

Fiona Rennie

West Highland Way Race 2003

My Turn

Well, this time last year I said I was going to do it, so I had six months mental preparation to December 31st and on January 1st my training started in earnest, my schedule was set out and I stuck to it. As the months progressed so did I, so five races, five PBs later I was as fit as I was going to be. I was ready.

Then two weeks before the race my dodgy back started playing up, although it gradually settled down I didn't, on the Tuesday before my race I was totally freaked, on our easy run my head ached, my back was stiff, my legs were heavy, I couldn't breathe and I felt sick. Both Pauline and Lynne said, "Don't worry, it's only nerves." Fine!

On Wednesday, I did start to calm down, I kept telling myself "relax, enjoy the adventure." Also getting my truck load of gear organised helped me focus.

On Friday I just dozed between checking my stuff several times and waited for Pauline and Russell to pick me up at 11.00pm. I chilled in the back of the car listening to my music staying calm until we got to Milngavie. After signing in and picking up my goody bag I had to clamp my jaws together to stop my teeth rattling, my throat was so tight I could hardly swallow. Dario (Race Director) then gave us pre-race instructions and finished with "ten minutes to the start". "Aaaahh!"

2.00am. We're off. Deep breath, relax, I'm fine. At last I'm running.

Conscious of not going too fast and concentrating on the path in the dark it didn't take long until I met Pauline and Russell at the four mile point where the WHW crosses the road to pick up my juice bottle, bang on schedule. The path to Drymen (12 miles) was easy going I enjoyed watching the sky getting lighter as I trotted along. Only stopped at Drymen long enough to put some tape on a couple of toes, they were fine but I could "feel" them, prevention is better than cure, well, that was the theory anyway!

I kept a steady pace as I made my way along the forest track towards Conic Hill munching a Rice Krispie bar as I went. Stopped for a few seconds on Conic Hill just to check out the scenery, sun coming up behind me, Loch Lomond in front. What a beautiful day for a run!

Then I headed down to Balmaha (20 miles) where I only stopped long enough to change juice bottles, pick up ginger jam pieces and drink a mug of coffee. I had relaxed now that I'd gone through the first checkpoint with time to spare, I really enjoyed the section along to Rowardennan (27 miles), the path had lots of ups, downs, twists and turns. The coffee had kicked in and I skipped along.

Beep-beep, beep-beep. Oh! I jumped; the alarm on my watch had gone off, it must be 7.00am then. It felt quite an intrusion as I only had the birds for company happy in seclusion with all the scenery to myself. I needed a pee stop and as 95 miles is long enough I wasn't traipsing deep into the woods for the perfect bush, so beside a thickish tree I stopped, with knickers round my ankles I looked up, I was in full view of a man walking towards me. Oh nuts! A false sense of seclusion as it turned out! He just smiled as I ran past him muttering something about thinking I was alone. "Oh never mind, he's a tourist and I'll never see him again." I consoled myself.

At Rowardennan I just changed my socks, still happy in my favourite shoes, picked up my munchies and juice, walked up the path drinking my coffee which was a tad hot, but Russell cooled it with some cold water but his aim wasn't too good, I got a wet leg as well, but at least my coffee was drinkable.

After the long climb up the wide track and down to Inversnaid the path now got scary, although I'd found this section fun on a training run it was quite different with nearly 40 miles in the legs and more again still to do. I had a few heart stopping moments as I clung to boulders, trees, blades of grass, anything to stop me falling down the rocky drops into Loch Lomond. Then I couldn't believe my eyes, tyre tracks, some mad bugger has cycled this path! How?

As I approached Inverarnan (40 miles) I was ready for my tub of rice pudding and coffee. My pinkie toes were nipping a bit now, I asked if they had brought my No.2 shoes. "No!" was the reply but Pauline shot off, with her jacket flapping, over dressed for a sprint to the car which was parked about a mile away, picked up my shoes and sprinted back to me. I also discovered the bloke who caught me "powdering my nose" was another runner's support! Great!

It was now afternoon and I was getting a bit warm so I tied my thermal round my waist and trotted happily onwards, going past Derrydarroch Farm the path was full of beautiful toffee coloured cows and their calves, not wanting to scare them too much I gently clapped my hands and asked them to move over and they all obliged until I spotted a humungous cow "Wait a minute, that's not a cow, that's a bull!" I clapped my hands but he just strolled sedately in front, I considered slapping it's big butt then I thought better of it. Well, I would have needed a step-ladder to reach anyway and besides the last time I was this close to prime steak it was covered in peppered sauce! I'll just walk behind him until he deigns to move over.

