

Murdo McEwan

WET HIGHLAND WAY RACE - 22 June 2002

A Perspective through the Precipitation

Within hours of my completing the West Highland Way (WHW) race in 2001, the question had been asked a dozen times. "Will you be doing it again next year?" There was no immediate answer either way. Physically the body was pretty well trashed - fortunately only in the very short term; mentally the brain was going through a turmoil of emotions - high, low, and high again; right off the top / bottom of the scale at times. So there was no definitive "no"; and, equally, no definitive "yes". But, if the truth be told, I guess it was pretty much a "yes" within about a week.

Why do it again, though? Would it not just be a re-run of last year? (Apologies for the pun.) Why not do something different? No, I figured; it would not be the same, not at all. In 2001 I really had no idea of what I was letting myself in for, having never competed in anything longer than the (pretty arduous) 18 mile Two Breweries hill race. Advice and assistance had been forthcoming from many sources - including Dario, the very patient race organiser, and several other very kind individuals who had done the WHW race over the years. This had been a tremendous help, but only by doing it myself could I fully begin to appreciate the enormity of the task. So I'd done it in 2001, though it was a hugely greater challenge than I had prepared myself for. However, I'd survived to tell the tale, and enjoyed it - most of the time. Wouldn't it be great to do it again with the knowledge gained from last year's experience - to revel in the highs, and to try and work out a way of avoiding the troughs of despair and anguish experienced around Ewich, Rannoch Moor, and Lundavra? Notwithstanding 2001, though, I'd never managed to get my head round the enormity of it all. 95 miles distance from Milngavie, on the northern outskirts of Glasgow, to Fort William - the best part of four full marathons back to back; 11,600 feet of ascent.....

A week before the 2002 event, and all had gone reasonably to plan. Countless hours of training runs in the bank, support team lined up, and a gentle taper down. So much time on my hands in this final week, with only a couple of runs to the post box and back. Now it was no longer a week away - it was tomorrow. Self-doubt overwhelmed me. Should I have done more training? Should I go out for a long run now? Why am I doing it again - I didn't have to, did I? A condemned man awaiting the gallows. Sleep would not come. Friday 21 June: "This time tomorrow I should have reached Beinglas". A few hours later: "This time tomorrow I should be going across Rannoch Moor". "Will it be raining?" Probably. The west of Scotland weather forecast for Friday had been wet wet wet. A couple of 'phone calls confirmed that it was indeed wet wet wet - with little let up for tomorrow. Early evening: we tried in vain to sleep - the phone rang three times from well meaning well wishers; the doorbell rang - a neighbour had locked herself out of her home. No chance of sleep - the mind was racing anyway; these interruptions, if the truth be told, were welcome distractions from the overwhelming emotions charging around in the head. 22.00 hours: a huge bowl of pasta; didn't really want it, but it seemed a good idea, and somehow all disappeared down the throat. 23.30 hours: time to set off for Milngavie, the start - the "bottle bus" loaded to the gunwales with paraphernalia for all weather conditions ("5 complete changes of clothes; no kidding", Dario had strongly recommended). Support team and myself - treated to the front passenger seat with marginally more leg room - somehow squeezed in. Initial intermittent drizzle soon escalated to heavy rain, but reverted to damp as we approached our destination.

Milngavie railway station, 01.15 hours. Empty at this time on 364 days of the year; chock-a-block full tonight. We register, and sign the mandatory death disclaimer before receiving race numbers and goodie bag. Nervous banter. Time flies by; a few words of advice and encouragement from Race Director Stan Milne. Total silence. For those condemned, the gallows are very, very close. A warm hug from Jo - chief supporter / organiser, who has lived through the agonies and the ecstasies of the past few months, as well as having been through it all in 2001. A quiet "Go", and the guillotine drops..... Into the tunnel, up the steps, and through Milngavie shopping centre. It's dry underfoot. Very quickly out onto the trail northwards through the woods, head torches bobbing up and down. Skirt round the first few puddles. Its dark. Fail to see the next one, and run through it. Wet feet. Can't avoid the next one - 20 feet long, and right across the trail. Soaked feet, along with everyone else. We're all going about 7 minute mile pace. Far too fast, but no one wants to let up and lose face. No banter now. Just the sounds of 72 pairs of feet padding along in the damp darkness. Surreal. Slowly we spread out into a more regimented pattern, with less jockeying for position. The lights from the front group are occasionally visible in the middle distance. Our, second, group proceeds at a comfortable pace, alternating lead runner role from time to time, and splash splash splashing along the old railway line past Glengoyne distillery. We cross the main road at Dumgoyne. I'm leading the group, and suddenly find that everyone else has peeled off to meet their support teams. All alone - no one behind; the lead group very occasionally visible ahead in the weak light of dawn. Its now splodge splodge splodge through ankle deep mud and other substances deposited by the nearby cows. I try, not very successfully, to avoid it spraying up on to the half eaten sandwich I have been carrying and very slowly eating over the past three miles. Dark grey, rain laden, sky, with a hint of light to the north east. No torch needed. The only sound being the increasing birdsong with the slowly awakening day. The sights and sounds will no doubt be the same tomorrow, but nobody will be here to pass through it. Today I'm passing through - a casual visitor lapsing into an almost hypnotic state.

