

Dave Waterman

The West Highland Way Race 2006

It's past midnight and I'm standing in the car park of Milngavie train station about seven miles north of Glasgow on Saturday 24th June. My primary thought is 'What the hell am I doing here?' It needn't be said that my fellow runner, Jamie, is thinking the same. We have trained solidly for seven months; early morning runs in the dark and cold of winter; 18 mile journeys to work running along the congested A3 instead of on the train; and those weekend, day-long jaunts over the North Downs. Despite the fastidious training plan, I wonder whether it has been enough. I'm comfortable that I have a good fifty miles in me, but the latter half of the race is an unknown. My fear and trepidation is reflected in the faces of our four-man support team; all colleagues from the London Fire Brigade and London Ambulance Service. The race requires them to meet us at pre-designated checkpoints to provide food, water, first aid and encouragement. It also requires them to locate and rescue us in the event of our non-attendance at any rendezvous point. I am hoping that there will be no need to unpack the rescue stretcher or medical bag from our hired support vehicle before we have to return it on Monday.

The lithe, athletic bodies and well-worn endurance race gear that are abound here tell a story of experienced individuals aiming for sub-24 hour times. Me? I just want to finish. I have walked the West Highland Way three times previously. I know that I have about 15 miles of relatively flat, easy, path before I hit the slopes of Conic Hill; I know that there are 20-plus miles of dodging rocks and tree roots along the eastern shores of Loch Lomond; I know that, once past the Highland Boundary fault, I'm in the mountains with the remote and desolate Rannoch Moor to cross and the portentously named Devil's Staircase to negotiate. Although the memories of my previous forays along the West Highland Way arm me well for this outing, I now have to complete the route in under 35 hours. A feat that has previously taken me 5 days.

It's 01:00 and having strained to hear the briefing from the race organiser, Dario Melaragni, we are off. A hundred or so head-torches bobbing about in the darkness like a swarm of agitated fireflies. The initial stage of the race passes quickly as we settle into a steady run. The weather is remarkably warm and the going underfoot dry. I am desperate to avoid turning an ankle in the darkness or slipping into a pothole but I am on a narrow track with runners behind me breathing down my neck as we pass through the suburban streets and into the woods. I have lost Jamie already, he is somewhere behind me but I continue to run, afraid that to slow or stop will make me cold. I need not concern myself greatly with the darkness as it occupies just a few hours in this part of Scotland.

My friend and colleague, Dom Fearnley is running the race too. He is somewhere in front of me, and although it hasn't been said, I know that there is a burning rivalry and he is determined to reach Fort Bill before me. Before I know it the sun is rising slowly as I begin the ascent of Conic Hill. I have climbed this hill, and larger, before, so it holds no fears for me. I am taken by the beauty of Loch Lomond in the misty half-light, millpond flat with its various islands extending north indicating my route. As I contour round the top of the hill I look to the peak. It is about 04:00 and someone is flying a kite! I mull this over as a roar down the other side toward the first checkpoint. I bound down the steps that have been cut into the descent that remind me of my many training runs on similar terrain around Box Hill in Surrey. Into the car park at Balmaha and my support crew are clad in midge nets offering tea and hot food. I accept some and suffer the onslaught of the Highland Midge. As I look across the car park I notice Dom hoisting his running sack onto his back and preparing to leave for the next checkpoint. Our eyes meet and we both know what that look says: 'You're not beating me, Waterman.' Jamie arrives some minutes later grumbling that he has experienced the hardest twenty miles of his life. I am slightly concerned, as I know what is to come. I can stand the midges no longer and leave Jamie to his food, hoping he will catch me up, but with my sights set firmly on catching Dom.

There are fewer runners around now as we spread out. I am concerned that a twinge I felt in my knee an hour or so ago is developing into an ache. At the marathon distance stage I pull into the second checkpoint with the intention of getting John, our team paramedic, to attend to my developing injury but he's not there. I am informed that he is ten minutes away with the medical bag seeing to Jamie who has pulled out of the race. Damn, I have seventeen miles until I see my support crew again and I

can't afford the twenty minutes it will take my crew to retrieve John so I leave and continue running. I consider mistake number one: co-runners may have a joint support crew- the keyword I guess is 'co.' I suppose this means that Jamie and I should have been physically together regardless of the complications. I dismiss this from my mind as my co-runner has pulled out so now the support crew has only to support me. I get concerned about my injury and the prospect of failure momentarily occurs to me but I quickly banish it from my mind. I will complete this race if it's the last thing I do.....and Dom is still ahead.

