

Mark Hamilton – 2006

For the Average Runner thinking of tackling the West Highland Way Race, I present my story of the 2006 Race.

A Tale of two Breaks

Average Runner, if you are like me you can forget about sleeping on the Friday. It just wouldn't happen. So, as my Support Crew and I park in the Milngavie Railway Station at just after 11pm, I am already tired but have moved the nervous stage that had gripped me up until that point. Just accept that this is going to hurt but you will get through it.

The camaraderie amongst the people involved in this race is incredible. You should take comfort and strength from this. I spoke to 'Madman' Dave McLelland, Ian Beattie and Debbie Cox, and feel better for knowing that we are all in this together.

At 1am precisely we are off. Good start, tendinitis seems to be behaving itself. Two lads with a couple of pints in them decide to join the Race and I am now concerned about how I am going to look if they beat me!

Buy yourself the best headlamp that you can. I got a micro Petzl and it wasn't enough. It isn't bright enough and I can't really see where I am putting my feet. Mugdock Park isn't too bad but the footing can get nasty down towards Dumgoyne.

This is really where my Race plan comes undone. I had hoped for a 24-25 hr time, which is... 'average'. It was not to be.

I first go over on the left ankle. You are going to have to get used to this Average Runner. Walk a bit, then get back into your trot. Third of mile later I go over on the right ankle. This is a sore one but I get over it. We are about 5 miles out when I go over on the right ankle again. There is a sharp, intense pain and an audible 'CRACK'. The crisp, still night time air is rent asunder with my profanity.

This one isn't so easy the shake off and my trot now has a distinct hobble to it.

Can you imagine how I was feeling? I had trained for seven months, spent a fortune on this and that, and I had brought out two Support Teams in the middle of the night and now there was a chance that it all been for nothing. 5 miles in for Heaven's sake.

I decided to take Ian Beattie's sagely advice and run my own Race. Everything was going to have to be done slower, especially in the dark.

It was after 3pm when I met my Team at Drymen. My 'Requirements' text had been 'cake tea drugs' and I got them down me as quickly as possible. In making the change from road shoes to off-roads (Asics Trabuccos by the way), we noticed a lump, about the size of half a golf ball, sticking out of my right ankle. I won't write what I said at that point, I'm sure you can imagine. Shock over, right shoe on nice and tight to keep the swelling down, then off towards Conic Hill. In all honesty, I doubted that I would get to Conic as I took the first steps away from Drymen. The pain was pretty bad.

The next hour was nasty. I expected pain on this Race but not this early. Conic Hill was remarkably dry considering the rain we had that week. Still, it was slippery enough and I didn't want to over on that ankle again, so I was a lot slower into Balmaha than normal.

The Team, bedecked in their Midgie Nets (a must) had soup waiting. I changed socks here so we got to see the extent of the damage. The lump was bigger and there was a good deal of bruising, but I had done 20 miles and I wanted to see how far I could go before having to pull out, or be pulled out as my Team were looking rather concerned.

Average Runner, never under estimate the power of Adrenaline. Off we go to Rowardennan.

You can set a decent pace on this section, so I did. The Team seemed a little surprised to see me come in around my new predicted time. They asked all the normal questions and gave them reasonably truthful answers i.e. "It hurts" and "I still feel sick". Since the Race, I have a photo from this stop. I don't look happy. The Teams worries were amplified as I having a change of Support Team at this point, which is something else I would recommend Average Runner. This Team, that included my Fiancee Pauline, would not see me again until Bridge of Orchy, which at the pace I was going would be about 5pm. Promising them that I was fine and would keep in touch, I set off for Inversnaid.

I like this stretch. Some of the views across the Loch are stunning. The ankle was making its presence known so I was even slower on this section and I was feeling quite sick by the time I got my bag from the T.S.A.R.T. guys (God Bless Them!) in the car park of the Hotel. Sick enough that I couldn't face the rice pudding it contained, so I after a 10 minute break.

Not eating was probably a mistake. Average Runner, you will go through highs and lows in the course of this race. Energy levels are certainly a factor. So can guess what happened in the next section?

I hate this section anyway, but adding in the pain in my ankle and the nauseous feeling, I fell into what I can only describe as a 'depression'. No energy, no pace. I made a change to my Support schedule and asked the guys to meet me at Beinglas Farm. Dario doesn't really like us doing this, but given the Health and Safety implications I didn't think he would mind.

My 'Daytime' Support were brought up to speed as I forced down a big muffin. Feeling much better, I set off for Derrydarroch Farm.

This was a highlight section for me as I caught up with Jim Drummond and decided to travel with him for a bit. Jim is a wealth of knowledge and stories, so the four miles passed very easily and I was, dare I say it, 'perky' on meeting my Team at the Farm. A quick stop and off towards Crianlarich.