The road approaching Gartness (10 miles). Some support cars; a few clean puddles to splash through. It starts raining. Some replenishment offered from the support team. Do I really want to eat cold rice pudding and peaches at 03.45 a.m.? Yes. It goes down a treat. Nearly at Drymen (12 miles), now going through a recently vacated cow field. Ankle deep mud etc. again. The rain continues. The support / checkpoint lifts my spirits briefly; but, with the rain, the daylight diminishes and we almost revert to darkness. I walk, albeit at a reasonable pace, up the long gradual hill; but I hear soft footsteps approaching effortlessly from behind. Sam Kirkpatrick. A brief exchange of greetings, and he flows ahead comfortably into the gloom. Low morale. I've done 13 miles; 82 to go.....

But things change. Into Garadhban forest, where to walk is to be eaten alive by midges. I chose to run. Quite a few folk around now, mostly perked up by a bit of refuelling and the slowly emerging daylight. Out of the forest, and into improved daylight, looking across towards the lower slopes of Conic Hill. Three quarters of it is shrouded in mist - maybe its better not to see what's in store..... Ankle deep mud again - but this time it is enhanced by sheep, not cattle. What variety I am enjoying! Down quickly to the bridge over the raging Burn of Mar, and obligatory walk up the steep steps on the far side. As we slowly ascend into the mist, people are lost from view. The temperature plummets. No sounds at all. Am I in a run? Am I in a race? What am I doing here? Weird. I slip and slide down the grass, which gives way to rock, which gives way to uneven steps, and a rapid descent to dozens of midge protected (wise) supporters, and dozens of midge unprotected (unwise) supporters at Balmaha (19 miles). Not an official checkpoint - more of a staging post before the joys of Loch Lomondside. A brief pause with my three supporters, who look like they've just emerged from a night shift at a leaking nuclear power station. Anti midge clothing does tend to make a certain fashion statement, which has not yet reached the catwalks of Milan, Paris or New York. Next year, maybe.

Loch Lomondside, and the water is as calm as a millpond. High grey cloud throughout, with the occasional cotton wool white cloud drifting around at lower altitude. Jorg Painsipp ahead, running on the shingle beach; he vaults - successfully - across a burn. Twenty yards behind, I pause. The shingle gives way to fine grit on either side of the water. I leap, successfully, across the water, but land in the grit - ankle deep; the shoes fill with very fine stones. Something new to think about. Over five miles to the next major pit stop at Rowardennan. Should I continue, and hope that the grit does not rub my feet to shreds; or should I stop and have a rinse out? Think..... Decide..... Continue..... - so now it is scrunch scrunch scrunch; bit risky, but not unpleasant. Switchbacks, forests, a bit of road; three or four folk in sight. I trot into Rowardennan (27 miles) feeling pretty good, but with no idea where I am in the field. I ask fellow runner Don Lennox where he thinks we are. "Rowardennan", he replies. Thanks, Don, I know that - but I've no idea if I'm in 6th place or 56th place. It doesn't really matter; I'm pretty much on schedule, and can now get the grit out from between my toes.

Don, Guus Smit and I continue to make good progress towards Inversnaid - eating up the miles comfortably; quite glad to leave Rowardennan, midge capital of the universe. We chat away about Wim Eskamp, WHW record holder, and a good friend of Guus. Suddenly Inversnaid (34 miles) arrives - just like that. Sister / brother in law Mary / Roderick are here, bright and breezy, with a car boot full of goodies. Alongside are the Trossachs Search and Rescue Team, resplendent in full midge protection gear and bright orange overalls. Opportunity for a photo call, and some cheery banter. Coach tour party groups emerge from their overnight accommodation, and totter over towards their coaches - probably heading for Fort William, just like us..... Well, kind of like us. Guus and I continue. His mind is totally focussed on a Pot Noodle stop he has lined up at Beinglas, 7 miles hence. I'm rather more focussed on the slippery boulders to be negotiated twixt here and there. Again the miles pass - a bit slower, but by no means uncomfortably; though I pass half a dozen or so who do not look so happy on this jumbled terrain.

