

## Mike Mason – 2006 West Highland Way race report

Birth right regained.....

### Pre-Race

To be successful in endurance events you need a number of things. Fitness, mobility, superb Vo2 max, a heart rate trained and honed to that of a Cheetah, high pain threshold, innate skills. If you have none of these, or only some in very limited quantities, then you need to focus on an overriding goal....and let nothing get in the way. For me, that was the 83 seconds that separated me on the all time finishers list for my 2004 race time of 29hrs 03 23 and that of the guy one place higher – Dario Melaragni the WHW Race Director and my nemesis.

After the 2004 race I swore I would never do it again. I had changed my mind even before the prize giving ceremony. But when the all time list was published it was the final straw.

So increased training ensued for the build up to 2005 event. Thanks to overtraining I managed to crock my calves (compartment syndrome). But many hours, and hundreds of pounds of physio helped get me ready for the race. My ability to regain my birthright was on its way. Unfortunately, my lack of overall race fitness plus unprecedented weather conditions (high humidity) meant that I was at least 2 hours off my 2004 time. So it was fortunate for me that due to a 'little light drizzle' the race was abandoned. Well, ok – vicious lightning and torrential rain was the actual fact. 7 people being hospitalised, 2 suffering renal failure were actually airlifted by helicopter to hospital and spent a week in Intensive care. But I digress...The bottom line was that my support runner Simeon Bennett and I were pulled from the race at Lundavra, less than 10 miles from the finish. Loaded into the back of a van with some other runners, a wet dog and a burning midge candle – the ignominy.....

Back to 2006 and getting ready for this years race. Decided at end of November 2005 to join a running club. And luckily for me chose the Benfleet Running club – local to home in Essex. After falling over a Benfleet runner – Ernie Jewson – in Hockley Woods (that's another story), I started attending the 2 sessions a week at the Club – quality and long distance. This paid dividends. They pushed me to do the things I hated – fartlek, intervals, hill repeats etc and I am eternally grateful to them.

Decided to run for Charity again (Cancer Research) and to do 5 Big races ilo 3 Big Races in 2005. The 2 biggest in 2006 would be the WHW Race followed by the Mont Blanc Ultra. Simeon Bennett my support runner foolishly agreed to come back again and roped in his mate Max Bloomfield. My wife, Gill, selflessly agreed to come back again after a break from last years race. I received my race number – 21 (my age) – well I can still remember it with Ginkgo Biloba.....just!

A lesson learned from previous years was to travel up from Essex on the Friday morning and rest for some hours in a hotel before the race. After 2 years of getting lost driving out of Glasgow to Milngavie for the race start I came up with the stunning plan to stay in the Premier Lodge in Milngavie, minutes from the start.

We arrived in Glasgow about 16.00hrs after leaving home at 06.00hrs and had the obligatory tour around the Tiso Outdoor centre in Glasgow. This was followed also by the now obligatory condemned mans meal of fish and chips before retiring to bed for 4 hours of troubled sleep.

Got up at 20.30 hrs and spent the next period of time faffing about mixing electrolyte for my camelback, finding gels, bottles, head torches batteries, gear etc. All previously nicely packed for ease of access only to as usual be gremlin like mixed up all over the place. (At this stage believed Dario had hired a Voodoo practitioner to mess up my mind). Gill managed to get my contact lenses fitted in record time – my flickering eye lids have a life of their own.

For the technical minded:

- § Ron Hill long sleeve running top
- § Ron Hill XC running trousers
- § Activskin tights from the US (yes ones you don't want to carted off to hospital wearing)
- § Montrail Hurricane XCR shoes (change to Montrail Hardrocks later)
- § Thorlo socks
- § Joe Dana trail gaiters
- § Hine running gloves
- § 2 litre Camelbak
- § Myo XP Head torch (excellent purchase)
- § MP3 player loaded with appropriate music to cheer en route (Joy Division/Funeral marches/AC-DC for the bad bits (they were on for most of the race in a continuous loop)!

