

Bob Allison

The 2004 West Highland Way Race. A midsummer adventure...again.

It was Friday evening, the 18th of June 2004. After months hiding out in a mountain cave of unknown location, trying to resist the jam piece cravings, the long training runs and avoiding sending in the entry form, I now somehow found myself a passenger in a designated race support vehicle heading for Milngavie...again!

The car park was busy with runners, supporters and marshals as we arrived to register at the train station ticket office. "A ticket to Fort William please". "All the trains have left sonny, just sign this disclaimer and you can join the other mad nutters who are going to run there."

The adventure challenge that you are about to embark upon is quite a thought. Milngavie to Fort William, 95 miles up the West Highland Way...

As I walked back to the car, now attached to my handy hospital friendly race number wrist tag, I surveyed the assembled gathering thinking, there are probably only a handful of days in my life as extraordinary as this.

I was performing some last minute race rituals when my friend and fellow entrant Russell Adams approached my support vehicle. I was in a contorted position in the front seat, leggings down at half-mast, applying cream to my tender bits. He laughed loudly and so did I. A welcome break to the tension that we all felt. After the customary shaking of hands and the exchange of good luck remarks I noticed time was almost upon us. 12:45 am and Dario's pre-race briefing contained a thought provoking assortment of words like "snow forecast on the hills" and "bivvy bags required from Bridge of Orchy onwards!"

Derek Jablonski, who was an invaluable support to me last year, had decided to have a go this year. The event has that sort of influence. We both headed towards the underpass ready for the off and assembled with Dave Muir and Jez Tomlinson near the back of the enormous field of 90 runners. I felt the cool night air even with my hat, gloves and rain jacket on. A few of us from Fife who had done some training together intended to accompany each other as far as we felt the pace comfortable then go our own ways. I fidgeted with my backpack straps and chatted apprehensively. A few cameras flashed from the road banking then a reserved cheer as everyone suddenly began moving through the tunnel. The 2004 WHW race had begun.

We made our way past the late night revellers in the Town centre and off into the blackness of Mugdock wood. During these early miles the trick of the night blunts the concept of distance travelled. It's a time to relax and enjoy, pondering what lay ahead. Even though I had previously passed this part of the Way a few times, I wasn't confident of recognising the route at night. I also thought the runners in front of us were too excitedly chatting away to really notice. I suggested to Derek that we slow up further from our already slow pace and drop back to give a clear view ahead. I had my map and compass but didn't want to have to use them. Now warming up, we also decided to remove our jackets.

My suspicions were confirmed as we approached Arlevan cottage. A row of torchlight's had continued down the landrover track and way off the trail. They were obviously bobbing around in the darkness towards Ardoch, shining like a landing strip for a close encounter UFO. We called to the nearest runner in front as we turned left on the trail and looking back, saw that the message had filtered down and all the lights were now dancing back towards the route.

Derek, Dave, Jez and I chatted intermittently among ourselves and other runners as we made our steady way to my first arranged fuel stop at Drymen. Entering the approach field I remembered to switch on the flashing armband so supporters Jean and Gus Bowman could see my imminent approach. Molly their friendly Spaniel looked on, thinking, "That looks like my flashing collar?" Yes Molly, it was and thanks, that's a chew bar I owe you.

With the first fluid fill successfully undertaken using my new giant formula one style plastic filler (thanks to Malcolm) and a jam piece eaten, it was on towards Garadhban Forrest. Here I met Phyllis Lemoncello a fellow Fife member and begun the gradual climb up and over Conic Hill. I kept my head torch with me but the morning light soon began to filter through and it was unnecessary. The summit was clear of cloud and offered a stunning early view of Loch Lomond, it's many islands and the surrounding hills. Passing a few runners we carefully made the brisk descent down to the Balmaha car park and checkpoint number one.

A queue had formed to sign in with the marshal and for the first time today I was aware that the dreaded midges were biting me. As soon as possible I hurriedly progressed over to where Gus and Jean had parked the car. I perused my 2003 WHW race menu and it said, "rice pudding and tuna piece at Balmaha". That'll do for me. Stick to the blueprint. More water and sports drink then out along the road for the Lochside jog to Rowardennan.

