

Fiona Rennie

West Highland Way Race 2006 I'm Back

Well, the last fourteen months haven't been what you would call normal but I've been working on it. After having a brain haemorrhage on the 10th April 2005, the morning of Speyside Way 50k, I have made steady progress from the scary stuff in hospital and dealing with feeling as if I have an unexploded bomb in my head.

Last year's WHW was quite an emotional roller-coaster, watching everyone set off from Milngavie without me, not knowing if I would ever get to do it again, but still in the just-glad-to-be-alive phase I enjoyed being there, supporting Pauline, even though I struggled with the pace from Tyndrum to Bridge of Orchy, she did slow down slightly when I joined her again at Lundavra to complete her sub 24 hour mission.

I had to explain ultra running to bemused doctors; they were a bit vague on what I could return to. "Just go to how you feel, but keep it easy." Was their standard reply to my many questions about training. The best advice I received was from Bob Allison (Fife AC runner and WHW family member) "You set the bench mark for them. You tell the doctors what you can do." Thanks Bob, you helped set me in a more positive frame of mind. The next big boost I had was running the Loch Ness Marathon at the beginning of October, with great timing, (a couple of weeks before the race) I had been informed that the aneurysm was stable and I was safe to do more effort. Every time I managed something normal, like driving, returning to work, and running; it was another tick in the box of my recovery. The marathon was a huge tick and a gold star. I was quite nervous and apprehensive at the start, and with no training I put a lot of faith into the theory of muscle memory and set off at an easy pace. As it became physically harder, mentally I got stronger, "I'm still here and I'm ok!" I crossed the line on a high not far removed from a WHW finish. Although around 45 minutes slower than my fastest marathon it was definitely a personal best. The next goal on my tick list was Speyside Way 50k, in mid February I panicked when I found out it was cancelled, what was I going to do? I couldn't let it pass. I had an appointment to smack some demons in the gob. Then I calmed down and realised it wasn't me that chickened out, it would have been nice to slam the door shut on that one but no longer necessary, I had just run Draycote Water 35 mile race with a bad back and a cold, I have nothing to prove, of course I'm fine.

I had used my WHW "never give up" mentality to help me recover, as I focused on this years race it was time to turn around the psychology and with the help of the old adage What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I have stared into the vile face of that creepy git in the big hoodie with the scythe and spat in his eye! I am invincible! Can I run 95 miles? It'll be a stroll in the park after what I've been through. Bring it on. (Well, Okay! Okay! Big stroll! Big park!)

As race day... err, I mean days approached I thought the nerves might start, but all I felt was excited and couldn't wait for the adventure to begin, even at Milngavie I wasn't nervous which did surprise me as it's in the air and very contagious, but I was here living my dream why should that make me nervous. I sat in the car, chilling, listening to my music while Pauline and Val did the social thing until the race briefing.

Right, backpack on, torches checked, lets go. 1.00am. We're off, 104 tough athletes (me included) left Milngavie. Kept it at an easy pace, making sure of no mishaps in the dark. Met Pauline and Val at Drymen (12 miles), swapped the backpack for the bum-bag without breaking stride and headed for Conic hill. On the climb up I made a point of looking around me, with all that scenery about it would be a sin just to watch my footing. Gave Pauline and Val an early morning wake up call just before the steep steps on the descent from Conic. "Get the kettle on, I'm about 10 minutes away." I was looking forward to my breakfast in Balmaha (20 miles), rice pudding with honey and banana washed down with my first mug of coffee in a month. Mmmm! Beautiful!

I have always enjoyed the run along to Rowardennan (27 miles) and this year was no different, I was on my own for most of it and happy to have it all to myself. I didn't stop here, just changed from the bum-bag to the backpack, which was refuelled and ready for me to pick up with no time wasted. I headed off for Inversnaid (34 miles) and the rough path along the Loch Lomond shore, I was glad to see that the fallen trees had been cleared. I had been along this way in a training run in April, just a few weeks after the heavy snowfall and I really didn't fancy repeating the tricky manoeuvres required for getting under, over or through the maze of fallen branches. This section is fun but I was relieved to get back running when the terrain eased. The weather was good even getting quite bright, I phoned in a request for my sunglasses at Inverarnan (40 miles) where I changed socks and went back to the bum bag. I felt great skipping along, getting close to half way, the legs were good and strong and a boost from Pauline saying I was the freshest looking runner she'd seen come through. I didn't stop at Derrydarroch, Stevie Hards from Kilbarchan AAC had arrived to help and he had to chase me up the track with a sticky tub of rice pudding with honey and fresh drinks bottles. I didn't see Val, she had gone on to run with Lynne at Tyndrum.