The weather was great. Personally, I like it warmish and the only thing that could have improved the conditions for me, would have been a light shower. So, the run over to Bogle Glen was actually pleasant...well...as pleasant as being 45 miles into a 95 mile race can be.

While making a couple a phone calls going through the forest section, I noticed that the swelling had gone down a little on my ankle. Unfortunately, every other step still had an element of pain associated with it, but you can endure. Average Runner, it is astonishing what you can endure if you want something strongly enough...and I didn't want to have to do this again!

I stopped again at the A82 crossing. It would be my recommendation to break the Race up into small chunks. Only 5-10 minute stops usually, but plenty of them. One of my 'Original' Support Team, Paul Walker, came out a bit from Tyndrum to meet me as it had been a while since they had seen me and they wanted to confirm that I was in good shape...well...still moving anyway. Company can be good Average Runner. You can get into a conversation and the miles just flash past.

Tyndrum is 53 miles, over half way and I decided to re-charge the batteries there. Eat, drink, change T-Shirt and socks. This gave us a chance to check the ankle. It was almost entirely blood red and the lump was well and truly back, bigger than ever. More Ibuprofen and on with the next 42 miles.

Looking behind me, about a mile out of Tyndrum, I saw what looked like Tim Downie running along the track. Now Tim was supposed to be supporting Jim Drummond and I couldn't work out why he was on his own. Trotting along he told me that Jim had partnered up with another runner and he had decided to run along with me instead. As I have said, the people associated with this Race are just incredible. Now Tim is a certifiable fruit loop but he is also a great bloke and a strong runner, so with cajoling and conversation Tyndrum to Bridge of Orchy turned into my best timed section of the Race. Thanks Tim!

At Bridge of Orchy we got the news of the first of the eponymous breaks. Jez Bragg had broken the Race record by a massive 45 minutes. I am in awe of this gentleman and his athleticism. However, my Race wasn't over yet and the pain was getting worse, but you now find yourself saying "I've come this far. It's only another 36 miles". Look, don't judge my sanity now. Wait until you are in the Race and see how you behave! However, the section scared me. It is 12 miles to the other side of the Rannoch Moor, no stops and I was hurting. I was to be helped along by two runners this time though. Tim was staying on to Kingshouse and my Support runner, Kenny Murray, was joining us as planned.

There is section of tarmac just before the Moor and this set everything off. Everything decided to moan at the same time, including me. Luckily, both Tim and Kenny were familiar with Hamilton moaning and took it in good spirits. About halfway across the Moor we caught up with hobbling Lady runner. She was in pain so I asked if she wanted a pain killer to help her across the Moor. Tim wanted to stay with her but she insisted that we press on. Not sure that I'd have that that brave in that place and in those circumstances. Gutsy Girl.

The last quarter of the Moor was another low for me. The end couldn't come fast enough and I couldn't go any quicker but we eventually got to Blackrock Cottage at around 8pm. I took another longer pit stop. Ate, took pain killer and put on an extra two layers of clothing as I was shivering badly. I felt done, but there was only 24 more miles.

Tim went back to supporting Jim Drummond with my thanks but the Support Team didn't want me heading out by myself, so Kenny once again stepped up and offered to accompany me to Kinlochleven which is only 10 miles further on.

What a 10 miles though. First, Glencoe. Awe inspiring. Chills down the back of your neck. The Support Team and the pain killer had done a good job as I managed to run up to the ludicrous part of the trail that climbs the hill for no reason whatsoever. Up to Altnafeadh it was a mixture of run/walk as I had to be very careful of my footing. Every sideways movement of my ankle hurt like hell and the pounding had also left the soles of my feet very sore indeed. As we approached Altnafeadh I said to Kenny that we had to run in so that the troops could see that everything was once again ok before we tackled 'The Devil's Staircase'.

Average Runner, the climb to the 'Staircase' and the 'Staircase' itself are tough, especially after the preceding miles but if you are steady and determined you will get up...it's the other side you have to be scared of!

We left the beautiful views from the top of the 'Staircase' behind and started to descend towards Kinlochleven as the last rays of light fell away. On went the lamps. Now I say 'descend towards Kinlochleven' but one of the killers here is that you can see the lights of the town in the distance down in the Glen, however, the WHW takes you everyway BUT towards it. IT IS TORTUROUS!!! The trail at times is fine and at the end is actually tarmac, but for the majority it is treacherous. If you are in the dark here Average Runner, SLOW DOWN. Take it too fast and it could be the end of your Race.

On a couple of occasions the frustration and tiredness had me breaking into a trot on the downhill sections but a misplaced foot and an increase in the pain would bring me back to to my senses. I decided here that it would be stupid to attempt the final two sections in the dark. The best tactic would be to rest up and leave Kinlochleven at dawn. That would still give me about 7 hrs to cover the final 14 miles.