Beinglas farm (41 miles). The midges, runners, and supporters are here in force. Adrian (Run & Become), clipboard in hand, Allan Douglas, John Donnelly, Dave Wallace. A party atmosphere..... almost. Someone asks if I am Murdo McEwan. "fraid so", I respond. He - Sam - turns out to be a friend of my niece who is currently in Australia. Well, well, well! That gives me something else to think about. Off again, now with Allan Douglas; and just behind Dave Wallace with his distinctive walking run gait. I try to mimic it, not very elegantly or successfully. Dave has done the race nine times, so should know the least boggy route across the boggy bit ahead. He doesn't. Apparently it changes each year. Its very dark bog, enhanced by the onlooking cows, and very deep in places - but we do manage a route where it doesn't reach the knees. Carmyle Cottage, across the main road, and support runner Cissie joins me to stretch her legs over the hill to Ewich. Cissie is not so keen on cows, but she is soon resigned to her nice white trainers not being white for long. About 30 paces. We approach a stile surrounded by cows standing in their own deep proverbial; experience as a cattle rancher would be useful. They refuse to budge; we splodge through and past - our every move being watched impassively. What do they think about? I wonder. Aching quads, but no trough of despair, we descend to Ewich (49 miles). Allan and Dave both looking incredibly strong. I tag along with Dave - his "walk" and my "run" complementing each other for pace. We lament the fact that an event such as this gets such limited media coverage. In New Zealand it would be front page news. Why is the rest of the world so focussed on the football world cup and Wimbledon tennis when the West Highland Way race is in progress? One of life's imponderables. Splash through the clear river just before Tyndrum (53 miles), and we reach this milestone with relatively clean footwear. A welcome break allocated here, as the support team moves into action like a well oiled machine. Where did Les learn his massaging skills??? Ten yards away someone else looks very unhappy - the aggressive massaging to his legs bringing no relief to his ashen grimacing face. Dave and I continue, accompanied briefly by his 14 year old son. Up up up the gradual ascent to the watershed, the county of Argyll, and a completely new landscape stretching out far ahead for many miles. Ben Dorain - head in clouds - beckons us on; it looks bigger every time I see it. A long long straight (and dry!) track to Bridge of Orchy. No one ahead; no one behind. Somehow I manage to keep running - well, I kid myself it's a run. At any rate it is more than a walk, and that's good enough. Nearly 100 km. travelled now, and approaching the start of the "Did Not Finish Drop Out Zone" - though some will have dropped out far earlier. But at Bridge of Orchy I'm feeling fine - well, as fine as can be expected - and wonder why the marshalls insist I carry an orange survival bag for the rest of the journey. Up up up over Mam Carraigh. The sun is out for the first time! Beinn Starav emerges into view to the west - the first summit not obscured by cloud and, as it transpires, the only summit not to be obscured by cloud over the whole route. Why on earth do I have to carry this survival bag? Meanwhile the first of about 1,600 Caledonian Challengers passes by, looking fresh as a daisy. The Challengers are running / walking - the ones at the front running; the others walking at varying speeds - on their 54 mile journey southwards from Fort William. Now a descent to Inveroran, and approach Victoria Bridge - no sign of anyone else coming the other way; that lead runner is miles ahead. The sun's still out; slight breeze; no midges; pleasantly warm. Pass Sam Kirkpatrick - he's walking, and reasonably happy; certainly not in Drop Out mode by any means.

