

'The West Highland Way' - or 'More reasons to shop at Morrisons

Not sure it'll make it into their marketing material but I have to say what a godsend they were when I was most in need. Woke up at 6 am on Sunday morning after the WHW in excruciating pain and made my support crew take me (piggyback me) to A&E to see what the damage was. The nice people at Fort William hospital gave me breakfast (well, my first breakfast), took x-rays, reassured me it was just inflammation/wear and tear and gave me super-strength painkillers.

29 hours previously I'd been waiting with anticipation in the car park at Milngavie, wondering what the day ahead held. A comedy moment was watching a group of drunken semi-clad revellers stumbling into the car park, looking very confused to see 100+ people clad in shorts, and declaring "Youse are all mad". Pretty insightful.

Inevitably I started off a bit too quickly, getting pulled along by the testosterone of a few army lads at the front. When they said they were aiming for sub-24 hrs I did think they were a bit ambitious in their pacing but thought I'd better try to hang on. That decision backfired when they missed a turning, leaving us all running a little detour but thankfully we cut through to rejoin the path without having lost too much time. We'd been warned of a short detour due to a landslide and in the forest I followed signs, but after about 3 miles I was beginning to get worried. Had a worrying half hour wondering if I'd gone completely the wrong way, as I'd lost sight of other runners, but it turned out to be the right way after all - panic over. And then the rain came...torrential downpour just as I was climbing Conic Hill. The path turned to a small river and the descent was a mudfest. The prospect of a further 80+ miles in storm conditions was very worrying, but thankfully the rain abated and the remainder of the day turned into perfect race conditions.

I didn't look at my watch once until Tyndrum (9 hrs 38). It was amazing how quickly the first part of the race went, and I put it down entirely to having run the route beforehand so recently. It didn't feel nearly as far as the Highland Fling, and I really enjoyed finding myself in familiar spots again. Adrian passed me with about 6 miles to go until Derrydarroch (though he assured me it was only 3!!), where I took my first proper stop. I knew that Adrian and Mark were in front of me but then lost track, and it was only when I asked at Tyndrum how many people were ahead of me that my support team said 'no-one - you're leading'. That was a bit of a surprise, and a good boost. The next sections are all a bit vague - I ran most of it by myself, just relaxing and enjoying it, trying to keep steady. Marmite was a godsend, as was the milkshake drink I'd been recommended by Adrian (thanks!).

Apparently by Glencoe I was looking like death and bonking badly - shivering, white etc. I took my second stop there to have some hot food and reload before the Devil's Staircase. The next section was good, very runnable and again reassuring to be on a path I remembered from having done it on the Carnethy weekend two years ago - an invaluable recce. At this point it suddenly got very warm and the streams were very welcome - it's amazing how refreshed you feel just from a quick wash and a drink.

Into Kinlochleven and up the steep climb. This was the most boring section of the race for me - seeing the forest in the distance, wanting to get to the end, seeing Adrian about half a mile in front and having nothing else around. Finally got to Lundavra and by this time I was really looking forward to finishing. I was given conflicting information as to how much further I had to go, and a few miles later, when I thought I probably

had about 4 miles left, I made the mistake of asking two German backpackers how far it was to Fort William. When they chirpily replied "Two and a half hours" I had to assume they were VERY slow walkers.

It was at this point that I thought the record might be within my sights - although I'd been asking about my progress all the way round I had never set myself any time deadlines, and was content just to see how I ran. But now it was looking realistic. Into the forest past Lundavra and the undulation was decidedly unwelcome. My support crew told me I 'might' make it in time, so I was getting a bit cross and had to keep pushing on. Apparently in the forest I went the wrong way (well, not the wrong way but a slower way) into Fort William, and I kept wondering where Adrian was. Then finally it was onto the road - civilisation at last. When one of my support was at the bottom in the car and shouted up "I'll give you a lift to the finish" I was sorely tempted, despite knowing it would be cheating - it took me a minute to realise he was talking to my other support crew member! The last half mile was good, I tried to keep pushing despite the burning in my shins, and was being congratulated by passing walkers. Then just 150 m until the car park and I was so relieved and excited to see it. For me the icing on the cake was the piper, who started up just as he saw me rounding the corner. I always associate bagpipes with racing and it gave me goosebumps.

Big hugs all round, then the realisation that I'd finished, I'd got the record and I could say I was a fully-fledged WHW survivor. It was an amazing feeling, and most of all I was overwhelmed by the tremendous support and generosity of everyone involved. The comments from supporters, organisers and runners have bowled me over. I feel truly privileged to have been a part of it, and have rarely been surrounded by such a group of supportive, encouraging, kind people. They really are an advertisement for sport bringing out the best in people.

p.s. The sickness and shin pain were a small price to pay - and hey, the wheelchair story got me a slot in The Sun so I'm not complaining...