I had begun to feel bloated prior to arriving at Balmaha and as I left, I felt even worse. I jog walked through the woods steadily realising that I was now unable to keep pace with my friends and began drifting off the back. It's a long race I thought and tried to move forward as best as I could with an exploded airbag slowly deflating in my stomach. I met up with Craig Liddle and Richard Shaw also from Fife and we chatted about how things were going. I began to compare how I felt

this year with last year and I wasn't too optimistic. I had breathing problems and felt light headed, nauseous and the stomach pain and discomfort had increased. They say prepare for the low points of the race. Well I was certainly having one here. I carried on trying to convince myself I had felt just as bad last year. It will pass, just keep moving, even slowly. Surprisingly I soon began to see Derek, Dave and Jez a short distance in front and managed to catch them up. Together we headed along the road past the Hotel and arrived at the Rowardennan support point. Still feeling unwell, I immediately headed into the 'tourist comfort hut' as per last year and gave thanks that there was a vacancy!

I exited in time to see Dave and Jez accompanied by Jocelyn head off along the landrover track. Gus and Jean quickly sorted me out with more fluids and food and I left to catch up. Luckily I arrived just as they were heading into the grounds of the Youth Hostel. "Wrong way guys!" I shouted, and they've both completed the race before. Jez has twice! Derek soon caught us up after swallowing a serious quantity of home made soup. Gradually feeling more functional I chanced a look at my splits' chart and was reassured that my target schedule was still on.

The Way continues along the Lochside high road before narrowing considerably into a path. We occasionally passed other runners including the moustached look alike 118 duo. We shared turns at the front along the muddy approach to Inversnaid checkpoint. A startled backpack laden lady walker kindly made way for us. Unfortunately she overbalanced and fell onto her back on the grass banking. "Are you OK?" we called passing by. "Yes", thankfully came the eventual reply.

The Inversnaid Hotel, official checkpoint number two is a rather unexpected sight to emerge through the rhododendron bushes. I registered myself in with the ladies from the Strathven Striders and the Trossachs rescue team is on hand with my lucozade sport and jam piece, which I had deposited, at the start. More water and a free banana, courtesy of the sponsor and I walk off munching my snack reflecting on last years' mega midge problem here. And on the subject of highland wildlife, where do all those large black slugs go in winter? This thought was to crop up periodically throughout the day as I tried to avoid squashing them all over the trail.

Having now covered over 34 miles our individual aches and niggles had begun. This section from here to the end of the Loch is narrow, muddy, rocky and undulating and I like it. It's a veritable obstacle course focussing the attention and helping pass the miles to Ardleish. I like the up, down, slow, quick, walk, run, jump, step, hobble, slip, trip and duck bits and with the extra addition of two recently fallen trees to clamber through. I intensely concentrate trying not to fall when suddenly I am startled by a moving rock. Calm down, it's only one of the local mountain goats spooked by my appearance. We emerge from the trees at the loch end clearing. I find myself at the front with Dave. The others are slightly further behind. I slowly walk on, continuing to take on fuel. I then notice the tree branch I'd painfully smacked my forehead into while running through a swollen river during a wet, freezing training run in March. Ouch...that was quite an eventful day!

Up through the trees and on to Doune bothy where that same March day, contemplating how far I was from my car at Balmaha, I'd scribbled a painful, grumpy account of the first half of that long cold training run before heading back. I now reminded myself that ultra runs are fun and got on with jogging down the hill past the bothy. Looking back, I realised I was now on my own.