It wasn't long until I next saw Pauline and Russell at the tunnel under the A82 (45 miles) where I had put on my checkpoint demands that I may want some flat coke, I wasn't too fussed for it but Russell had it ready so I had a mouthful just to humour them. Then trundled off towards the forest near Crianlarich where the path had some very steep climbs and descents, which were starting to tell on my feet. I could feel some hot spots on my heels and on the balls of my feet. When I got down onto the flat tarmac I found an easy running pace passed the remains of St Fillan's Priory and the wig-wams where I caught up with a fellow competitor who was walking, as I acknowledged him, he held out his hand to shake mine. I was the first person to pass him still running. "Well done, keep it going." he encouraged. Tyndrum (53 miles) seemed to take ages to pull in; I was looking forward to my soup and roll, also to check on my feet. Pauline had run out to meet me, it was good to talk about more than my immediate needs, and then with about ¼ of a mile to go into Tyndrum she darted off to muster the troops for my imminent arrival. Val and Lesley have now reported for duty and it was great to see friendly faces. Russell set about refuelling my bum-bag as I sat on the stool eating my soup.

Now guess how many Carnegie Harriers it takes to change a plaster?

Wrong! I'll just have to tell you. Four!

1. Well I count, 'cause it is my feet!

2. Lesley, to stand behind me to stop me tipping backwards off the stool and spilling my soup.

3. Val to hold my leg up.

4. Pauline to do the necessary. (She did very well, as she is usually too squeamish to wipe our dead cute and gorgeous two-year old niece's nose!)

With Tyntrum being over half way I was pulling it in now, I knew if I got to this point I would get to Fort William.

Now fed and feet treated I was ready to go, with Pauline and Lesley for company, they were great scooting off to open and close gates, they took loads of photos, I was even happy to stand still and pose while Pauline framed a shot with Beinn Dorain in the background. We were now in Caledonian Challenge territory (a sponsored walk from Glen Nevis south to Ardlui with about 1000 participants). They had portaloos, so I took advantage of one, as I emerged, there was my pit stop nemesis, he laughed and said "You've found a proper toilet then!" Lesley and Pauline looked puzzled until I explained where I had met him. It made them laugh too! Glad to cheer you up, guys!

Bridge of Orchy (60 miles) soon appeared, I wasn't stopping long here, it was heaving with midges, like a fog, they were in my rice pudding, my coffee, everywhere, it wouldn't have surprised me if fights broke out in my support team for who's turn it was for the midge net I got in my goody bag.

After being grilled by the checkpoint Marshall making sure I had bivvy bag, waterproofs, food and drink also that I was fit to carry on, Russell and I set off for Rannoch Moor, normally one of the remotest areas in Europe, but not today with all these walkers. Lots of them offered encouragement and moved over to let me through. I even heard a voice say "I really can't believe how far these people have ran!"

"Yeah! Me too!" I thought. But my tolerance was going, I was finding a lot of the walkers were as irritating as the midges, I was having to run round them, dodging their flaying poles with spiky ends. They shouldn't be allowed outside! Morons! I wanted to shout, "Get out of the bloody way! Don't you know how far I've ran?" It was now time for a game of chicken. I put my head down and shuffled blindly on, if I came face to face with a moron I stood still until they moved round me. I think Russell was being sneaky and was trying to make me run the gentle slopes up, but the rule is walk the hills, I might have needed a spirit level to prove it, but they felt like hills to me! My shoes felt like they were full of hot stones, I stopped to empty them but there was nothing there, I've never ran bare-foot over hot coals but I think I know how it might feel. It was getting hard to keep running, my toes were sore coming down hill, we could see Kingshouse but why wasn't it getting any nearer?

At last, Kingshouse (72 miles) I could take my shoes off. Pauline said she had a surprise for me, I was instructed to get in the car put my feet up on the dashboard, then she draped a cold wet t-shirt round my feet. I'm sure there was steam rising from them. (It was a tip from Simon; I think Lynne received this treatment last year.) Bliss. Do I have to move yet? I was given my pasta and coffee, as I was eating I started to shake, I don't think I was cold, but I was given my fleece and Gore-tex trousers to put on. Pauline reassured me that it was normal by that time anyway. My mind was a bit fuzzy by then but one of my clearest memories was of Val's generous kindness, while the rest of my team fuffed about getting tape and plasters ready, I unjustly thought that if they don't hurry up, I'm only going to have stumps 'cause the midges will have eaten my feet off! Val held my burning feet in her cold hands. That certainly deserves a medal for "beyond the call of duty".

