facial orifice was full of midges looking for a lift further up the Way.

INVERARNAN - 40 miles

I hadn't arranged support here due to the awkward road access. I spoke to my friend Russell who was waiting on Fiona then I continued onwards and upwards. Dave, Jez and I maintained our steady jog somehow even managing synchronised bush watering breaks! I enjoyed their company and we laughed through much of these early miles. Thanks to you both.

DERRY DARROCH Checkpoint 12:24pm Position 37th

Water was supplied here and bananas. I stopped, had two cups of water, ate a banana, thanked the marshals then moved on to meet Derek just up the road.

TUNNEL UNDER the A82 1 mile up the road from Derry Darroch Farm- 45 miles

Derek had been having a snooze but soon woke up and into support mode helping fill the drink bladders. I ate another small rice pudding and a tuna sandwich for a change. Get some protein in, I thought. Changed socks and into another identical pair of trainers and long sleeved thermal top. Dave and Jez were having more carrot and coriander soup here and a general feet overhaul. Keen to move on, I started up the hill on my own towards the halfway point at Bogle Glen. I was encouraged by how I was feeling and left with another jam piece for company. I looked forward to turning "left" above Crianlarich and psychologically heading towards Fort William. "This is a race against the clock", I said to myself, time to try and speed up a bit.

TYNDRUM - 53 miles 2:36pm Position 32nd

Derek met up with more support friends here, Gus, Henry, Jane, Jean, Charlie and Molly the dog. All members of Beacon leisure centre running club or the Kingdom Race Team cycle club. The boxes with my gear were changing cars here and I was glad to see Gus meet me in the approach woods. I continued my routine, 500ml in both drink bladders while eating a jam piece then a banana to go. My only low point strangely as I arrived here. I felt cold and the outlook appeared to be heavy rain. However with all the fine company I soon got the smile back on my face and I was keen to get going again. I left the checkpoint running with Jane and Jean who were bursting with enthusiasm and had to be curtailed to my slower pace. Mega midge problem now, but the girls had sacrificed themselves and bravely wore shorts!

BRIDGE OF ORCHY - 60 miles 4:09pm Position 29th

Filled the bladders, ate another jam piece. Stick to the same robotic food and drink routine I thought. I did have with me all sorts of other delicious hot and cold food prepared by my wife Gail but never ate it. Derek though was very partial to the dozen slices of my Mum's fruitcake. I felt nauseous much of the time so the trusty jam piece was tried and tested. Changed my socks again and put a compeed blister patch on my painful right foot side instep and carried on. Shortly afterwards Jean took a tumble on the rocks heading down towards Inveroran Hotel and bashed her leg but she's tough and was soon up and off again. Never even damaged my rice pudding in her hand. What a star! I now ate this going up General Wades' cobbles after Victoria Bridge along with a delicious thick midge topping. What a support team, we managed to have a good laugh going over Rannoch moor towards Kingshouse. There were now many Caledonian Challenge charity walkers coming from Fort William who had to be negotiated around. I brought with me today a large quantity of sense of humour to help get me through the race and I kept smiling no matter what.

KINGSHOUSE - 72 miles 6:48pm Position 20th

Safely across the busy A82 road for the 5th time then down to the checkpoint. Filled my drink bladders for the ninth time. Now drinking Derek's SIS Go electrolyte watermelon flavour, quite tasty. Ate another banana and put a jam piece in my bag for the section ahead. I probably didn't need it as going over the Moor my open mouth had "hoovered" up enough midge fuel to last for ages! Sat at a picnic table and changed my socks and back into the trainers I started with. Put another blister pad on my foot, doubled up with the other one. My legs were beginning to seize up so I didn't want to hang around unnecessarily. Gus and Henry left the checkpoint with me. There was still plenty of daylight so I pushed on to get as far as possible before darkness fell. Gus was up front trying to clear a route through the last of the charity walkers. The pain in my knee was getting more noticeable now.

I arrived at the top of the Devils staircase about **8:00pm**. I looked back at the fantastic view over Buachaille Etive Mor then over to the Mamores and Ben Nevis. A stunning natural landscape. I was continuously conscious about getting an ankle injury or becoming ill and grinding to a halt but I now cautiously began to think not just finish but finish time. I felt very good and was covering the miles at a fair pace.

The plan was working all those jammy pieces had finally kicked in!

KINLOCHLEVEN - 81 miles 9:07pm Position 16th

I plunged down the steep track, over the river and on into Kinlochleven. How I now felt was something special. I didn't even stop here just shouted my number to the checkpoint car as I went past. Jane joined me to the turn up into the woods to ensure everyone knew the route. Gus and Henry went to our support car for water and sports drink. They picked up my head torch, some doughnuts, a last jam piece, then caught me up on the climb. Gus was gasping a bit due to a doughnut restricting his airway! Unknown to me Derek was also at the checkpoint getting changed to join us having just arrived after running to Kingshouse with Dave and Jez. He had to put on a spurt to catch us up on the Lairigmor track!