I trotted on towards the fun fair of a forest near Crianlarich (luckily there's no height restrictions) and I made it through the steep swoops up and down. I refrained from waving my arms above my head and screaming, (I'm not a complete nutter...I think I've got bits missing!) I stopped to take a stone out of my shoe that was jaggging the ball of my foot. There was no stone, just the start of a blister, oh well, big dollop of Vaseline then. I found the words of one of Pauline's inspirational songs going round my head, The Cranberries Zombie except Pauline has changed the words a bit "In my

head, I am so strong” I wasn’t singing it to gee myself up I was merely stating a fact. There is nowhere else I’d rather be or anything else I’d rather do. I AM living the dream.

I arrived in Tyndrum (53 miles) to the usual encouragement, “Well done, looking good.” My crew’s scathing comments of “You look far too fresh, you’re not working hard enough!” made me laugh they can say what they like, I’m enjoying myself. “Och! I’m saving it for a sprint finish!” was my reply. Simon had come back to see how I was doing, and since he’s the foot expert Pauline relinquished that duty to him, I sat on the stool tucking in to my soup while he put a Compeed plaster on the ball of my left foot, then he said “The blister on your middle toe needs to be burst, do you have a needle?” Yeeeeeks!!! There isn’t a needle in my first aid box but that didn’t deter him, he nicked it with the scissors (I now have a surreal flashback of Simon as Johnny Depp’s Edward Scissors Hands but not so pretty) squashed it flat and bound it tight with Compeed and tape. As I watched pink fluid ooze down my foot, I thought just as well I’ve a strong stomach ‘cause looking at this could put me off my soup! Also tough ultra runners don’t squeal, they just say lots of Owws! Simon had promised that it would settle down and he was right, it did, I didn’t feel it anymore once I got going again. I now had Stevie with me along to Bridge of Orchy (60 miles) this section flew in, with great company and conversation we reached the checkpoint ahead of my anticipated time, where once again I didn’t stop, dumped the bum bag put on the backpack and walked up the path with my rice pudding and hot chocolate, with Pauline for company going over Rannoch Moor, Stevie continued with us up the hill until I had finished my food and took my empty mug and tub back, it was the least he could do since he was now heading back home and in a few hours going to bed! Cheers Stevie!

Pauline and I kept a good steady pace along the Moor, what a pleasure it was this year without having to dodge the masses of Caly Chally walkers with their jaggy poles and to be able to pee whenever the urge took hold, bliss! We came upon another runner, he was lying on the grass and his support was on the phone, I continued on, Pauline stopped to check if she could help, they had plenty food and fluids, he was just knackered. So Pauline grabbed him by the ankles, lifted them up and gave his legs a shoogle, and informed him that when he stood up he’ll have a whole new heap of fresh blood in his legs and that will help get him going. (It’s a trick you’ll have seen done to footballers after they’ve fairy-ed about for 90 minutes and then have to go into extra time, poor souls!) I now felt as if I had to put in some effort, kept looking up wondering when we’d start the descent into Kingshouse (72 miles), the wind got quite cool, I felt cold and hungry for my big plate of pasta that was waiting for me. Pauline scampered about taking photos of golden light and long shadows as the sun was going down, which at the time I didn’t take much notice of (but now one of those photos is in my all time favourites) I plodded on. Where is this Kingshouse?

At last, Kingshouse, sat in the car, chattering eating my pasta, I put my tracksters on over my $\frac{3}{4}$ length tights and also my fleece, jacket and woolly hat. I couldn’t decide whether to keep the trail shoes on or to change to sturdy walking shoes. Put one trail shoe on and one walking shoe. Ouch! They both hurt! Still couldn’t make my mind up. Pauline decided for me, “Well, just stay with the light weight ones then.” Gail and George arrived to wish me well; they were now heading home after supporting Richie, who finished with a massive PB, knocking around five hours off his time from last year. Gail in her caring, medical capacity said “Well, I’ve seen you look better, but plenty painkillers and you’ll be fine.”