Lots of tape (every toe looked like an Egyptian mummy) lots of plasters, fine socks, thick woolly socks and boots, I couldn't face running anymore, but the legs were still strong. I can walk.

Got out the car after my longest stop (38 minutes). Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! My legs had stiffened a little but my toes were excruciating, I winced along the tarmac hoping my toes would settle down. My lightweight boots that I bought a ½ size bigger than usual especially with the WHW in mind were crushing my toes like a mobile medieval torture chamber. I stopped at the stile to remove the thick socks, I took in a deep breath, so did my feet, another five minutes down the path, I had to stop again, I was roasting, took off the Gore-tex jacket, another few minutes, I was still roasting, the vest came off from under the fleece, another few minutes, another stop, I had to lose the fleece too, Val and Russell who were to escort me over the Devil's Staircase, were extremely patient with me as I lobbed them my clothes, they probably thought we were never going to reach the Devil's Staircase never mind get over it.

I didn't mind going up at all, hands on thighs, I stomped up, singing The Proclaimers "500 miles" to myself to keep a good rhythm going. Coming down was a different song altogether, both feet were screaming at me and neither was in tune. I minced sideways down the brutal descent so my toes didn't touch the front of my boots with Val in front with the night-sight of an owl pointing her torch backwards for me to follow. I was very slow and both Russell and Val were good at holding out an arm for me to steady myself over big steps or jumps.

My cheese roll and oxo were waiting for me at Kinlochleven (81 miles) and I was hungry for real food, it took forever to get there. At the checkpoint I saw a couple of familiar figures, for goodness sake! It's Simon and Lynne; they've come up to see me finish, so I'd better get going then.

Pauline has the job to haul me into Fort William. After another climb through woods, we could see the open path of Lairigmor that wound on for miles, as it was now light again, I had hoped to be over this bit before dawn but never mind, I'm still moving, with every step Fort William is getting closer.

Beep-beep, beep-beep. It's 7.00am again! Bloody Hell! I'm still in the same race!

I'm tired now; if I shut my eyes I would sleep, so I concentrate on staying one pace behind Pauline and trying to place my feet exactly where hers have been. Every time I stumbled, or kicked a stone I let out a wussy yelp, Pauline gave me a row for not sounding very hero like! Earlier Russell had made comments about my cat impressions.

It had started to rain, so out came the jackets; Pauline's remark was "You jammy sod! Even when it rains, it's on your back." (Last year at this point, it was freezing, wet and in our faces.)

YEEEOOWW! All was not hunky-dory, my right pinkie toe just exploded! Forgetting the big blister on my heel, I banged my boot on the ground trying to get it off my toe. Deep breaths, I feel sick. I've given birth, waxed my legs, but nothing comes close to this pain. Pauline reassures me it will pass, as I hobble on with my toes in the air.

At last, the trees, we're pulling it in. Probably still a few hours to go but my head is up. I know the pain will disappear, the tiredness will go but the sense of achievement will stay with me forever.

The last miles have some cruel ups and downs and a torturous descent on to the road. We cross over as we near the roundabout, it's the shortest route and this side has pavement. Then Pauline suggested I might want to touch the WHW Finish Post at the woollen mill as we go past. "Don't be so absurd! It's the other side of the road! It may as well be on the moon!"

I can see the blue and white sign for the Leisure Centre.

Deep breathes. My bottom lip quivers. I've done it... I have done it!

There's Russell and Lynne... with cameras.

I laugh and say to Pauline "We'd better start running then."

Round the corner, across the car park, up the steps, I'm in the Leisure Centre. A hug from Dario, I have finished. 31 hours 40 minutes 26 seconds. Wow!

Pauline and I head off for a shower. The moment I've been dreading, checking the carnage in my boots. Pauline's had her shower; I'm still counting toes. I'm told to hurry up as it's breakfast time.

At the prize giving every finisher is awarded his or her crystal goblet to the same applause as the winner.

Of 80 entrants, nearly 70 started and 49 finished. Due to the good conditions that was a record. In amongst that motley crew, seven ladies started and seven ladies finished. (Tough dudes us girlies.)

My epic journey would not have been possible without the unconditional support of Pauline, Russell, Val and, new recruit, Lesley.

THANK YOU SO MUCH.

(By the way, Pauline, Lynne, next year you're on your own, I bags this lot for support next year. Put June 19th 2004 in your diaries now guys!)

Fiona Rennie