

Jon Steele

The West Highland Way Race 2007

One by one my eyes opened to find myself in an alien environment, people in white rushing up and down the corridor, the strong smell of antiseptic, distant chattering voices and a tube disappearing into my right arm, it took me a moment to gather my senses and then realise I was in the intensive care unit of Fort William hospital.

'I'll pay for your entry into this years West Highland Way race for your birthday if you want" I jumped at the chance, 96 miles from the Glasgow suburbs to Fort William, as well as a fantastic route to be undertaken, good training for my Tour Du Mont Blanc race in August, brilliant!! A chance to tick another Ultrarunning challenge off my list. The train journey to Glasgow was eventful itself with storms, delays, squaddies and an impossibility in actually getting my head down for an hour or two. My plan had been to sleep on the train to compensate for not getting much sleep the night before and an early start at work. Eight hours later I was at Milngavie waiting to meet Mike Mason (one of the regulations of the WHW race is you must have your own support crew, to meet you at checkpoints, feed and water you etc,) but my driver had cancelled at the last minute and Mike saved the day, so I was now sharing Mikes Support crew 'Ernie' and later support runner 'John'. Ernie knew the rigours of Ultrarunning after recently competing in the 145 mile Grand Union Canal Race (Birmingham to London) in a little over 38 hours.?

We all crowded into the Train Station car park at 1.00 Saturday morning waiting in nervous anticipation for the large task which lay ahead of us 96miles to be completed in under 35 hours (Jezz Bragg completed the race in 2006 in a record time of 15 hours 44 minutes) The atmosphere was electric, and then we were off. Our gameplan was to start off slowly for the first 20 miles or so, to warm up both mentally and physically, that plan went to the dogs!! After a few miles into the race through pitch black woods we took a wrong turning and realised this quite a while later. Seeing a light on in the distance we decided to go and knock some farmer up and ask him directions, Mike knocked on the door and eventually a slightly shocked cross eyed man answered the door in his pyjamas (I suppose being woken at 2.00 in the morning by 2 English men dressed in running tights and weird head torches is enough to shock anyone) as the man opened the door I slipped back and hid behind Mike to avoid any kind of verbal onslaught or the barrel of a shotgun (ger off my land, in a Scottish not Cornish way!) but the man gave us directions and we were on our way. 'Why was that guy in pyjamas at 21.00hrs, bit early to go to bed" then it dawned on Mike, he had read his watch wrong it was 2.10 (Ultras do funny things to your common sense, mind you if you had any you wouldn't be doing them in the first place!) We had set off at 1.00 so how could it be 21.00, and also it was close to the longest day so at 21.00 it would be light, wouldn't it?? I will hold this one over Mike for years!) Our little diversion off the track had cost us an hour and a half in time and an extra 6 miles!! So we needed to up the pace if we wanted to reach the first checkpoint before it closed. Along the way we met up with Alex the rear sweeper (runner who collects ways and strays from the back of the group) Alex ran with us all the way to Conic Hill before joining another runner who we passed on the ascent. Mike set a hard pace, which every now and again topped 7.30 minute milling, a suicidal pace for the start of a 96-mile race but imperative to stop us being timed out at the first checkpoint. I felt sick and dizzy, repeatedly ducking behind bushes to have diarrhoea. Eventually we reached Rowdennan (20 miles) 1 minute before the checkpoint would close. The checkpoint was a large car park with 3 or 4 race marshals covered up in midge nets. Ernie, Mike's and my support driver had food and drink ready for us, which we consumed in seconds, while the midges ate us! Minutes later we were on our way as we still had a serious amount of time to make up before we could contemplate taking it a bit slower.

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Alex once again joined us for the next few miles as the guy who he had joined on Conic Hill had dropped out. The pace altered between a decent running pace and speed walking the ascents. Our aim was to catch other runners up and gradually pass them, which would help motivate us to continue. Eventually we managed to pass a few of people before the second checkpoint.

