

The West Highland Way Race 2006 – Jez Bragg

This is my account of the epic 2006 West Highland Way (WHW) Race which I took part in last June. For the few who may not know about it, the WHW is Britain's most popular long distance footpath, running for roughly 95 miles from Milngavie, a north Glasgow suburb, to Fort William in the Western Highlands.

I must firstly start with some background. My first encounter with the WHW came several years ago, well before I became involved in ultra running. An old university friend and I had decided to tackle the WHW as a one off challenge in the summer we finished university, carrying rucksacks and camping kit for the 6 or so days we predicted it would take. And how tough we found it; consecutive days of walking across rough terrain with a pack full of kit that certainly didn't take consideration of the 'hike light' revelation of the present day. The most I had ever walked or run before was a half marathon so this sort of distance was completely new to me. It was during this walk that I first became aware of the wonderful world of ultra running. By coincidence the 'Caledonian Challenge' was taking place on the last day of our walk and we had the 'delight' of several hundred corporate runners coming past us in the opposite direction as we slogged out the last few miles from Kinlochleven to Fort William. Without previous knowledge of the ultra running world I was astounded to learn they were running 50 or so miles non-stop along the WHW as part of a corporate charity challenge. Little did I know I would be attempting a similar feat less than five years later!

The point of this background is to explain what the WHW means to me. It was the route of my first major foot-based challenge. Over the course of that week I went through a range of emotions in tackling a distance way beyond anything I had ever done before. At the time it was without doubt the most physically challenging week of my life.

And so in the years following this challenge, as I began to progress well with my running, firstly in marathon events, then in trail based ultra distance events, the WHW soon came back on to the radar, but this time as a non-stop running challenge. In 2006 I targeted a whole-hearted attempt at the WHW Race, held annually on the longest day of the year (mid-June).

The concept of the race is very simple. Starting in Milngavie at 0100hrs on the Saturday morning and to quote the race director Dario Mallerangi, competitors have 35 hours to "run, walk or crawl" the 95 miles to Fort William following the route of the WHW.

For safety reasons competitors must have a motorised support crew of at least two people to provide logistical support as well as the manpower to find a runner should he get into distress. My crew consisted of close family friend Roger Parsons and my brother Matt, to both of whom I am now indebted after sacrificing a full weekend to traipse round the highlands including missing a full nights sleep.

So there we were at 0100hrs on a June Saturday morning, in the quite surreal surroundings of the event start at Milngavie Railway station, along with 120 other runners. My nerves were running high. I had devoted the last six months to training for this event, running up to 100 miles a week to get myself to a peak level of fitness. During the six month build-up a day didn't go by without me thinking about the race, my strategy, how I could get an edge on other competitors and making sure, logistics-wise, a stone didn't go unturned. By my own admission this race was hugely important to me, an obsession even. I desperately wanted to be competitive and get a top three position and put my marker down north of the border. To add to the pressure there was an additional expectation generated from a race preview article in the Glasgow Herald the week before the race where I was highlighted as joint race favourite, along with North Face sponsored American runner Topher Gaylord. Topher has an impressive track record in this type of race so I knew straight away it would be a tough, competitive and fast paced race.

After all the hard work in preparation it was almost a relief when the race started as the runners headed off along the trail away from Milngavie under light from head torches. The first section of the route is relatively flat across the rolling hills of the lowlands, heading north towards the south end of Loch Lomond. The plan was to meet my support crew every 7 or 8 miles, at locations generally dictated by road-crossing points.

After the first couple of sections the pack started thinning out until there was a lead group of about 5 of us running at a brisk pace, leap frogging each other due to our differing support crew meeting points. Twenty miles into the race on the path towards the foot of Conic Hill at the bottom of Loch Lomond I was feeling strong and sitting in third place with the lead runner in sight. I decided that the steep section up Conic Hill would be an opportune moment for me to push for the lead which I did, overtaking Topher and another Scottish runner who had grudgingly pipped me to the finish in my last Scottish race outing. It was a bold move so early on but I knew it would pay dividends having a clear lead for the next section which winds along the shores of Loch Lomond. After a fast descent of Conic Hill I met my support crew with a lead of roughly two minutes. A quick sock and footwear change, a bite to eat and I was off again, still in the lead, but only by a narrow margin.

The next 20 mile section along the shores of Loch Lomond is my least favourite, the path being barely runnable in places with awkward tree roots to negotiate and plenty of undulations. After my bold early break I felt I didn't have much choice but to push to extend my lead.