Strategy:

- § Stay off solids (lasted until the marmite roll at Kingshouse)
- § Perpetuum electrolyte in camelback
- § GU gels (25gm carb) 1xhour

- § Succeed lactate buffer pills (1xhour)
- § Hand held runners water bottle
- § Scott Jurek approach to hydration – 2 sips/10 minutes (brilliant - I think this lasted all of 20 minutes)!
- § Complian – with water at checkpoints (250mg carb)
- § Minimal checkpoint loitering
- § Be pleasant to my support crew
- § Beat Dario's time.....

## Race

Arrived at the race start at about midnight. Usual formalities – get the dreaded wrist band. Banter with Dario that this is the year I retain my birthright. He comments – 'For God sake's Mike...can't you get over it....?' Well, no I can't actually. Get weighed in for the hydration study I am taking part in. Meet up with Brian McIntosh who we had been exchanging e-mails with. Meet Chris Upson here to gloat. Next time we meet it should be in Mont Blanc in August. Meet up with Soeren Hahn. My plan is to run as much of the race as I can with Soeren, as being a lazy runner I need to be pulled around a bit. Unfortunately, it was not Soeren's plan. We met last year on the Slovenian Alpine Marathon – it's a mountain marathon in.....Slovenia. God, it was hell and taught me a major lesson – train harder and whimper less audibly.....

Milngavie – Balmaha – (20 miles) arrive – 04.30 hrs split 03.30 hrs

01.00hrs head torch on. Race starts – we leave the underpass.....

Had been following the 10 day weather forecast and expected cool and showers. The night was actually fairly warm, although still wore gloves and woolly hat. Ran with Soeren at gentle pace about 12 minutes/mile. Had expected the ground to be very muddy as previous years, hence the Montrail XCR's. But it was actually firm even on the run into Conic Hill. Strong climb of Conic and very fast descent. With hindsight probably a bit too aggressive as my quads began to sing from then on. 10 minute checkpoint stop – changed to Helly Hansen Versa long sleeved top. Changed socks and switched to Montrail Hardrocks. Replenished fuel and off. No timing checkpoint here this year – Dario has deliberately prevented me from seeing a decent time in print..... another example of his mind games.

Balmaha to Rowardennan – arrive 06.26hrs split 1:56 and then Inversnaid – (34 miles) arrive – 07.30hrs split 1.04 hrs

I really hate this bit. The long run around the side of Loch Lomond. Rocks, tree roots – an inexorable grind. Still feeling good. Rosie Bell joins us for a brief canter. She says that she has been walking every hill from the start. Same strategy as us, but by now my definition of a hill is anything over about 0.005% gradient.... Now switching to run/walk. The cadence throws poor old Soeren out a bit and I release him from his vow of staying together (we had agreed to leave who ever started faltering at any stage) he runs off into the distance. Later I am joined briefly by Ian Rae. I hear a voice from behind me in the middle of nowhere 'Are you Mike Mason?' Yes I splutter. Ian advises that he recognised me from my Montrail Hardrocks and gaiters. We had been exchanging e-mails and on my advice he had also bought a pair, but the gaiters would come later when his wife had recovered from finding out about his recent purchase. He told me later that he had paid about £40 for a pair. I said that is less than half price! To which he retorted that when he had opened the box there was only one shoe in it! Oh how we laughed! On reaching Inversnaid, a lovely hotel which appears almost totally inaccessible from civilisation, my plans for a really good time had evaporated. Just drink a few cups of water and leave.....whimpering.

Inversnaid to Derrydarroch – (44 miles) arrive – 11.32 hrs split 4:02

I think I hate this bit even more than the last bit! This is a real pig. Loch Lomond never appears to get smaller. I pass Rob Roy's cave again and don't stop to view it. Finally arrive at Beinglass farm and the wigwams. Stop here for a refuel and pick up MP3. Not feeling too good. My quads and hamstrings ache like hell, and I begin to worry that my left calf is showing signs of Compartment syndrome again. Agree to meet again at Derrydarroch farm a few miles on. I am really struggling now. For the first time ever I am rationalising how to quit. At the Farm my support crew have my chair out and some mushroom soup. I sit in the chair and tell them my thoughts. Although they listen they don't hear me. 'Quit – I want to quit....' They suggest I rest, re-fuel, take pain-killers. As I fester I move in the chair and one of the arm rests shears in half almost sending me tumbling. I leap up and turn the air blue with a stream of obscenities.....even the midges put their 6 legs over their ears and leave me alone. I look around and a group of about 5 people some wearing midge hats are looking at me with strange expressions (if any of you are reading this - my apologies). However, this is the wake up call I need. Obviously Dario has managed to weaken the chair handle in some way.... So 30 minutes after entering the checkpoint I am off again and managing to jog.

