

Jonathan Bellarby

West Highland Way Race June 24th 2006

I entered this race back in January. Its fearsome reputation gave me many sleepless nights, but training went well and Friday 23rd June 2006 saw me and over 100 other runners and their support teams gather at Milngavie railway station for the 95 mile West Highland Way race. Normally, a quiet suburb of Glasgow with the last train just departed, tonight the car park was a seething mass of lycra, head torches and nervous banter. I am nervous and can't stop shaking. I can't hear the race brief – something about bodies and numbers? One a.m. and the race is off, through the pedestrian precinct and then out into the country. The pack slowly spreads out and after 5 miles I find myself alone. I was not at the front or back; have I gone the wrong way? The first refuelling stop at 6 miles confirms the right route – along the old railway line. The next 5 miles is also alone – where is everyone? Occasionally I hear the sound of gates bashing shut a few minutes behind or ahead, other than that a quiet, calm night. As it begins to get light for the climb over Conic hill, I am overtaken by several very fast runners – part of the lead pack that unfortunately took a wrong turning near Drymen and lost 25 minutes. One of them is clearly very annoyed with herself! The rough descent to Balmaha is busy, but goes without incident. I have a quick bowl of rice pudding and a flapjack and am away again – once again alone.

I struggle somewhat in the constant up and down alongside Loch Lomond and the sight of the checkpoint at Inversnaid and some runners comes as a welcome relief. I perk up and enjoy the rough footpath North of Inversnaid and a bit of chat. I arrive at Derrydarroch in good shape and now in 20th place. A typical pit stop involves replenishing energy bars, gels and juice from the rucksac, a bite to eat and sometimes changes of socks, shoes and vest. My team for the first half of the race is my wife Helen and father-in-law and after Tyndrum it is my parents and brother and sister-in-law – a whole family and superb teams. After stopping still even for a few minutes it is tough to get back into a rhythm, so my longest stop of the day is 4 minutes. Whilst I sit down to eat, the shoes and socks are replaced, and the rucksac replenished. An F1 pitstop couldn't be smoother. As I leave I shout back the requests for the next stop.

The next few stages all go very well and I'm beginning to enjoy myself. With one exception I see no other runners in the next 35 miles and the run over Rannoch Moor is lonely but exhilarating. Bizarrely on the descent down from the moor I see a familiar couple ahead. It is my uncle and his wife walking the West Highland Way. Both parties are as completely surprised as each other, but 30 seconds later I leave them shaking their heads. At Kingshouse I have moved up to 11th place – do I run with my eyes shut, that I can miss 7 runners? Not being in the top 10 means I can take advantage of a support runner and my dad (recently returned from a mountain marathon) joins me for the section to Kinlochleven. The ascent up the Devil's staircase is a welcome chance to walk, but the descent is very tough on the quads and slow, but there is hot soup waiting and that goes down well. My support runner changes to my brother for the slow climb out of Kinlochleven. Unfortunately we meet my fellow clubmate Carl Pryce just retiring near the top of the climb. Shortly after, it then occurs to me that I am in the top ten and thus technically I'm not allowed a support runner! We briefly discuss the morals of this case and as the rules aren't clear on this point and I can't just abandon my brother in the middle of nowhere, we continue together. It also occurs to me that if we get overtaken, the overtakers would be in 10th place and we could get them disqualified. This logic is lost on my brother who points out that then we would then move back into 10th place and open ourselves up to also being disqualified by a justifiably vengeful runner! The next few miles are very tough – rough, undulating, bleak. My slow speed makes me paranoid about being overtaken and dropping back to 11th. I constantly look back until this risks a trip – I ask my brother to do it instead!

A pizza takeaway awaits in Lundavra. It's cold and a bit midgy, but absolutely superb and I wolf down 4 slices of Hawaiian with extra topping of jelly babies. Beyond Lundavra however the terrain is still rough, the stiles (deliberately?) huge and progress slow. With about 4 miles to go, we are climbing up a very gloomy path in the woods when we hear voices behind—are we about to get overtaken? Instantly the pain, soreness, and blisters disappear (adrenalin or delayed pizza effect?). I start to run up hills. I get faster and faster, I shout; I am a new man. The descent to Fort William begins and the speed increases; my support runner can't keep up, I race along the road, across the roundabout, past my rather startled wife - "I'm being chased" I shout, and sprint to the finish! I break down in tears and a babble. Unbelievable! The chasing runner arrives 7 minutes later and my brother shortly behind. What an amazing day.

Footnote: As part of this year's race, I volunteered for a survey into nutrition and hydration strategies for ultra-endurance events. They weighed me at the start – 73 kgs. They checked urine – well hydrated. I was weighed at the end – 75 kgs! As I can't have got more hydrated than the start, and I didn't eat enormously (apart from the pizza), the difference must be either accumulated mud or midges?

A huge thank you goes to my brilliant support team and to all of you who sponsored me. Over £2,000 was raised for the HOPE for children charity.