On arriving at the next checkpoint Mike headed straight for an al fresco massage, and a 6ft Arnold Schwarzenegger masseur went to work on his hamstrings, not a pretty sight, Mike with his running tights down! And then the rain came down. Leaving the checkpoint wasn't too hard as I was starting to feel cold, several minutes later we had upped the pace and had started to make good time. Mike stopped for a no. 2, so I decided to see how far I could get before Mike would catch me up, my pace quickened and I felt great, even running the ascents, by the time I arrived at Auchentyre checkpoint I had passed a dozen runners or so.

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Ernie was waiting for us at Auchentyre checkpoint, with food, and a Thermarest to collapse on. I relaxed on the Thermarest as Mike arrived, I refuelled, changed my socks, inspected the remains of my feet and chilled out a bit too long, as I watched most of the people I had passed, leave the Checkpoint.

The next section seemed to drag on forever, I fell well behind Mike and started to feel very low, 'Mike send you

message t" I looked to the side of me to see who had disturbed my 'sorry for myself slumber' two Oriental girls where sat on the ground giggling "He say, hurry up!" I feigned a smile, the prat!! I swore, and then ran to catch Mike up.

BRIDGE OF ORCHY CHECKPOINT

At last we were approaching the next checkpoint, I speeded up knowing refreshments and 10 minutes off our feet was coming up. At Bridge of Orchy we would be meeting our support runner John, who would be accompanying us for the next 30+ miles to Fort William. We reached the car but Mike didn't stop "Ernie we are going to continue over this hill and will meet you at the other side and John you may as well join him, save you having to climb this hill too" for a second I thought he meant me! I to waved goodbye to the refreshments and carried on up the bloody hill. We eventually arrived on Rannoch Moor were Mike dropped back yet again for another no 2 and was spotted with his pants down by a poor lady runner. The descent down to Kingshouse started to really hurt the soles of my feet leaving me looking for softer ground to run on. Eventually I came upon tarmac and for once was very pleased to see it. Kinghouse loomed and I pushed myself to catch Mike up, he just laughed and sprinted the couple of hundred metres to Kingshouse, I followed

KINGHOUSE CHECKPOINT

Ernie was there waiting to feed us, my right foot was a mess covered in Blisters but my left foot was the worst, it was twice its normal size, very hot and painful, I fixed a couple of blisters using compeed (not a good idea in this instance, as when I tried to remove the compeed it took most of the skin around my foot off with it!!) Ernie taped my hot air balloon of a left foot up and I set off towards Kinlochleven leaving Mike on a longer break, knowing my pace would just be a little more than a shuffle with the intense pain in my feet and I would slow Mike down.

Night had fallen and I began to see small lights ascending upwards towards Devils staircase, the lights were runner's head torches. Climbing Devils Staircase was much less painful on my feet then descending into Kinlochleven, walking on the balls of my feet gave my heels some restbite and I began to pick the pace up and passed half a dozen runners. The descent was another matter, the journey downhill into Kinlochleven seemed to last forever and things began to become very painful, the pain in my feet escalated with the lose rock underfoot and the hallucinations began, developed through sleep deprivation. I chatted nonsense to non-existent people (more then I usually do) and dodged non-existent Ravens trying to peck at my eyes!