I passed a few runners as I made decent time through Beinglas farm, then up Glen Falloch and onto Derry Darroch the third checkpoint. My ankles had begun to feel sore but I received a great psychological lift when amongst the crowd I spotted Jane McIntyre and Henry Cooper who had come to support me. I spoke to Brian Landels and Graeme Bairden who were here to help Dave, Jez, Craig and Richard. I registered with the race marshals and ate a banana then covered the short distance to my support stop at the tunnel in about 10 minutes, almost smacking my head into the rail tunnel steel roof girder as I intently studied my splits' chart! "Duck Bob", whew just in time! Gus and Jean were a welcome sight and now assisted by Jane, Henry and Charlie Anderson who had arrived to help. This is definitely an event to share with others, a right social occasion. The team was together and I felt generally more optimistic. I called to Deirdrie, Neil and Jocelyn that the guys were just behind and I made my only trainer change. I thought my laces were maybe too tight from the start and had caused nerve pain on the front of my ankles. Just have to go with it now. Another look at the menu, a rice pudding and a tuna piece. Unfortunately, being over zealous with the salt application on the tuna for scientific reasons, I had to swiftly chuck this unpalatable sandwich to the birds and head for halfway distance.

Higher I climbed, surveying the stunning views from the old military road towards the mountains of An Caisteal up to Cruach Ardain and over to the dominant twin peaks of Ben More and Stob Binnein. What a wonderful sight and so far the predicted horrible weather hadn't materialised, thankfully. However, many miles had still to be covered so I pressed on past Bogle Glen and up to the viewpoint overlooking Crianlarich. The tortuously steep roller coaster descent through the pine trees towards Ewich caused my knees to protest. I unavoidably continued to compare how I was this year to last and had to admit, I now felt more pain at this stage and with 45 miles still to go.

Emerging to cross the A82 road towards Kirkton farm, I met and had a short conversation with Adrian Stott before he pulled out a few hundred metres on me and promptly disappeared past the historical ruins of St Fillan's Priory. This is not one of my favourite sections possibly because it's part road, flat and open and a bit of a directional detour! I'm glad when I again cross the A82 and head for Tyndrum.

Up past Dalrigh but with no time to look for Robert the Bruce's sword in the lochan, I now see Brian running the opposite way to support Richard. I arrive at Tyndrum, checkpoint number four, make my presence known to the marshals, say hello

to my support team, grab a jam piece and a banana and continue to walk on up the hill. I make sure I smile for some photos so in years to come it all looks great fun! Jean and Jane are now keeping me company and we make our way further up the trail towards Bridge of Orchy. I look back at the view and see Adrian leaving the checkpoint now behind me.

The wind had risen and was blowing into my face just as you'd expect. We ran down the hill past Auch and I was tempted to cunningly block the wind with Jean and Jane but no, that would be unfair assistance so we all continued to run in line abreast. I was increasingly aware that my ankles and knees were suffering much more at this early stage. This gave me cause for concern but the full on conversation from the girls was an entertaining and welcome distraction. As we neared the railway station the sound of the wind was overlapped by the intermittent exhaust noise of powerful motorcycles revving through the gears, accelerating along the nearby A82. A reminder to me that prior to my late entry into the world of ultra running I was more used to covering long distances by this much faster and easier method.

Down past the houses and there's Henry waving his arms trying to stop the traffic and help me cross the road. What a guy! I hope the cars are paying attention to him as I charge across then down to checkpoint number five. There at the bridge is Gus with his camera. I keep jogging, try to look fresh and smile. That's another section completed and in the bag. More water and sports drink and the compulsory space blanket into my backpack. I was already carrying full water proof body cover as required. Another rice pudding, jam piece and off I went with Jane, climbing up the Mam Carraigh path. The rain had now begun to drizzle down in patches and my hands were cooling rapidly even with gloves on.

The top of Mam Carraigh is another elevated part of the Way offering a superb view over the Black Mount hills and Rannoch Moor but with no time to stare we plunged down the rocky path and out onto the road at the Inveroran Hotel. Gus joined us here as we made our way through the Caledonian Challenge charity walkers coming in the opposite direction. This can be frustrating and requires full use of that compulsory piece of WHW race kit.....the sense of humour.