As Rowardennan becomes a memory I pass a group of beer-fuelled, unpleasant individuals who have been camping by the loch. They are shouting obscenities at a woman runner and me. I wish I had the time and energy to introduce them to the depths of the dark water but I continue on. I smile as I see my shaven headed support crew approach them to explain the error of their ways. The next seventeen miles are purgatory. I wonder if a knitting needle has found its way into my Ron Hill Tracksters and is now embedded in my knee. Neither my wife nor I knit so it must be my injury worsening. My pace has slowed terribly and descending hills results in excruciating pain either side of my patella. The going underfoot is worse than I remember too. I find myself scrambling over rocks, making very little headway and the aroma of garlic is becoming sickening as I tramp through the Ramsons that grow prolifically by the side of the Loch. I sing Bob Dylan songs to myself and focus on moving forward.

Eventually I arrive at checkpoint three. I have completed about forty-four miles and I'm getting near the half way point. I stop for about ten minutes and allow John to strap my knee up with Gaffer Tape while I eat some hot military rations. I get a telephone call on my mobile from an ex-Parachute Regiment friend back home who informs me he is drinking beer and watching the football. As I leave the checkpoint he texts me: 'Guts and determination mate.' I repeat this as a mantra as I head into the highlands. Feelings of tiredness plague me now, although the Ibuprofen John has given me softens the sharp edges of pain from my knee. I continue on in the knowledge that I need complete only seven more miles before I see my support crew again at a road crossing. I decide to film the first extract of a race diary on my mobile phone's video camera. As I watch it back the person I see on the screen looks many years older than my 39. He also looks shockingly tired and the expletives I hear from his mouth render the film x-certificated. I continue on and as I arrive at the road crossing I am surprised to see John clad in running gear. He has been told that from the halfway stage it is within the rules to accompany ones runner, so I have a companion again and we set off for the next checkpoint at Tyndrum. Dom is well ahead now. He has left a message for me with my support crew: 'Pain? It's just weakness leaving the body.'

Tyndrum arrives and I am now struggling to make the cut-off times and am at the very back of the field. Getting slightly lost in the hills around Crianlarich did not help. We need to leave almost immediately to make it to Bridge of Orchy at fifty-three miles. As we climb out of Tyndrum we meet cheery, Australian race official and exchange banter with him as we progress toward the next checkpoint. It is Keith 'Mad Dog' Hughes, a very fine individual. The hulking Beinn Dorain looms above us as we contour round it following the West Highland rail line, and before we know it arrive at Bridge of Orchy. A swift food stop and a change of socks and we're off again, climbing the hill toward Rannoch Moor. Suddenly, the pain diminishes in my knee and I am able to increase my speed. John encourages me and we achieve a fair pace. We begin to overtake other runners and my spirits lift. We pass our support crew at the next rendezvous point, the pub at Inveroran, they are drinking pints of beer and look surprised as we choose not to stop, the look on their faces is priceless. Rannoch Moor is notorious as a miserable part of the race; it is remote, featureless and exposed but John and I continue to overtake other runners. As we pass them John asks 'Are you OK?' Invariably they respond negatively to which John replies 'Oh, we are!' We are running well now and the wild moorland flashes by as we maintain our good pace. I think that Dom might well be within my grasp now.

As we complete the Moor stage and pull into the Kingshouse Hotel a runner who has removed his shoe greets us. His foot is purple and he seems in agony. I consider my own injury and realise it could be a great deal worse. I discover later that this was Mark Hamilton, who had broken his ankle in the early stages of the race! Darkness is approaching and I'm not looking forward to my second night of running but my spirits are high and I start to believe that I've got the finish in the bag. I won't break any records but I'll be awarded a finishers crystal goblet. Feelings of joy fill me and John and I trudge