Val and I headed off for the Devil’s Staircase, fed and with lots of clothes on I soon warmed up, on the climb I handed Val my gloves, I was nice and cosy. Over the top and on the long boulder strewn descent Val, who has done support for Pauline, Lynne and myself over many years, usually started her shift from Tyndrum, commented how much harder it is finding your footing going into the second night without sleep. Yeah! I had noticed! I was trying to remember how Lynne and I skipped over these boulders on a training run last month. The legs were still moving well but now the ball of my right foot felt ready to spontaneously combust. Kinlochleven (81 miles) did seem to take a while to come in but not as torturous as previous years. I sat on the stool eating my cheese and ham roll, drinking my oxo as Pauline tended my feet, then as Pauline and Val organised stuff the guy who was parked next to us put my socks back on for me, it wasn’t weird, he wasn’t a total stranger, in the realms of this race, he’s family. I think he’s Jim Drummond’s support.

Pauline has the short straw, the long, steep climb out of Kinlochleven and the endless Lairigmor. Last month I did Pauline’s support in Holland where she ran a 24-hour race (the first Scottish woman to go over 200km and setting a new Scottish record) I did a lot of shouting and bullying...err, I mean encouraging. It was now pay back time, except Pauline didn’t shout at all. It was worse than that she made me eat! My feet were on fire, my legs sore, I was exhausted and felt sick. The last thing I wanted was jam pieces, Mars Bars and a bottle of flat coke, yeech! Even with lots of clothes on I got quite cold, I put on my waterproof trousers for a third layer on my legs and Pauline gave me her thick fleece for a fifth layer on my body and her gloves, I tried to remember not to wipe my nose on them (oops! oh well! She’ll have washed them by now). I had made a CD of my favourite inspirational music, the song I had earmarked for Lairigmor was the Corrs version of Everybody Hurts but I didn’t have the energy to sing it in my head, all I could manage was “Hold on, hold on”. Once in the trees, I knew Lundavra was getting nearer, Val had walked out to meet us, then shot off to get the coffee ready. At last, Lundavra the home straight! (Well, ok not that straight, 6 miles of ups, downs and twisty spooky woods). My head went up, I could smell the finish. I had put on my checkpoint demands coffee and a kick up the bum at Lundavra. They were going to have to catch me first. In fact Val had to put in quite an effort to get back to us. Pauline headed back to the car and Val was now in charge, she was just as forceful as Pauline making me eat, if not worse. She would have made an SAS sergeant seem like a nursery school teacher; so much so, when I dropped my flapjack I quickly picked it up, dusted it off and ate it before she could reprimand me for throwing it away. She made me stop to drink the coffee, I took the opportunity to remove the jacket, fleece and waterproof trousers, right it was time to work, the sleeves were pushed up and I was off. Val was very good at keeping me under control; I was going at it like a puppy with a rag-doll between its teeth, running on pure adrenaline (and a flapjack with sprinkles) I didn’t have energy to waste. At the

Braveheart car park Val phoned in my imminent arrival. Lynne had finished ages ago with a massive PB too, around five hours off her previous time.

The last mile, head up, shoulders down, hips forward, hands loose, lengthen the stride, work and breathe, past the Nevis Bank Hotel, I could see the Leisure Centre. I promised a sprint finish. Arms pumping, legs following, blisters popping, spit flying. I'M COMING HOME. The door into the Leisure Centre remained on its hinges as Simon held it open for me. I came in with my arms above my head and a euphoric scream. 31 hours and 20 seconds, a PB by 8 minutes, one of the seventy runners to finish in this year's race.

I was surprised that I didn't cry the whole last mile, knowing what it meant to me. It was the last tick in the box of my recovery. The emotion of my achievement did grab me round the throat and blurred my vision a couple of days later. I go back to hospital around October for a scan but I don't have to wait for doctors to tell me something I already know. I am recovered, fit, well and stronger than before. Those bits I thought were missing, well, I've found them. I am a complete nutter. My plan now is to join the ranks of Jim, Jim, Alan and Adrian. They have completed the West Highland Way Race ten times or more. Now to tell my support crew they're not allowed any other plans or holidays in June for the next seven years, at least!

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July 2006