Derrydarroch – Tyndrum – (53 miles) arrive – 14.31 hrs split 2:58

The usual crouch under the Sheep creep tunnel and on .....Feeling a lot better now – it's amazing what 400mg of Ibuprofen can do. I meet a guy en route and offer him a few drags of Perpeteum from my camelback and move on. The descent to St Fillian's priory really hurts my quads but still manage to do some down hill jogging. Arrive at the Green Welly stop at Tyndrum. Meet Soeren who has been resting for about an hour. He is again experiencing sickness and an inability to want to eat or drink.

I cheerfully point out 'well that's what you get for leaving me in the middle of nowhere.....' A typical Mason remark but unfortunately the pained look on his face and that of his support crew – Kees and Anita – shows me that English

(Mason) humour doesn't translate well at this stage of the race....or as my wife mentions ...at any flaming time! Soeren leaves as Gill changes my socks and bodyglides my festering feet. A couple of blisters and hotspots sorted with some Compeed plasters. Dump my camelback and bumbag and just take hand held bottle and a few gels.

Tyndrum – Bridge of Orchy – (59 miles) arrive – 16.02 hrs split 1:31

My favourite bit of the race – it is relatively short and much downhill. Jogging the route, pass a couple of guys – cheers me up! Arrive at checkpoint. Soeren is in the support car struggling to take nourishment. I suggest he joins me at the Inveroran hotel, just over a small hill. Gill has complan ready. Take a short break and leave actually jogging up the hill – feeling much better. Run the downhill section to the hotel but not at the break neck pace of last year's race. At the hotel I wait for Soeren. Change socks and after Soerens rest we set off for Rannoch moor.

Bridge of Orchy – Kingshouse – (72 miles) – arrive – 20.15 hrs split 4:13

How much better this stage is for my support crew, without me moaning about the Caledonian Challengers (corporate charity walk in opposite direction to us). Walkers with poles who will not give way to tired runners. They did the walk last weekend and unless there are any 'stragglers' it will be quiet...and it was. Rannoch moor never seemed so eerie...Max stays behind to assist Soeren. I go on with Simeon (he of homing pigeon skills). At Kingshouse, Gill has soup waiting.

Kingshouse – Kinlochleven – (80 miles) – arrive – 23.15 hrs split 3:00

In 2004 I bonked badly at the Devils staircase. This year I powered up the hill like a bounding gazelle.....oops well ok - I climbed it steadily and felt better then ever before. Even managed to run down the steep descent from the top for a short distance – quads hurting. Simeon and Max help me get into a yomping cadence of fast hike on the flat routes and we begin to claw back time. By now Max has developed some thigh chafing. He is walking with a pronounced cowboy gait. He thanks me for letting me use my bodyglide on his upper body, but he forgot to use on inside of his legs. I cheer him up by pointing out that the last use of my Bodyglide was between my bum cheeks! He feels depressed on hearing this and his chafing pains worsen. Simeon is beginning to get a sore foot. As people have noticed I begin to cheer and feel better by taking vicarious pleasure in others pain and misfortune. All my support crew have to tell me is that they are in pain or so and so looked bad and I am galvanised....Last year the one cheery point of the torrential rain was on the last section when Simeon's Sealskin socks sprang a leak – excellent! Don't see any hallucinations this year and pass a burst joint on one of the Kinlochleven hydro pipes which is showering water into the air. More soup and a lovely marmite bread roll awaits. Hear the bad news - Soeren has had to pull out before the Devils staircase – gastric emptying problems again....