The stile beyond Victoria Bridge is crossed and we make our way up onto the famous Rannoch Moor. Jane tirelessly offers greetings with a smile attempting to plough a direct route through the hundreds of oncoming charity walkers. By now the wind is blowing stronger and unsurprisingly it's still into my face. The showers continue and my core temperature is starting to fall. Ba cottage ruins and bridge are passed. I deliberate whether to put my jacket on. I see a runner ahead amongst all the walkers and decide to carry on as I am. We exchange a few words and I overtake him and his support runner on an incline. I then stop for the umpteenth leak of the day behind the first big boulder I've seen in ages. What a relief, for an instant I almost feel warm sheltered from the wind. I contemplate how much race time could be saved wearing incontinence running gear all day but then how does one avoid the inevitable disadvantages? The runner now passes me as if freshly invigorated and he's off down the hill in the direction of Blackrock cottage. I pause for a moment to survey Kings House and on towards the devils staircase and then shift my focus up a gear into the terminator mode. Checkpoint number six is coming up.

Another crazy dash across the busy A85 and down the old tarmac road to the Kings House Hotel. My backpack fluid is hurriedly replenished, I grab a banana and another jam piece in minimal time but my hands are now so cold I have difficulty getting the cling film off my sandwich! Even worse, I can't put on any of the other four spare pairs of thicker gloves that I brought as my fingers are too frozen. Can you believe it? Luckily Charlie offers his windstopper gloves. They're a couple of sizes bigger and I get them over my fingers with ease. I check out with the marshals and stride onwards with Gus. Jane takes a breather. As I leave the car park I noticed the runner who just passed me is still there. I was primarily trying to finish and beat my last years' time and had no idea what race position I currently held. I walked along the road wondering whether to ask, then beginning to jog, decided I didn't want to know.

Along the Way to Altnafeadh we pass the last of the charity walkers. Gus tries to alert them to our presence. Many are talking about important issues on their mobile phones and one guy has a big sound system strapped to his backpack giving it large volume as you do in the Highlands.... Cheers mate, you made me laugh at this crucial stage.

Gus parted company at Altnafeadh. Jean, the Beacon calendar July babe, now joined me alone for the climb up the Devil's staircase sadly wearing more than just her surfboard. Doing my best impersonation of the Duracell bunny, the climbing version, I reach the summit cairn at a reasonable pace. We turned momentarily to admire Buachaille Etive Mor, the surrounding hills behind us and the walkers now descending who had greeted us with an encouraging, "Well done ladies!" Jean and I laughed loudly. The rain showers continued to sweep in and I was feeling very cold. We had an hour's descent ahead of us so I finally decided to put my jacket on.

Over and down the boulder-strewn path we bounded. Right foot, left foot, trying to select the best placements wherever possible. The pain in both my ankles and knees was getting quite severe causing me to wince and land awkwardly with each step. I knew it was slowing my rate of descent but in a race of this distance you have to be very lucky not to have your fair share of problems to overcome. I looked over to the Mamores panorama and reminded myself I was thankfully fortunate to be healthy enough to have a go at this budget touring. We now overtook another couple of runners as we further pounded our quads down the steep rough vehicle track and out into the streets of Kinlochleven. Passing the first row of houses I saw Jane and Henry come to escort us to where Charlie and Gus had parked the car at checkpoint number seven, the final one.

A cup of hot tea was thrust into my hand as I continued to walk straight through looking at my splits' schedule and trying to ignore the enticing aroma wafting from the chip shop. Another sandwich in the other hand and an acknowledgement to the marshals as I went on by. Number 42 had left the building...err...checkpoint. Fourteen miles to go and it's 6:45pm. "Remember the head torches please" I shout. Better to play safe even though darkness was still a long way off. Gus, Jean and I began the steep climb out of Kinlochleven and it wasn't long before my breathing became laboured and I felt really tired.

"Am I going as well as last year?"

"Yes" came the encouraging answer.

"I sure don't feel as if I am".

"You are".

"Why am I not catching anyone then?"

There was a long silence followed by "You're doing great".

Probably just another race low point I thought but kept wasting my energy asking daft questions anyway until I received this surprising answer, "because you're in sixth place".

Wow! "Are you sure?"

"Yes".

Having no real idea what position I held until now I was very surprised and delighted.

"How far are the others behind, can you see anyone up front?"