On arriving at Kinlochleven Health Centre Pauline and Marie-Ann, from my Support Team, told me they had got a tubegrip support from a Doctor and he was now asking to have a look at my ankle. I almost exploded in shock and fury as the Marshal at Kinlochleven was Dr.Chris Ellis, the Race Doctor, who could withdraw me from if he thought it necessary. They, of course, were doing what any good Support Team should do, but all I could think of was being withdrawn from the Race with only 14 miles to go. 76 pain filled miles for nothing. So, me and the Support Team weren't on the best of terms.

Chris Ellis, as it turns out, is a great bloke, a gentleman and scholar. I want him as my GP. He examined and prodded my ankle, and I lied to him about what hurt to no avail. He diagnosed a probable fracture to the tibia (the second and last of the eponymous breaks) and my heart sank. I was sure that that was it, he would take me out of the Race. He then said "You've run 80 miles on a fractured ankle". It was actually 76 miles but I didn't think it was the time to be splitting hairs. "Have you considered stopping at any point?" he questioned. "No!" I snapped back. "Well relax" he said "I won't be stopping you finishing the Race".

Oh. My. Good. God. The feeling of relief was unbelievable. Turns out Chris is a sportsman himself and understands the sporting mentality. He did insist on icing the joint, then I would get a couple of hours sleep. If the ankle condition hadn't gotten any worse in that time i.e. no increase in swelling and toes stilled moved etc, I could go on. I was scared that I would seize up given that much downtime but I was in no position to argue. Went to sleep at around 1:45am.

Pauline woke me at 4:20am. First reaction was 'why didn't she wake me at 4am', then the shaking started again. I didn't want Chris to see this so I got up and stretched to get the blood flowing. Chris checked to ankle, which looked as though it should be attached to a cadavar, but gave his ok.

Paul Walker and I ran out of Kinlochleven at just after 5am. We were in last place but still in the Race.

The climb out of Kinlochleven didn't seem that bad actually. We passed Jim Drummond, Jim Vemeer and a couple of other guys on the hill and Paul adopted the right attitude of telling me to get a move on.

We got into Lunarva quicker than the Team expected so no-one was waiting for us. I checked in with the Marshalls and was told "So you're the one with ankle, we heard you'd pulled out". As you would expect one minute later the Marshalls were fully aware of how 'in' the Race I was. It turned out I needn't have worried as my Support Team had already been through this with them and it had been confirmed that someone had made a mistake somewhere. Panic Over.

People kept on looking at my groin which was rather disconcerting. Turns out that the fresh application of Vaseline from Kinlochleven had soaked into my shorts making look as though I had had an accident in my pants. I assured those there, and every other person I met that morning that I hadn't.

Stayed long enough to get some more water and set off for Fort William stating "Everyone has a 10k in them".

You would think the last 10k would seem a nice run. It wasn't, everything hurt. I don't just mean injury pain but quads, calves, lower back, hips etc.It seemed to take me a lifetime to get over stiles. Into the forest there are steep climbs and equally steep decents that move your weight around, isolating muscle groups that already had had enough. Paul was using the map and landmarks to call out the distance remaining as physically and mentally I was shot. Questions put to me would receive one word answers. There was no chatting, or even moaning, just Paul talking away, trying to keep me going.

Leaving the forest I perked up a bit. 4 miles to go and even if I couldn't run I still had my stompy run although it had developed a limp a long time before.

There was a surreal moment on the pavement entering Fort William when a guy walking his dog went past me. I just couldn't quite get to grips with the normality of it. Can't remember what his reply was to my enquiry of "Give us a cokey back Mate?"

At the sight of the Blessed Roundabout we broke into a run (where does that energy come from). I crossed the road, not even considering the traffic and there it was Lochaber Leisure Centre. The most beautiful sight in the world. Enjoy those last few steps Average Runner. You will have earned the feeling of accomplishment and pride in yourself.

Luckily Dario and Sean were in the Centre when I finished, so I got to thank them for letting me into the Race.

There is relief, but also anti-climax about the finish. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to behave. Should I be crying? Should I be jumping up and down (an impossibility on the ankle)? Instead, I thanked my Support Team and then stood there wondering what to do next. I am sure you will come up with something far better.

My finishing was 32 hrs 33 mins and some seconds. I'm disappointed in that but considering the circumstances I suppose it is fair.

My last bit of advice would be to attend the Prize Giving. We were all knackered but went anyway and thoroughly enjoyed it. Dario is quite the MC with funny quips about a lot of the runners. Adrian Stott had some poignant words to add and, of course, we all got to applaud the magnificent Jez Bragg.

A rather long tale of two breaks. Enjoy your Race Average Runner. It is an experience you will carry with you for the rest of your life.