Victoria Bridge (63 miles) - brief support stop - and Rannoch Moor beckons. A trough of despair last year; but not so this time round, for some reason. No one ahead, no one behind; a few Caledonian Challengers pass by, including the first lady. Some are fulsome in their encouragement, some grunt a greeting, many don't seem to notice my existence. Strange how folk can be so different. Meanwhile the sun has gone, there is no tree shelter at all, the barren landscape affords no protection, the whole sky is grey, and a heavy rain cloud approaches rapidly round the side of Clach Leathad ready to ambush and catch me unawares. But I'm not falling for that one, as I pull a plastic rubbish bin liner over my head and plod on into the heavy - and cold - precipitation like some kind of slow moving scarecrow. But morale is high, and I can enjoy and appreciate the vast volume of water passing under Ba Bridge. Very pleased that there is indeed a bridge at Ba Bridge - a river crossing here would be suicidal. Up up up, over the brow of the hill and there's Kingshouse, a tiny white coloured oasis in the midst of a landscape of varying shades of brown. The reverie of the environment is totally lost as I hit the main road, and somehow scuttle across between severely overspeeding vehicles. Not nice. Trot into Kingshouse (72 miles) - The End for some; but The Start To The Finish, 23 miles away, for others. For me it's time for a shirt change - but still keep the incredibly manky Carnethy club running vest on top, of course - and time to wolf down some pasta in wild mushroom sauce. Off again. Its dry on the minor road leading away from Kingshouse. About a mile. Over the stile, and its wet - but clear water wet, not cow brown bog wet. Squelch uphill, then rapidly descend to Altnafeadh. Now to the infamous Devils Staircase, zig-zagging up nearly 800 feet. No problem. I did run it once, but not today. Steadily up, accompanied by support runner Cissie; ascending into rain and huge temperature drop - this was rain of stair rod proportions. On with the plastic rubbish bags; don't need the survival bag..... but now kind of reassured that it is there. (These race organisers think of everything!) Summit cairn. No one ahead; no one behind -very much in solo run mode, albeit accompanied by stalwart Cissie, having seen no runners going our way since Sam, over 2 hours ago. Everything is wet - the sky, the ground, the path in particular provides a conduit for the water rushing down to find the fastest way to the sea. We too are descending to sea level, but the water seems to be more adept than us at gliding effortlessly along the path. Again a landscape where I am passing through - not unlike 70 miles back, before Drymen. Seems an age ago. But now we have moved on to the knee jarring descent past the vast black hydro pipes. It's sheltered here. Trees. But every river is a bursting torrent of white water hurtling downwards with uncontrolled energy.

Kinlochleven (80 miles). A brief stop. Cold, and rain, discourage any thoughts of lingering longer. Morale is fine, and a brief cheery greeting / smile to the marshalls. I'm sure that in marshalling terms this must be the worst possible location in the world - but there is a fish and chip shop down the road, so its not all bad news. Still no sign of anyone else. Up up up through the shelter of the trees to the totally exposed, always into the wind, nearly always into the rain, Lairig Mor. It does not fail to let us down in any way as we trot / splash along the flat and the descents; walk / splash on the ascents. Reasonable progress; then John McLaughlin plus his support runner bound past us. We try to reassure ourselves that they were going really fast, and we're going okay; rather than they are going okay, and we are pathetic. A full pack of jelly babies down our throats helps to confirm the more positive view of things. We trot down towards wet Lundavra - 88 miles gone; 7 to go.

Quite a crowd of people. "Have you seen Sam?" asks one slightly concerned supporter. "About 24 miles back". My response doesn't seem to reassure him. Cissie and I continue. Up, down, up, down, what a horrendously convoluted route through the forest. Its wet - needless to say - but by no means unpleasantly so. Then..... up up up, and out of the forest to see Fort William way way off to the left, and the lower flanks of Ben Nevis ahead - most of its vast bulk obscured by cloud. Downhill all the way now; no one ahead, no one behind. Back to solo run mode. Is this really a race? Where is everyone? Down down down at a very reasonable pace; cheers from support team Jo and Les at Braveheart car park. One mile on tarmac to go. On cue the rain starts again, the pace does not slacken, the 30 mph sign, a few houses, the roundabout, the Nevis Bank Hotel, 100 yards to go, its raining hard, the Leisure Centre, splash splash splash through the car park, and we've done it!

The Leisure Centre. I guess normally bustling with the activity of swimmers and keep fit enthusiasts. Now an oasis of calm. Hot shower, one cup of tea (I decline the offer of a whisky!), and that's it. Once again the head is buzzing with emotions - like a washing machine in some kind of crazy high speed spin mode - but physically there's no problem. Amazing! The rigor mortis like stiffness in the legs will inevitably follow shortly but, for the moment, just sit down and try (totally unsuccessfully) and come to terms with the whole experience and enormity of it all.

Of course the experience and enormity of it all - I still can't get my head round it - would not be at all possible without the effort put in by all the Organisers, Marshalls, Supporters, and my fantastic Support Team - Jo, Cissie, and Les. These good people, and those competitors who are out on the trail for over 30 hours duration (and their support teams), are the real stars of the show. All I have to do is to try and keep running, and try and keep cheerful - which I did manage most of the time!

Question now is - Will I be doing it again next year.....?

Murdo McEwan - 2002