

West Highland Way Charity Run

"The Way It Was" By Ian McCuaig 2002

I had run the West Highland Way Race in 2001 and completed it in 32 hours and 59 minutes, an achievement I am extremely proud of. However, in 2002 I was back with one goal in mind, to demolish my time from last year, or at least to get in to Fort William in under 30 hours. I had trained very hard all year round. I ran several full and half marathons in amongst my training and had achieved PBs in most of my races throughout the year. I felt great about my training and was quietly confident. I was running for charity so the pressure was on in that respect.

My support team consisted of Karin Harrop (mothering etc.), Budge Harrop (logistics) and Darren Frudd (support runner). Their instructions were clear: to feed me with bananas etc., refill my water bottles and throw me out of the check points regardless as to how sad, pathetic, ill or dejected I might look.

We set off from Nottinghamshire late in the afternoon on Friday and made the six hours drive to Glasgow, stopping for a bite to eat on route. It was late in the evening when we arrived in the Milngavie Railway Station car park, but we were the first to arrive for the race. It was chucking it down with rain, and by all accounts that had been pretty much the story of things for weeks. The support team went for a walk around Milngavie, whilst I had about an hour of solid sleep in the back of the van. When I awoke, more runners had arrived, and that's when the nerves started to tingle. The realisation of what you are about to do at that stage is just the most awesome feeling you'll ever experience.

After all the registration and pinning on race numbers etc. I was finally ready to go. I had decided to run in shorts and T-shirt and to wear a bottle belt. I was also going to carry a separate bottle in one hand and my torch in the other. I didn't want to carry any unnecessary weight at this early stage.

At 2am, after the customary race briefing from Stan we were off into the night, 72 brave souls with one common goal.

At first I tried to skip around puddles and jump over the muddy bits, but it wasn't very long before I discovered how futile this would be, and so it was a case of "let the mud bath begin". I splugged and splashed and squelched my way to Drymen. Besides the drenching, I felt great and arrived at the checkpoint in 1.59.

After a complete change of footwear I was off again. I felt good with the water bottle in my hand and one in my belt, even though I had never carried a bottle in my hand before. By now, it was so wet that Conic Hill had a stream running down it where the path should have been, but what the heck, when you're wet you're wet. At the top, I met another runner (a Dutchman) and we joked about the beautiful view of the mist. On the way down I tried to avoid the slippery rocks and instead ran on the slippery grass. I slipped and slid about 20 metres on my back, miraculously missing a series of pointed rocks that protrude from the grass. However, I managed to empty my belt bottle, which was in the middle of my back and the bottle in my hand collected a lump of animal dung (nice). I had to refill using the water that was running down the track. Luckily there's a toilet in the Balmaha car park with an outside tap and I got clean water there. At the next checkpoint Karin started to come into her own. She stripped me off, dried me and dressed me again, everything apart from the shorts, all in the blink of an eye.

I ate a banana and a small tub of rice pudding and was off on a section, which can only be described as living hell. It's a never ending assault course of giant boulders, trees and swampy bits that you have to scramble up, over, up and down (endlessly). In my opinion, this is where the WHW starts to stick the boot in. However, I still felt good and was making good time. I met the big Dutchman again on this section, we seemed to be playing leapfrog. We had a chat and he told me that they don't have such mountains in Holland. I thought he was joking, but he wasn't. Eventually I arrived at the Inverarnan checkpoint, and the Midgies were out in force. I'm sure that they can smell fear.

A few moments to re-group And I was on my way again. This section to Tyndrum seems a very long way, and it is where us mere mortals start to feel the pain. I trudged on, chuntering to myself, just looking forward to the next bit of moral support that I might receive at the checkpoint. This section and the next went without any real hitches. In fact, when I reached the Bridge of Orchy, everyone in the backup team commented on how fresh I looked. But I had no idea what I was about to encounter.

I headed off for Kings House, and, as I descended onto Rannoch Moor I got caught in a sleet storm which very quickly reduced me to a shivering wreck. I was wearing a waterproof top, but even so, I got soaked to the skin and the driving wind made me feel so cold that I actually doubted that I was going to make it off the moor alive. As if that wasn't enough, I fell badly and twisted my ankle between two rocks, and from then on I couldn't weight bear on my right foot. I felt so sorry for myself that I think I actually cried for a bit. A helicopter flew past to pick some other unfortunate soul off the moor and my arms almost went up to it, but something deep in me told me to keep going, and if need be, I'd have to die with my dignity intact. I just reminded myself over and over again that when I got to the checkpoint Karin would sort me out, and I was right. A few hundred metres from the checkpoint Budge came to meet me and gave me his coat, and I could have kissed him. I was shivering uncontrollably, and despite all attempts with warm clothing and hot soup, I never did stop the shivering before I had to set off again.

This time I had Darren for company and my ankle was strapped up with elastic bandage. We climbed the Devil's Staircase in total darkness, still wading through the mud and the rivers. This section mainly consists of stepping from boulder to boulder for about

nine miles. If you want to try something that's a lot of fun, try doing this with one good leg. The pain was becoming unbearable. I was questioning my own sanity and getting only blank looks in response. But we somehow got to Kinlochleven, and I knew then that nothing was going to prevent me from picking up my trophy at Fort William.

The last section is so hard that it can literally destroy you. It has the most nauseating roller-coaster in the woods that left me a broken man last year, but this time we laughed in its face because we knew we could crawl it if need be. Darren was fantastic to run with because he is as laid back as they come, and all my whimpering went straight over his head. We ran the whole of the wide gravel track down into Fort William, but by then my knees and my, by then badly swollen ankle were pleading for mercy. But again I took off over the last quarter mile to the Leisure Centre with Karin running beside me.

32 Hours 30 Minutes and 15 Seconds. MAGIC !!!!! See you next Year.

My thanks to Karin for whom nothing is too much trouble, and to Budge who just looked after everything with his fantastic organisational skills, and to Darren who got me to the end in style. A better team you'll never find. I would also like to thank those members of East Midlands Ambulance Service who helped with the transport arrangements and all the people who sponsored me. The total monies hasn't been collected yet, but I believe we raised around one thousand pounds. Well Done!!!