"Have you seen a big guy with a Para tattoo on his arm?" was this another trick of the mind? No, thank god it's Mike! "I'm here Mike" Mike and John had caught up with two other runners who were 12 feet or so behind me, they had answered yes. How on earth Mike had expected them to have noticed what tattoo I had on my arm in the pitch black while wearing a long sleeved top and a Paclite jacket I don't know but amazingly they had replied 'yes he is in front of us" and who was I to argue! I was glad of the company, someone to keep me awake. The intense pain in my feet slowed my pace down to a very slow jog and once again I fell behind Mike, John stayed with me, the path was full of loose rocks and the effort to pick my feet up over them was too much and resulted with me catching my swollen toes painfully on the rocks with ever step. Minutes later I was on the verge of collapsing my feet broken, my quads trashed and John had to support me as I stumbled on. I just pushed on, one step at a time muttering and crying out in pain every time my toes caught a stone. My whole world was spinning, my body was pleading to quit, but my mind just kept pushing on. I just about made out a voice, it was a race marshal searching for a man who had apparently collapsed on the side of the path, someone in a worse state than me. Even on a reasonably warm summer night the risk of hypothermia can still be strong high up in the Scottish Highlands, lack of sleep, low body fat levels (er not in my case unfortunately) perspiration soaked clothes and the body on the brink of physical and mental exhaustion whittles the chances of survival down for any fully equipped walker never mind an exhausted underdressed (t-shirt and shorts/tights) runner. After one or two detours we arrived on the deserted streets of Kinlochleven, followed by a short stagger to the next checkpoint, luckily this checkpoint is based in the local medical centre. John shuffled me into the aid centre and helped me sit down in a chair in what looked to be a consultation room. The whole world seemed to spin around and a huge dose of nausea engulfed me, John vanished off to find a race marshal, a few minutes later he returned with a nurse. The nurse helped me onto the bed, took my blood pressure and pulse, my pulse was sky high, she asked me a few questions to check my mental state. I just wanted to sleep but everyone seemed to want to wake me.

Mike wished me well and departed for the last stage of the race.

The race doctor arrived and executed further tests and asked me if I wanted to sleep for 4 /5 hours and then continue with the race, without hesitation I answered "yes". My mind had wanted me to continue but my body wanted to quit, Just a few hours undisturbed sleep was all I wanted and then the chance of receiving that goblet! Ernie and Dario (the race organiser) disagreed with my decision stating it was too dangerous (with hindsight they were 100% correct) I would of never made the final stage in the condition I was amongst Britain's highest mountains. Ernie decided to take me back to their Hotel in Fort William, so I could shower and try to sleep it off. I didn't care where I was, just as long as I could get some uninterrupted sleep. I got up slowly off the bed and within a minute I was back on the bed after my legs had given away and my whole world had gone black. The doctor decided it was time I visited the local hospitals intensive care unit.

FORT WILLIAM

On arriving at Fort William's hospital I was helped out from the car onto a bed and wheeled inside to be greeted by two lovely female Doctors who fitted me with an IV drip and then proceeded to run tests on me. 'You are extremely dehydrated and have very low levels of potassium in your body (Hypokalemia). Your kidneys are being poisoned by the high levels of muscle wastage which your body is trying to get rid off.' Great!! Even though I had drunk 12 litres of water, took electrolyte capsules it hadn't been enough. The diarrhoea I had suffered at the start of the race had robbed me of my potassium stores. Through not consuming anywhere near the amount of calories I needed for my energy expenditure, I had bonked (sometimes referred to as 'hitting the wall') the process of the body using fat/muscle stores as energy when all glycogen stores have run out. Leaving you feeling very weak and your legs feeling wasted. Bonking for so long (he he) had caused a catabolic effect of my body using my muscles as fuel, the side effect being muscle wastage is toxic to the kidneys, so for 75% of the race I had run on bankrupt energy stores.

I was moved out of Intensive care and placed in a ward where I promptly fell asleep and what felt like seconds later woken up by 'Please, please help me, please, please help me I need to get out of here, please help me!' the noise was coming from an old lady in the next room to me, I guess suffering from senile dementia (either that or I was in big trouble) 'they wont let me go, please help me, please help me"

The ward Doctor came to see me, and informed me that I would be stopping in over night for observations, I had other ideas, my coach to Glasgow would be leaving at 14.00 hours and I was going to be on it. A couple of hours later after having a shower and something to eat, I pulled the lv drip out of my arm and set off on foot across Fort William to find the WHW award ceremony to see Mike receive his finishers Goblet. On leaving Hospital I received some strange looks, trying to cross a busy road in my socks (Ernie had taken my trainers away with him, I think maybe to stop me from continuing the race from Kinlochleven.

So I will return in 2008 to finish this race, but without sidetracking into Fort Williams very fine Hospital. As in the great words of Schwarzenegger

I'LL BE BACK!!!!