I snapped out of my low trough and was determined if possible to hold my position. Negotiating the loose boulder surface and crossing the burns of the Lairigmor as purposefully as possible with my deteriorating ankles and knees, I kept enquiring if anyone was visible behind me? "No", came the reply but it was almost impossible to accurately see and I worried that a busload of my fellow competitors would charge past me at any minute.

Now into the trees on the approach to Lundavra and we are met by a couple of big four wheel drive vehicles possibly on a late school run or heading for an unknown supermarket destination. With no desire to unnecessarily interrupt my basic forward motion I kept moving on the edge of the track and was almost knocked over. I had to settle for a light soaking as they drove through some rather large puddles. Maybe it was an organised ploy to slow my progress. Jane and Jean had voiced their disappointment that they couldn't use their brand new head torches as I was probably going to finish before it was dark!

I arrived at our last arranged support. Six miles to go and it's still clear daylight. I say hello to Charlie and Henry. Jane joins us for the final leg to the finish. I give my thanks but decline the offer of a cup of tea and just bash on through as best I can on the undulating path, motivated further by all the fantastic company I have. I was "running" well here, just walking the uphill bits and some extra bits I had designated as uphill bits. I was however, getting accused of having phantom toilet stops just to get a rest! Honest guys, I was still genuinely taking a leak. On that subject, I find out later that Molly Jean's excitable spaniel had a little accident travelling round from Kinlochleven in the car and peed on Jane's knee. Oops... and Henry and Charlie the fireman had set fire to the banking at Lundavra with the stove making tea! Such is the obvious excitement in a day in the life of a WHW runner support team!

It's still light as we enter that final lost forest of dehydrated imaginings. Tonight, thankfully, there are no goblins, gnomes or giant toads jumping about the trail to distract us. But it was still all up, down, up, down, round, through and under the dark pine trees negotiating the seemingly endless winding path which eventually emerges with Big Ben Nevis to be seen across the Glen under cloud cover. This is the beginning of the end feeling. I still maintain my position at the front in order to have a clear view of what I am about to trip over. Gravity assisted, we are soon jogging down the wide forest track interrupted only by my need to periodically hit the brakes. I hear some humorous remarks coming from behind about new head torches. "Just wear them anyway", and "Haven't you kept the box?" I shout back thoroughly enjoying the banter even though my knees and ankle pains are now pushing me to the limits of my endurance. Nearing the road we are met by Charlie, Molly and Henry with the camera. Together in the fading evening light we jog along the road towards Fort William on a mission. I again give my thanks to the Glen Nevis Wishing Stone for a successful day and notice that a twenty one hour finish time has probably just slipped beyond my reach now.

It's an absolute delight when I see the thirty miles per hour sign on the edge of town. One last effort up the final small incline in the routes' total 11,624 feet of ascent and along past the houses, across the roundabout road and down towards the finish in the Lochaber Leisure centre. A last determined run across the car park and through the open door. With my head pumping, I dizzily slump onto the reception counter and I've made it.

It's been 21 hours, 7 minutes and 10 seconds since I left Milngavie, 95 miles away. I am in 6th position overall and the 1st placed veteran over forty. I have taken 1 hour 32 mins off my last years' time.

Everything now begins to blur in the heat of the Centre. The leg pain finally overcomes my determination and I have difficulty walking back outside for some fresh air and photographs. The pavement kerbside seems enormous and I try to tackle it side on. I thank Gus, Jean, Henry, Jane, Charlie and Molly for their superb enthusiastic support, the companionship and friendship. I thank them all for being an essential part of this intense experience and adventure. I phone my wife Gail to tell her I've survived and thank her for her encouragement and tolerance during the months of training.

Immersed in my thoughts, I slowly take a few very painful steps away from the centre and try to absorb the content of my Saturday, the 19th of June 2004. An absolute epic.

Well done to first timers Derek, Russell, Craig and Phyllis and to Dave, Jez, Richard and Fiona for all your successful, excellent finishes. Many thanks to Dario, all the Marshals, the race organisation, the helpers, support crews and fellow runners who together make this the fantastic event that it is and an extraordinary special day in my life.

Bob Allison,
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