On this last section I continued to drink what I left Kingshouse with. Five litres of sports drink was now enough for the digestive system. It had begun to get dark as we headed over Lairigmor. This is the part where pink elephants and the like may just pass you by! I did "see" a couple of minibuses, a landrover vehicle, assorted small animals and some odd looking garden gnomes. I had looked forward to this extra dimension to my vision, a sort of dehydration delirium. I realised that the rocks and light reflections can at this stage of the race play many tricks on the mind. I also tried to pretend I was "loosing it" mentally to keep up the humour. It was weird however when real toads or frogs jumped into the torchlight. This did spook my concentration a bit.

I kept running at the front so I could plan my way over the burns and boulders and was well aware of the route ahead. I have never been so focused in my life. I enquired many times, "remind me the race started at 2:00am and was the time on my watch the right time?" I was repeatedly assured both were correct. I felt surprisingly strong and knew if I kept up my pace I would not just get under the magical 24 hours but could break 23 hours.

At the Lundavra road point I was now unexpectedly met by Jane, Jean and Charlie. After the briefest of pauses I was up and over another deer fence. I now had Derek, Jane, Jean, Gus, Henry and Molly, Jean's dog running behind me. This was a great experience, an absolutely fantastic buzz. Over those last few miles, my focus was interrupted only by the odd howl as someone tripped, slipped and tumbled behind me on the dark, muddy path! Our frenzied torch lights desperately trying to illuminate the way ahead. Eventually we emerged out of the black claustrophobic forest canopy to see the distant lights of Fort William. Over on the Ben half way up a solitary torchlight was seen, we hoped it wasn't a fellow runner seriously off course! Down through the trees and out onto the Glen Nevis road where Charlie met us. He now joined us as we ran on towards Fort William. I just had to have a final brief pause at the Wishing Stone to "thank it" for my good fortune as I had made a wish on a training run weeks before that I have a successful day. A couple of dark final corners, which seemed to take forever and the roundabout's in sight. "Does anyone know how to get into the leisure centre" I hurriedly enquire. "Yes, right in the front door" a voice from behind answers. Obvious! The last hundred yards and into the reception. I had made it.

SUNDAY 22nd JUNE

FORT WILLIAM -95 miles 00:39am Position 16th

When entering this my first WHW race I had hoped to complete the 95 miles route and finish. I had occasionally dreamed of maybe someday finishing under 24 hours. I was stunned and delighted when told my finish time was 22 Hours 39 minutes and 30 seconds. I had covered the second half from

Bogle Glen faster than the first half. A negative split in the West Highland Way Race. I was really chuffed, my finest hour.

After a phone call home to Gail to relay the news, I was hastily "arranged" into a group photo but my head was now spinning and I felt rather sick. I sat for a while and had a cup of coffee and tried to eat a cheese roll but couldn't. I had a shower and then quietly into my sleeping bag on the reception floor. Couldn't sleep, got up and ate 3 ham rolls and crisps with Russell about 3:15am. I listened to the other finishers' tales as they arrived then talked to Dave and Jez when they came in about 6:30am.

Went for a fry up breakfast at the local supermarket at 9:00am with Derek, seemed like a good idea even when the mushrooms looked dodgy. Then I had a pint of Guinness at 11:00am in The Nevis Bank Hotel at the race presentations. Bad combination, I had to stop at the Devils Staircase lay-by on the way home feeling very nauseous. Struggled on to Comrie where I was violently sick in the woods at the car park. Derek and I continued on home, I was feeling absolutely awful but at least I was walking ok!

Neither myself nor any of my support team had previous experience of the WHW race so we were all pleased to make it to Fort William and had a great weekend. My friends who supported my race attempt were fantastic and so enthusiastic. It was a privilege to share it with you. Special thanks go to my wife Gail who although unable to make it to the event provided patient support and encouragement throughout the months prior to June. I thank you all and could not have made it without you. At risk of producing an "oscar standard" speech may I continue. My thanks also to Russell, Fiona, Pauline and Lynne from Carnegie, Joe from Fife AC, Adrian (run & become) and Dario for all the useful information and advice I was given and to everyone associated with the organisation and execution of such a phenomenal event.

Never at any time during the race did I know what position I was in so I was well pleased to find out that I had finished 16th out of the record 49 finishers and 69 starters.

An intense physical and emotional roller coaster of an experience
Quite an amazing adventure!

Bob Allison
July 2003