off into the night to tackle the Devil's Staircase. As we are about to ascend, Keith the Aussie arrives in his car and gives me an elasticised knee support to wear. I am overwhelmed and thank him, then head up the zigzag path toward the summit of the Staircase. I have dreaded this part of the race and the going is as tough as I remember it but remarkably I feel as if I have energy to spare. We arrive at the summit, drink some isotonic sports drink and then head off, making good progress as we descend into Kinlochleven. We pass more runners who are now walking and we listen to them complain that it is too late in the race to be moving as fast as we are. We ignore them and arrive confidently at the medical clinic that doubles as the penultimate checkpoint. Some runners have taken the opportunity to rest here as the cut-off times are now particularly generous but John and I waste no time in heading for the final major climb of the race. I consider my performance thus far: the horrendous, painful part of the race removed me from the middle of the field and placed me at the back. Now I feel born again and I think a sub 30 hour time is on the cards.....but most importantly I need to catch Dom who is about an hour ahead.

My renaissance lasts until I hit the hill out of Kinlochleven. I've done about eighty miles and now I'm feeling it. My head is swimming and the pain in my knee has returned with a vengeance. I begin to hallucinate and see Iain, one of my support crew, on an exercise bike by the side of the track. If you knew Iain you'd realise how ridiculous that is. Later I see a van and a car parked side by side on the track. It can't be, vehicles can't tackle this terrain. I squeeze my eyes closed and then open them- yes, definitely a car and a van. I consider asking John if he can see them too but change my mind. As I do the two vehicles morph into the bushes that they really are. The sun is now up and the path seems to go on forever. It snakes away into the distance and boulders litter the ground in front of us. I accidentally kick one and the jarring effect sets off a firework of pain in my knee. This is definitely the worst stage of the race. I know the end is in sight but my body knows it too, it is beginning to protest at the lack of sleep and having to endure the injury that probably should have dictated my withdrawal fifty or so miles back. But we keep going. John has been magnificent; he accepted the role of support crew and agreed to run the final twenty-five miles with Jamie and I if needed. He ran a fifteen-mile training run in preparation and is now approaching his fiftieth mile. As I said- magnificent.

The final checkpoint appears at last and Fred, a long lost friend who left the London Fire Brigade to live in Scotland some time ago, greets us. He has driven from Dundee to support us and it's good to see his cheery face. After a quick drink we set off to complete the final seven miles. Again, they seem to go on forever and a blister bursts on the ball of my foot about four miles from the finish. I waste time trying to tape it up with gaffer tape pulled from my knee but it doesn't work so I just take the pain and crack on. The massive Ben Nevis heralds our arrival in Fort William and we find ourselves on an asphalt path, heading into the town. A few photographs of John and I by the 'You have completed the West Highland Way' sign and I stagger into the Lochaber Leisure centre and the end of the race to be congratulated by Dario- 31 hours and twenty six minutes after I left Milngavie. The feelings of elation are surprisingly absent; I think I experienced them when I realised I had a finish in the bag. Dom has finished too. An hour before me. I'm just tired and sore. A shower and I'm in the car sleeping the sleep of the dead.

At around midday the support crew, Jamie and I go to the prize giving ceremony. It is an event not too be missed, compeered by Dario, who is full of comical comments. Dom looks at me across the crowd and smiles as he sips his pint of Guinness. I nod in acknowledgment. Yes, you beat me mate, well done. I leave the ceremony an hour or so later with my goblet and hobble to the hotel we have booked. I want to wander into town and have a drink in the Ben Nevis pub, but it is too far to drag my sorry self. My knee resembles a melon now and my lower leg is swollen and becoming an interesting, purplish hue. I get into the hotel and watch television and eat fish and chips. Probably the best fish and chips I've ever had.

The West Highland Way Race has been for me a life-defining episode. Definitely one of the hardest things I've ever done. So two weeks later, how do I feel? Well, still not elated. The injury appears to be healing well and I've caught up on my sleep. The finisher's crystal goblet is in my cupboard alongside my son's football medals. My complimentary West Highland Way Race sweat top has been worn often and the memories of the pain are disappearing fast. What's left are the mental images of the outstanding scenery, the feeling of camaraderie among our team, and an excellent weekend in Scotland. But I think I can do it quicker. Not as quick as the winner, Jez Bragg from Solihull who

achieved a new course record in an incredible fifteen hours and forty-four minutes, but definitely quicker. Yes, I think I'll be back next year.....and so is Dom. Next year, mate, next year.