Reaching the top of Loch Lomond, forty or so miles into the race, I was still in the lead but I had no idea by what margin. All I knew was that when I looked back along the route during the open sections there was no one in sight. I was still running a good pace and feeling in good shape so it was just a case of keeping focussed, knuckling down to maintain a good rhythm and not making any navigating errors. After the lengthy inaccessible section along Loch Lomond where my crew couldn't meet up with me it was good to see them again at Derryadoch Farm where they appeared in good spirits after a night without sleep. They also were unaware of the margin I had over second place but gave me plenty of encouragement and a welcome morale boost.

From Derryadoch I pressed on, climbing the steep uphill section leading to the start of the Highlands. Here the landscape gets even more dramatic, varied and challenging, but from experience much more enjoyable. I reached the town of Tyndrum, 54 miles into the race, on target time at exactly 0930hrs. This was my physiological half way point. I knew that if I reached Tyndrum feeling half decent then I was in good shape to finish. It was a huge boost to have achieved that goal. Although I had the tougher part of the course still in front of me it was only 40-odd miles to go!

It was shortly after Tyndrum at the pretty highland village of Bridge of Orchy that I heard the news I was desperately waiting for. I had a lead of 40 minutes over Topher in second place. The hard work was paying off, just keep running I was telling myself. Easier said than done after 60 miles!

Reaching the barren Rannoch Moor I started to experience the hazy, delirious state one goes through in such endurance events but with the sun shining, unique peace and quiet of the area and beautiful views I couldn't help but feel it was meant to be my race. It was all just perfect.

Straight off the moor into Glen Coe next to the ski resort Roger and Matt were waiting for me, and soon pouring isotonic drinks down my neck and encouraging me to eat in preparation for the tough climb up devil's staircase. "Just keep it steady Jez" were Roger's wise words. Pretty simple advice, but very appropriate. It certainly wasn't the time to get carried away.

The Devil's Staircase was a surprisingly enjoyable climb out of Glen Coe. It is too steep to run, so power walking up to the top provided a welcome break from running and use of a different group of leg muscles. The descent into Kinlochleven was less enjoyable, my feet battered and bruised from the rocky trails did not enjoy the fast and steep path down but I was still moving well and maintaining a decent pace.

At the checkpoint in Kinlochleven I met the race director Dario for the first time during the race and he congratulated me on my efforts thus far and suggested that if I picked up the pace slightly I would have a chance of beating the course record of 16 hours 26 minutes that has stood since 2000.

It was difficult to not get carried away with such comments so I set off on the last section with a renewed spring in my step. After the steep climb out of Kinlochleven there was a long remote stretch along the high level hanging valley which eventually leads out into Glen Nevis, the valley at the foot of Britain's highest mountain, Ben Nevis. My pace was still good, keep pushing on I repeatedly told myself. Reaching Glen Nevis with three miles of descent into Fort William in front of me, I now knew for sure I was within record pace. The remaining motivational factor was the thought that the faster I ran the last few miles, the more time I would knock-off the record. I didn't need any more encouragement than that, I sprinted the last three miles, desperate to use up every last ounce of energy I had left in my body.

After the biggest running performance of my life I crossed the finish line at Fort William leisure centre in first place in a time of 15 hours and 44 minutes, beating the previous record by 42 minutes and with a lead of more than an hour over Topher in second place. I had won!

It was a lot to take in at the finish, a very emotional moment, and with Roger and Matt there to greet me I couldn't help but think it was a truly great team effort.

After some celebratory drinks and a hearty meal in Fort William on the Saturday night we returned to the Glen Nevis hotel on Sunday lunchtime where the presentations were to be made. Having only seen a few of the race crew at the finish and spent all the time between finishing the race and the prizegiving away from any of the race proceedings, I had little idea of the reception that awaited me from fellow competitors, race crew and other supporters. I got a standing ovation from the 200 odd people packed into the presentation room, all of which was quite overwhelming for me! There is plenty of prestige and historical folklore that goes with this famous Scottish race, it was just great to be the youngster from Solihull who went to the highlands and stamped his mark. To have won the race was achieving my goal but to have set a new record was way beyond my expectations, simply a dream come true.

I would like to publicly thank Roger and Matt for their whole-hearted support over the race weekend, I genuinely couldn't have done it without them.

Jez Bragg, September 2006