Kinlochleven – Fort William (95 miles) – arrive 04:57:26 – position 49 (spooky - my age)! overall time 27:57:26

The last long stage. In 2004 I bonked on the long climb out of Kinlochleven. But this time I manage it well. We are now yomping again. Want to jog but my body won't let me. Until we come out of the forest though. Then the downhill approach to the Leisure centre starts. I see 3 runners ahead walking. Damn – one of them is Ian Rae and he is wearing his Montrails. By now I am checking my watch. It looks like if I can get some pace on I will beat Dario's time. I leave Simeon and Max and tear past Ian and his group. He later tells me that all he heard me saying was a mumble of 'Dario.....seconds...and other assorted expletives...' I popped another Ibuprofen and ran on.

After what seemed like a couple of miles I came to a sign – unfortunately it didn't say Leisure centre. But what was this – 'Visitor Centre....?' I flew down a path into the woods. 10 minutes later I began the ascent back to where the sign was. I went then towards Ft William and came out on a road. Stupidly I turned right....damn the flaming Visitor centre again. My watch was ticking away the seconds, I was really beginning to panic. Obviously Dario had done something to the signs. But I couldn't afford to stop running as I would never get going again. I ran back to where I had exited on to the road to see a runner streak out and turn left away from me. it was Ian Rae ....

No alternative now, I had to follow him and hope that he at least knew where he was going, And to ensure I didn't lose him, I had to run fast, very fast. Now picture this – early hours of morning, no cars on road and 2 runners chasing each other. I was gaining... but not enough. Ian passed his wife Angela, who took a photo of him and said as I passed - - 'are you racing each other?' I could only mumble and dribble saliva. The Leisure centre came in view. I followed Ian in and had my wrist band cut off. I then realised the time. I had thought I was 3 minutes better than the time I needed....it was actually one hour and 3 minutes better.

Ian and I sat on the bench outside the centre and reflected on the race...laughing loudly. If only I hadn't suggested he bought the Hardrocks to which he retorted 'yes but think of how much faster I would have been if I had bought your gaiters as well....' Our laughter woke Gill up in the parked car where she had been sleeping and she came over. 'Where are Simeon and Max?' I left them a few miles back....sorry. The end of yet another WHW race.

Post-race

I reflected on my lessons learned. In 2004 they had been:

#### Lessons learned - 2004

1. Train harder – including more hill work
2. Carry less gear – for most stages a fluid bottle will suffice as long as good support stops arranged
3. Travelling up from Essex on Thursday to rest Friday good idea – better if you don't walk around Glasgow too much on the Friday!
4. Spend less time at the checkpoints – my fault for not telling my support team to kick me out
5. Better to run with someone/others so you can tow behind or lead them at times. Perhaps I should mention this to Duncan Clark! (my 2004 running partner who had also left me in the middle of nowhere – perhaps they are trying to tell me something)
6. Ensure appropriate fuelling so that you don't bonk
7. Do other 50/100 milers during year
8. Nothing can replace a good support crew and mine were great
9. The pace chart developed by Richard Moorby based on runner averages from previous races was spot on – allowing support crew to be ready and for me to check pace
10. When it hurts it is really doing you some good (ok I made that one up so I could get to a number 10)

#### Lessons learned in 2006

1. As per 2004
2. more downhill training
3. focus on an objective – no matter how pathetic – it works

Talked to Dario at the prize giving just to point out that my birthright had been restored. His comment makes me smile ...'Mike I told the timekeeper that if you made it in 29hrs 03 seconds again this year to record you as 23hrs 09....I can't put up with your moaning for another year....' Brilliant!

Swore I would take a rest in 2007 and be back in 2008. But then the all time list comes out and I am below Ian Rae... ...' Ian – you now owe me ...wait for it.....11 seconds.'

Special thanks to my support crew – Gill, Simeon and Max. To Soeren, Anita and Kees and to all the others for whom I made life hell in the build up, during and after the race. To Dario and all those involved with the race organisation ....And to Jez Bragg for breaking the race record and putting into perspective the enormity of what he achieved.

Mike Mason